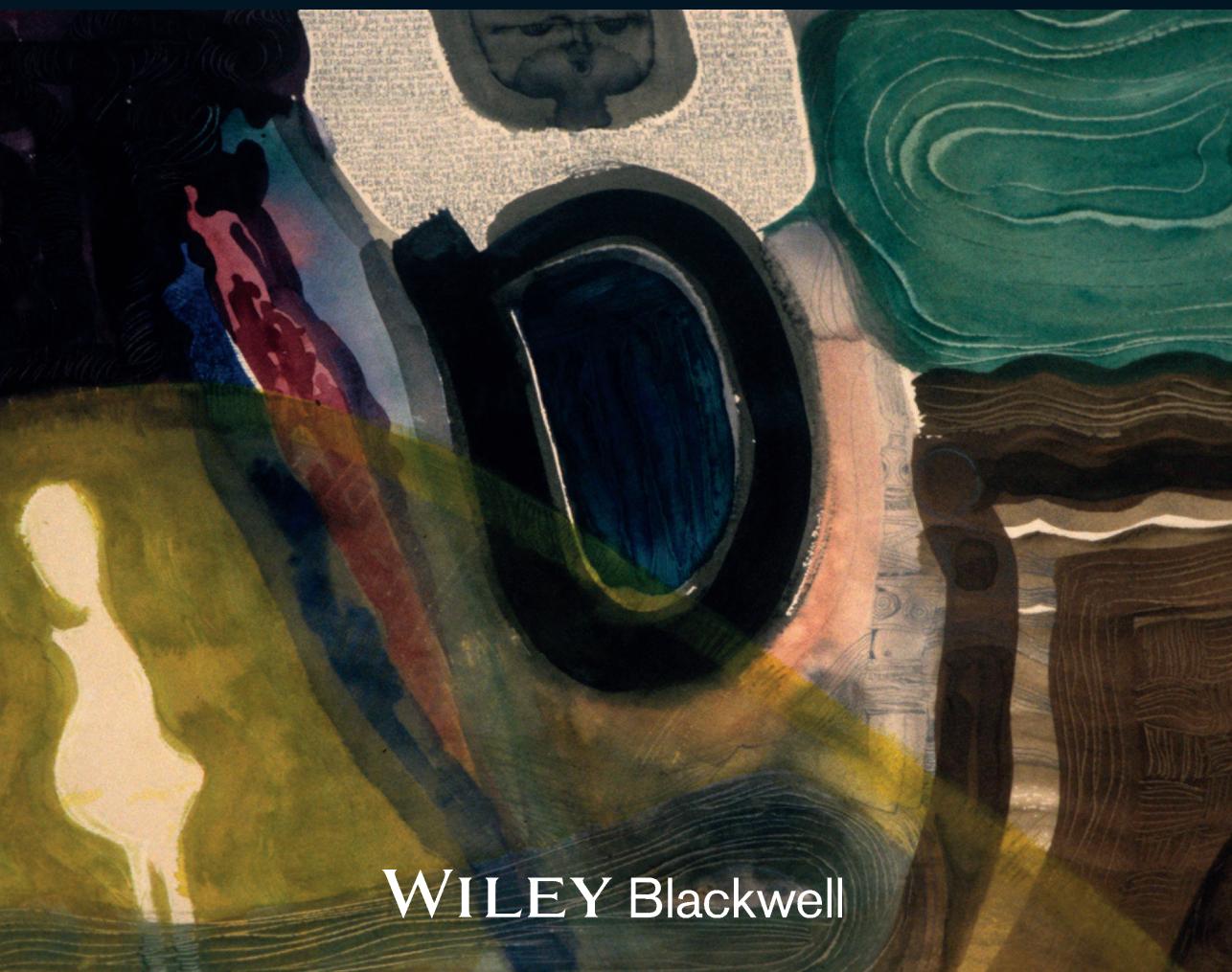


A Companion to Modern African Art

Edited by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà



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A Companion to Modern African Art

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To Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie

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Gitti Salami is associate professor of art history at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland. She has received numerous research/visiting fellowships, including Fulbright-Hays DDRA, Smithsonian Institution, West African Research Association (WARA), and Sainsbury Research Unit (University of East Anglia) fellowships. Her research focuses on Yakurr culture in the Middle Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria. Her publications have appeared in *African Arts* and in *Critical Interventions*. A monograph, “Postcolonial Yakurr Studies,” is forthcoming.

Sunanda K. Sanyal originally from India, is associate professor of art history and critical studies at the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University. His research interest includes contemporary African and South Asian art. His two-part documentary film (2008 and 2011), *A Homecoming Spectacle*, explores the visual culture of Durga Pujo, a religious festival held in West Bengal, India. Sanyal is currently working on a book on transnational South Asian artists.

Peter Ukpokodu is professor/chair of the department of African and African American studies at the University of Kansas. His publications include *African Political Plays; It Happened to the Blind Beggar*, and *Socio-Political Theatre in Nigeria*, a co-edited volume, *African Literatures at the Millennium*, and many journal articles. He has directed numerous plays, including *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island*, *Eshu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Waiting for Godot*, and acted in plays and a television production. A monograph on the history of African theatre is forthcoming.

Monica Blackmun Visonà is associate professor of art history at the University of Kentucky, and was the principal author of both editions of *A History of Art in Africa*. In addition to numerous articles (including an essay in *Art Bulletin* on “*Agent Provocateur*: the African Origins and American Life of a Statue from Côte d’Ivoire”), she has published *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d’Ivoire* (2010). She is currently investigating cross-cultural notions of artistic identity and practice for an exhibition on divinely inspired artists of the Lagoon peoples.

Mary Vogl is associate professor in foreign languages and literatures at Colorado State University. Her publications include *Picturing the Maghreb: Literature, Photography, Representation* (2002), articles on Orientalism and explorations of inter-art relations. Her current book project, developed with a Fulbright research grant, is called “Articulating Morocco: The Role of Art and Art Criticism in Defining National Culture.” In 2010 she co-curated an exhibition of Middle Eastern and North African art at Colorado State University’s Hatton Gallery.

Acknowledgments

Several weeks before a Triennial conference of the Arts Council of African Studies Association in 2007, Sylvester Ogbemie contacted a group of colleagues in the USA and South Africa and assigned everyone a task. Never mind that the scholars were all in the process of writing their own lectures – he wanted each of them to prepare a presentation on a specific approach that authors could take in writing a book on modern African art. Such was his fervor, and his powers of persuasion, that every colleague agreed, and the hastily convened panel was packed with informed and vociferous Africanists at the conference. Gitti Salami gave the group's presentation on thematic approaches to modern African art, while Monica Blackmun Visonà mapped out a chronological approach that was to eventually serve as the structure of this volume. It was thus the determined efforts of Ogbemie that launched this project, one of several initiatives he has pursued in order to focus scholarly attention on the modernity of Africa's artists.

Yet many other Africans, Americans, and Europeans have shared Ogbemie's passionate desire to introduce a broad spectrum of students and scholars to African modern art, to allow the voices of African artists to be heard in art historical discourse. Robin Poynor surveyed colleagues who taught contemporary African art, and he assisted Sylvester Ogbemie and John Peffer in presenting the results of his findings at an earlier Triennial meeting. Lectures, publications, journals, exhibitions, and other endeavors that have inspired this project were spearheaded by Janet Stanley, Jean Kennedy, John Picton, Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Susan Vogel, Achamyeleh Debela, Moyosore Okededji, Sidney Kasfir, Simon Njami, Jean-Loup Pivin, and other committed advocates of modern art who are too numerous to mention here; some graciously accepted our invitation to contribute to this volume. Gitti Salami thanks Okwui Enwezor for his conversations with her about his own engagement in these efforts. She was able to devote time and energy to planning this volume thanks to a West African Research Association fellowship and residencies at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC and the Sainsbury Research Center at the University of East Anglia. She further thanks Judith Arnold for her support. Monica Blackmun Visonà is grateful for a Zora Neale Hurston fellowship that

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Note

- 1 Visonà, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris (2000) *A History of Art in Africa*. New York: Abrams.

Part I



Introduction

Writing African Modernism into Art History

Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà

Narrations of Modernism and Modernity

Modernity has taken many forms. It may be understood as the emergence – after centuries of global commerce – of cosmopolitan outlooks adopted by local cultures negotiating with one another across vast geographic distances, and across gulfs of profoundly incompatible cultural conceptions. Exchange of material culture has been accompanied by trade partners' cultural translations and highly selective rejection or incorporation of foreign objects and ideas. Genuine mutual admiration for the trade partner's respective "Other" at times characterized this traffic in newness. However, significant power imbalances governed the terms of these exchanges during much of their duration, and continue to do so today.

Modernism, modernity's expressive aspect, has as many local and regional variants as modernity itself. Until recently, those in control of the discourse within the international art world saw modernism's European variant – in reality, one of many local forms – as normative. Specific features characterizing French artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are still regarded as a set of universal principles, standards that might be used to evaluate modernism worldwide, and Paris was seen as a center to peripheral modernisms located elsewhere. The notion of a French "avant-garde," as an example, as Gitti Salami (chapter 29) points out, has militaristic connotations, suggesting that its intellectual feats typically entail rupture, shock, and conquest of unknown territory.¹ Such paradigms are alien to those African societies that embrace newness via conceptual frames stressing ancestral authority and continuity within egalitarian principles and consensus-building. The notion of the "avant-garde" is only one of the filters rendering African modernisms simply invisible to art historians. As dele jegede (chapter 18) notes, Paris, London, and New York were cities teeming with African, African American and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals and artists throughout the twentieth century, yet African epistemologies were never

considered when “standard” art historical canons were established. This volume provides many perspectives that challenge dominant, yet unexamined, paradigms. It thus contributes to a broad international endeavor, shared by artists, critics, and art historians alike, that would move beyond Eurocentric models to less parochial representation.

For African artists in particular, being modern has implied a progressive outlook, a desire to inscribe new contemporary experience with meaning. Just as European and American modernists have absorbed insights offered by African figurative representations in their painting and statuary, utilized knowledge of African ceremonies and body arts in their performances, and drawn on their impressions of African shrines in their installations, African modernists have studied the “traditional” art of Europe and Asia. They have incorporated responses to Chinese painting in their pen and ink washes, Turkish imagery in their reverse-glass paintings, Italian Renaissance figures in their sculpture, and, as Monica Blackmun Visonà shows (chapter 9), top hats in their performances. As citizens of the world, generations of African artists have sought to contribute to an international art world. Acknowledgment of their successes in the past usually omitted their names; though, in rare cases, as Sylvester Ogbemchie has shown, some African artists were afforded short-lived celebrity status within international art circuits, but were subsequently written out of history.²

African modernist explorations can be traced as far back as the late fifteenth century. Frequently, these are a matter of continuously adapting indigenous institutions and practices to new circumstances, as many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate.³ Other African modernisms have been intellectual, interdisciplinary responses to new educational models and artistic frameworks. As contributors to this volume explain, some of the new venues in which African artists were trained upheld the standards of elite foreign institutions. Others were products of a colonial system that sought to train workers for the colonial empire – and in many cases both types of educational institutions had been altered for a local or national context. Individuals of varied backgrounds, including custodians of “traditions,” masters of workshops or royal guilds, commercial artists, and academically trained artists, have shaped local and national art infrastructures that promote particular forms of art and train future artists. Two strands of modernism – one based in indigenous culture and the other in foreign-derived institutions – variously coexist as separate platforms for artistic creativity, but they are simultaneously intertwined, often inextricably so. Together, they reflect not only the tension between the local and the global that typifies modernisms worldwide, they also model tremendous command of the paradoxes induced by the meshing of diametrically opposed value systems. Writ large, modern African art brings the expertise of sophisticated artists (at work on the continent for centuries) into the academic discourse swirling around the “antinomies of art and culture” in the contemporary, postcolonial world.⁴

Centering Narratives on Africa’s Art Worlds

A Companion to Modern African Art foregrounds just one slice of a larger corpus of artistic production tied to Africa; it highlights African artists who live and work (or who have lived and worked) on the continent (Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). The 29 case studies place a premium on African artists’ agency and their grounding in African



FIGURE 1.1 Map of the African continent. Richard Gilbreath, Gyula Pauer Center for Cartography and GIS, University of Kentucky.

epistemologies. This focus upon Africa challenges sophisticated arguments, some of which are raised by the contributors themselves. In her chapter on Swahili visual culture, Prita Meier (chapter 5) critiques the practice of grouping artists by their place of origin or the current location of their practice, reminding the reader that the dominant discourse on modernism foregrounds time rather than space; by writing about art that is geographically bound – particularly if writing about art on the African continent – Africanists write its artists out of history. Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu also feel that Africa as a classification has outlived its usefulness, for the mechanisms of the contemporary world are global.⁵ While these perspectives are

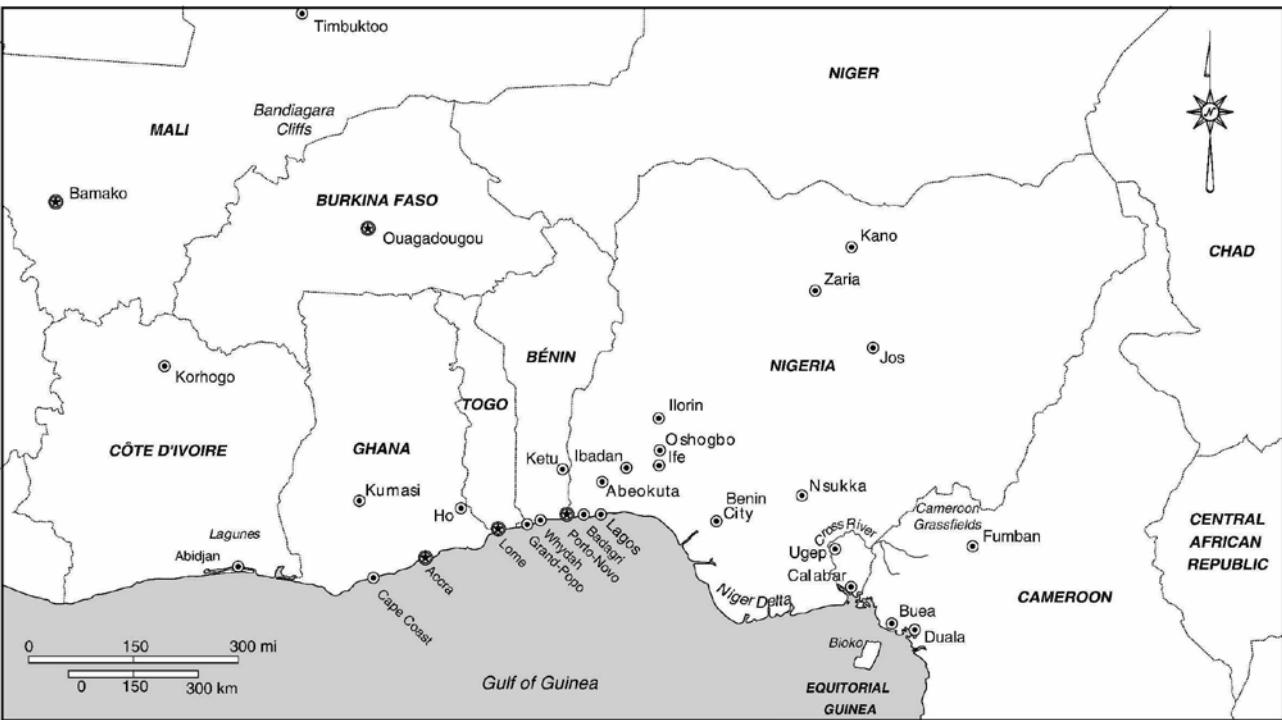


FIGURE 1.2 West Africa, detail from the map of the African continent. Richard Gilbreath, Gyula Pauer Center for Cartography and GIS, University of Kentucky.

intriguing, they unwittingly validate the outmoded idea that African artists must have a place within the dominant discourse if they are to be taken seriously. This assumes that Eurocentric though this discourse may be it is the only framework we need to consider. Rustom Bharucha is one of the critics who believes that this discourse need not be central to our debates, particularly since Europe “is scarcely at the center of the world any longer, politically or ideologically.”⁶ As Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi point out in a pivotal and groundbreaking catalogue, *Unpacking Europe*, Europe and Europe’s “Other” constituted each other; the latter, racialized and subjugated, acted as “a foil against which Europeaness struggled to emerge.”⁷

Henry Drewal reminds us in chapter 2 that the currents of modernity are “rarely unidirectional.” The fact that Western explorers did not document what terms Africans used in the nineteenth century to describe the phenomenon of “modernity” hardly means that Africans did not define or debate it. Nor does the fact that European definitions of modernity prevailed therefore mean that Europe invented modernity, or that the rest of the world is bound by those definitions. Thus Nichole Bridges’ deconstruction of the reliefs carved onto ivory tusks from the Loango coast (chapter 3) would suggest that Kongo (Vili) engaged in lively, even humorous debates about changes to their sociopolitical and economic environment in the late nineteenth century, and that their images were partially designed to transmit these debates to foreigners. She explains that Loango ivories helped shape European and American understanding of modern Africa; particularly as some of these artists carved their wares in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower for the Universal Exposition of 1889 in Paris.¹⁸ Gilane Tawadros points out that “the world is . . . littered by modernities and by practicing artists, who never regarded modernism as the secure possession of the West,”⁹ while Ali Mazrui argues that Europe’s claim to universality has no legitimacy, given the cultural, historical, and empirical relativism embedded in its own modernism.¹⁰ The idea that Africa can move “beyond its Eurocentric provincialization,” as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza puts it,¹¹ to become an equal actor on a decentered world stage, is altogether feasible. It is a perspective many of the volume’s authors entertain.

dele jegede (chapter 18) joins other critics and scholars who would abandon an “African art history” for a “diasporic art history.” He makes the case that the notion of “Black art,” which conceives of Africa in conceptual terms, is a more viable construct than “African art,” whose origins lie in the “terms and conditions” of the West. “Black art,” or even “Black Atlantic art,” emphasizes the continuities between artists of African descent across the globe and often pays tribute to Pan-African ideology and the philosophy of Négritude as historical bases for contemporary attempts to counter a hegemonic Eurocentric discourse. By subsuming African artists within diasporic art (created both by descendants of enslaved captives brought to the Americas, Europe, and Asia against their will, and by members of later diasporas provoked by vast economic inequalities and the political instability of neocolonialism) critics can bring a vast pool of talent within their purview. To a substantial degree, this view of the African continent’s creative production as a “subtext to the main story” (as Sidney Kasfir characterizes it in chapter 26) now predominates in the literature.¹²

Artists of the Diaspora do have pivotal roles in many local and national narratives on the continent, of course, and are noted throughout this volume. Ikem Okoye (chapter 6), for example, demonstrates how the creativity of architects born in Brazil inspired an early African modernism in architecturally innovative structures. Yacouba Konaté (chapter 19) traces the contributions of diasporic intellectuals, artists, and

educators on both cultural policies and art movements in Côte d'Ivoire. Likewise, the concerted effort of contemporary transnational African artists, scholars, and curators to insert themselves into the power structure of the international art world, as discussed in greater detail by dele jegede (chapter 18) and Kinsey Katchka (chapter 25), has had significant repercussions in Africa. One might say their success has inspired confidence in African artists, which in turn has led to bolder attempts at communication with a global audience and even to improvements for the continent's art infrastructures. Abdellah Karroum's exhibition space L'Appartement 22 in Rabat, Morocco, discussed by Katarzyna Pieprzak (chapter 22), and workshops in Uganda based on the Triangle model, discussed by Sidney Kasfir (chapter 26) are cases in point. Not only does the influence of these transnational artists and culture brokers surface in many of the volume's essays, but one could say that *A Companion to Modern African Art* owes its very conception to a shift in the discipline they created. Prior to the mid-1990s, a pioneering group of scholars, such as Ulli Beier,¹³ Jean Kennedy,¹⁴ and Janet Stanley,¹⁵ labored to bring African modernism into the art historical and critical mainstream, with little success. As Okwui Enwezor, Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe (in the USA), and Simon Njami (in Europe) drew scholars' attention to contemporary African art, they infused the field with critical theory, redirecting much of the discourse in African art history. Their publications are required reading for scholars of global modernism, especially *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Whitechapel Gallery's *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (1995),¹⁶ Oguibe and Enwezor's *Reading the Contemporary* (1999),¹⁷ Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001),¹⁸ and Simon Njami's *Africa Remix* (2005).¹⁹

However, as the many new insights into modern African art presented in this volume clearly demonstrate, transnational scholars, critics, and curators have neglected African artists on the continent. Consideration of the "Black Atlantic world" results in representation of transnational experiences defined by the African émigré's relationship to a more powerful "Other." Transnational intellectuals' cause – to create a formidable African presence within the international sphere – is better served by African artists living abroad than by artists in Africa. The former assume global audiences for their artwork and create meaning within a discourse developed by critics, dealers, and artists enmeshed in the global art market. Thus a highly acclaimed British Nigerian artist such as Yinka Shonibare MBE, who lives and works in London, can entice Western audiences with his stunning tableaux and reflections on European history and canonized European artworks; Shonibare MBE's headless figures and their (im)plausible hybrid couture – Victorian-era clothing made from fabrics mistakenly felt to be "authentically" African – destabilize entrenched essentialisms only after both their strangeness and familiarity have already ensnared the viewer.²⁰ Such works raise complex identity issues and create shifts in awareness regarding the relationship between Europe and Africa from within the international art world, yet they address European rather than African viewers. We would argue that they thus ultimately reify Europe's "foundational" definitions of modernity. African expatriates such as Shonibare MBE are overburdened by the expectation that they represent Africa, something they decidedly cannot do.

A host of global venues modeled after the Venice Biennale, discussed by Kinsey Katchka (chapter 25), have provided African artists with opportunities to address international audiences relatively free of the constraints associated with more conservative, donor or patron-dependent museums. The latter, moreover, tend to explore

modern African artwork's debt to African epistemologies, ethics, and aesthetics merely as novel subtext to artworks' formal appeal. Who could resist the tantalizing beauty of El Anatsui's recycled bottle-cap tapestries (see Figure 25.1), but how many viewers understand the poignant critique of European imperialism their hazardous tactility – about as friendly to the touch as barbed wire – evokes?²¹ Even efforts to introduce modern African artists in small, focused group exhibitions often lead audiences astray. Introduced beneath the umbrella of multiculturalism, which retains colonialism's paternalistic undertones, "Others" are said to "take up the twenty-first-century challenge of locating one's place in society against the backdrop of globalization."²² Yet the omission of white male artists from the same exhibitions conveys that the latter's ideological position at the center of the international art world is as secure as ever. Despite Enwezor's reconfiguration of the events of Documenta 11 (2002) as a series of globally staged "platforms,"²³ or Nicolas Bourriaud's pinpointing of multiple centers of modernity in the Altermodern exhibition at the Tate Gallery (2009),²⁴ the struggle to decenter the international art world is ongoing and the search for terminology free of an implied center remains elusive.

The artists whose work is evaluated in this volume (in Kasfir's words) are "deeply invested" in an African locale. In-depth studies focused on the continent, most of them based on prolonged field research or scrutiny of archives, or both, draw out precisely those intricate aspects of African histories, issues, and values that other narratives of African art worlds are unable to capture. It is a premise of this volume that bringing modern African art into the mainstream of art historical discourse is not a matter of selecting artworks that reify European paradigms, but rather one of discerning those that are alien if not diametrically opposed to established models, and which, constituting a critical outside perspective, are ultimately able to contribute to the emergence of a decentered intercultural aesthetic. After all, as Jürgen Habermas has argued, completion of the project of modernity requires all-encompassing, not partial, access to knowledge.²⁵ Will a full comprehension of the world not depend upon the capacity to negotiate contemporary contradictions? And are not Africans, who have mastered such negotiations, in the position to create powerful new modernisms that build upon paradox? As Enwezor argues, African artists are well into the process of disaggregating "the architecture of colonial modernity" from their social context with a "possible tabula rasa for a future composition" of modernity the likely outcome.²⁶

Chapter Overview

How, then, could we organize these in-depth views of specific African settings in ways that would allow for points of intersection with other narratives in the world? We opted to arrange them in roughly chronological order by selecting a moment of major impact within their internal chronologies. This was not a neat affair, as many chapters span extended periods of time and their placement involved subjective judgments. Three chapters stand alone, either because they are sweeping surveys that defy assignment to a particular time period or because their topics, important to the discussion though they are, fall outside of the volume's explicit parameters. Part II is thus given to the chapter by Henry John Drewal, the chapter by dele jegede forms Part VI, and Sally Price's chapter appears as Part VIII.

The chapters and the sections that group them into clusters appear in the following order: Henry John Drewal's essay on "Local Transformations, Global Inspirations: The Visual Histories and Cultures of Mami Wata Arts in Africa," comprises Part II and opens the volume's discussions. After tracing the "preeexisting frameworks" for water spirits to the fifteenth century, he documents the late nineteenth-century German print of an Asian snake charmer whose widely reproduced image still inspires devotees of Mami Wata in Africa; he sees the transformations she has undergone as exemplary of the multiple modernities that allow local communities to adapt to change, and contribute to a "planetary" modernity. In this sense, "Africa has always been modern."

Part III: Art in Cosmopolitan Africa: The Nineteenth Century then groups studies that describe African participation in global modernity in the aftermath of the slave trade, as men and women of African descent travelled back and forth across the Atlantic to Africa, to Europe and the Americas, as independent agents. Others crossed the Indian Ocean, visiting Arab and Indian ports. As European empires did not establish control over most of their African colonies until the last decades of the century, Africans were able to freely select concepts, practices, and material objects offered by foreign cultures and integrate them into their own societies in novel, innovative ways.

"Loango Coast Ivories and the Legacies of Afro-Portuguese Arts," by Nichole N. Bridges, reflects upon the fifteenth century, when encounters between Portuguese mariners and African coastal populations entailed "curiosity, sizing-up, and [an] unpredictable leap toward opportunity and danger," setting "Africa's modernity in motion." She describes sculpted ivories produced by Kongo (Vili) artists, sometimes in settings such as the 1901 Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Although these sculptures were made for foreign patrons, Bridges argues that they contributed to the agency of artists in "contact zones," as their images express local commentaries on African-European interactions. Christraud M. Geary, in "Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices: From Modern to Vernacular Photography in West and Central Africa," sees African photographers as at "the center of explorations of modernity and modernist practices." Here she maps out a brief history of photographers who, starting with Augustus Washington in Liberia in the 1850s, traveled throughout western and Central Africa by 1900. Her discussion of photographic practices in the kingdom of Bamun, in Cameroon, includes a description of the court photographers of the 1920s, and the local invention of an "instant camera" in the 1930s. Photographs from the 1880s also give Prita Meier, in "At Home in the World: Portrait Photography and Swahili Mercantile Aesthetics," insight into the "globally circulating iconography" of "codes of modern self-representation." She is particularly interested in the precolonial era "mercantile modern" culture of the Swahili coast, a result of centuries of trade across the Indian Ocean. She resists labeling Swahili "practices of appropriation" as an "alternative modernity," as they are rooted in a liminal space where the old and new, the local and global, overlap and interact. Ikem Stanley Okoye turns to nineteenth-century West Africa for "African Reimaginings: Presence, Absence, and *New Way* Architecture." Coining the phrase *New Way* as a translation for local ways of speaking of modernity in Nigeria, he looks at "conceptually original" structures. He describes an 1892 mosque (built in Lagos, Nigeria, by a Brazilian-born architect for a Sierra Leonean patron) and a palace (built in Lagos in 1922 for a local king by a Yoruba architect). Unlike the imposed International Style Modernism built

in African cities by European and European-trained architects from the 1950s onwards, this *New Way* architecture was the “dialogical outcome of global modernism.”

Chapters in Part IV examine modernities and cross-cultural encounters resulting from the conflicts and negotiations set in motion by Europe’s colonization of Africa during the cataclysmic early twentieth century. The studies show how Africans, confronted with often brutal colonial exploitation, invented and developed artforms that maintained a sense of self, created counternarratives, and resisted or manipulated outside forces.

Dina A. Ramadan, in “One of the Best Tools for Learning’: Rethinking the Role of ‘Abduh’s Fatwa in Egyptian Art History,” examines a series of articles written by an influential Muslim cleric in 1903 and 1904 that served as the basis for an edict, or *fatwa*, on the visual arts. She challenges characterizations of this educator and judge as an intellectual who sought to make Islam adapt to “the ways of modern life,” seeing those interpretations as fitting into a narrative that regarded “Westernization” as progress, a narrative formulated by the *al-Nahda*, or Arab Renaissance, in the nineteenth century. Kathrin Langenohl looks at watercolors created from 1930 to 1936 by an artist in the Kasai region of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. In “Congolese and Belgian Appropriations of the Colonial Era: The Commissioned Work of Tshelantende (Djilatendo) and Its Reception,” she examines how critics have seen these works as only “precursors of modernity,” rather than recognizing the artist’s ability to draw upon local knowledge to create a Congolese modernism. An extended time period is covered by Monica Blackmun Visonà in “Warriors in Top Hats: Images of Modernity and Military Power on West African Coasts”; statues from the 1860s (in the Niger Delta of Nigeria) and 1880s (in the Bissagos Islands of Guinea-Bissau, and in the lagoons of Côte d’Ivoire) and photographs of the 1920s are all considered as backdrops to performances in the twenty-first century. She investigates why top hats, first associated with cosmopolitan modernity, were transformed into “traditions” of subversive, supernatural warfare in three separate regions.

In Part V, studies survey a multitude of local modernities that gave rise to artistic modernism throughout the continent by mid-century. Colonialism and modernism were so intertwined – as were modernist explorations and the rise of independent nations – that untangling the complexity of narratives on modern art in Africa from the 1930s through the 1970s requires a close reading of texts (be they oral or written). In some cases, contributors are providing the first published account (or the first survey in English) of a nation’s history of modern art. In other cases, authors apply new insights to narratives that have already been written.

Mary Vogl, in “Algerian Painters and Pioneers of Modernism,” surveys modern art in Algeria from the 1920s to the present. She reports that “Orientalist” paintings of the colonial era may be subversive in their portrayals of cultural heroes, and she incorporates new research on artists’ searches for indigenous Amazigh imagery as expressions of identity. She writes of Algeria’s “generative confrontation” with European art, which one of her sources characterizes as “complex, mutilating and enriching at the same time.” “Kofi Antubam, 1922–1964: A Modern Ghanaian Artist, Educator, and Writer” is the subject of the chapter by Atta Kwami. His biographical study examines Antubam’s relationship with Kwame Nkrumah’s philosophy of the “African Personality,” and the artist’s stance on “Sankofa” – a return to the aesthetic principles and artistic values of the past – as his “strategy for understanding modernist expression.” Elizabeth Morton sets the stage for modernism in contemporary

Zimbabwe by reviewing the training programs set up by two missionaries from the 1920s to the 1960s in her “Patron and Artist in the Shaping of Zimbabwean Art.” She then discusses the pivotal roles of Joram Mariga, a local artist, and Frank McEwen, an expatriate activist and entrepreneur, in expanding current critiques of this distinctive national artistic practice. Sunanda K. Sanyal, in “‘Being Modern’: Identity Debates and Makerere’s Art School in the 1960s,” discusses the complex and conflicted understandings of modernism that engaged painters, printmakers, sculptors, writers, poets, and playwrights during the years before and after Uganda’s independence. He examines underlying issues that led to tensions between those who adhered to the vision of Margaret Trowell, Makerere’s founder, those who believed in conforming to a “universal” (i.e., Western) modernism in their teaching and practice, and those who searched for other models of postcolonial identity for artists. Joanna Grabski also sets “The École des Arts and Exhibitionary Platforms in Postindependence Senegal,” in the 1960s and 1970s, examining prevalent narratives on the artists known as the École de Dakar, reconsidering the role of Pierre Lods, and revisiting assumptions of the artists’ relationship with the philosophies of Négritude. She describes how these artists simultaneously “capitalized on modernist notions and disavowed them,” and why such histories may have situated their national art world on the periphery of global discussions. “From Iconoclasm to Heritage: The Osogbo Art Movement and the Dynamics of Modernism in Nigeria,” by Peter Probst, also reevaluates a canonical body of African modern art. He looks at the iconoclasm of the 1950s that made the creative ferment of Osogbo possible in the 1960s, and discusses its current status as a locus of cultural heritage and pilgrimage. He argues that the modernism of an older generation has become the “tradition” of Nigerian artists working today. “Modernism and Modernity in African Art” incorporates the reflections of John Picton. He revisits some of the exhibitions and publications that laid the foundation for new paradigms from 1989 to 1995, and relates them to expressions of modernism in Nigeria. He chooses two case studies; first revealing the modern features of *adire*, a “traditional” textile, and then explicating how Bruce Onobrakpeya incorporated the iconographies of such works in his own art. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, in “A Century of Painting in the Congo: Image, Memory, Experience, and Knowledge,” discusses arts of the colonial and immediate postcolonial period, contrasting murals documented in the 1930s with pictures on canvas that were hung in the Congo (later Zaire) in the 1960s and 1970s. He situates both within what he calls the “modern practices of the two dimensional image,” describing systems that govern how images are seen, interpreted, and circulated, and ties the decline of painting to the general failure of modernity in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

dele jegede’s “Visual Expressivity in the Art of the Black Diaspora: Conjunctures and Disjunctures,” considers “modes of narration” for the artistic production of artists of African ancestry. Noting that artists have rallied behind the idea of Pan-Africanism as a viable framework for a counternarrative, one opposed to Eurocentric frames, he asks who narrates whom, and into whose history, and on whose terms? Part VI: “Perspectives on Arts of the African Diaspora” thus invites the reader to critically reflect on inexplicit, perhaps unconscious, agendas shaping the explicit goals of each author.

Part VII, on arts at the end of the twentieth century, examines syntheses in art that were created as artists – sometimes idealistically, always pragmatically – integrated earlier practices and local values into new forms of modernism. Innovators welcomed

the technical expertise and theoretical insights of non-African mentors, colleagues, and patrons as they created national or international (or both) contexts for their work.

Yacouba Konaté's chapter, "Art and Social Dynamics in Côte d'Ivoire: The Position of Vohou-Vohou," recounts the history of this art movement from its beginnings in the 1970s to an assessment of its impact today. The artists' exploration of salvaged and homegrown materials is seen as a reaction to their academic training, and Konaté links their philosophies to national developments in music, theater, and popular culture in the 1980s. "Contemporary Contradictions: Bronzecasting in the Edo Kingdom of Benin" by Barbara Winston Blackmun focuses primarily on twentieth-century sculptors working in Benin, Nigeria, although she provides a historical background for their workshops. She documents innovations introduced by artists who trained with brasscasters, including the famous Nigerian modernist Ben Enwonwu, and one of the royal princesses, Elizabeth Olowu, and asks why Benin sculptors have been written out of the discourse on African contemporary art. "Puppets as Witnesses and Perpetrators in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*," by Peter Ukpokodu, presents a collaborative project by William Kentridge and the Handspring Puppet Company, a multilayered theatrical production first performed in Johannesburg as apartheid crumbled in South Africa. Ukpokodu brings his understanding of historical and theoretical models – including Nigerian theater and masquerade performance – to his analysis of the play's "mise-en-scène," and its commentaries on apartheid. Katarzyna Pieprzak's "Moroccan Art Museums and Memories of Modernity" compares contemporary art museums – one planned for Rabat, and one operating in Tangier since 1990 – to other initiatives that have been attempted from 1970 to the present; these include the Appartement 22 projects of curator Abdellah Karroum. She questions the investment of the state in an "emancipatory modernity," and asks whether galleries and museums in Morocco can allow artists to enter into dialogues with the public.

Sally Price's review of the Musée du Quai Branly, which opened its doors in Paris in 2006, forms Part VIII. She provides insights into a persistent discourse based upon fantasies of "the primitive" – and misunderstandings of "the modern" – that willfully ignore centuries of history in a "primitivism as erasure." She notes that references to Africa's colonial subjugation by France have been removed from the museum, while signs of African modernity are still impossible to locate in its permanent displays.

Part IX investigates recent intersections of local expression and global identity, providing glimpses into the complex contexts of diverse African art worlds of the twenty-first century. In some cases authors explore readings and misreadings of contemporary art by critics who have little to no understanding of the social and cultural milieu for which it was created. In others, authors trace how local artists address a national audience – or seek visibility in the world beyond the borders of their country.

"Zwelethu Mthethwa's 'Postdocumentary' Portraiture: Views from South Africa and Abroad," by Pamela Allara, begins the section with an investigation of critical responses to the work of a South African artist whose work is exhibited internationally. She analyzes the culturally inflected responses of disparate critics and their (often limited) views of documentary photography and modernist images. "Creative Diffusion: African Intersections in the Biennale Network," by Kinsey Katchka, examines the nature of the structures in which artists now exhibit their work, paying particular attention to the ways that the Venice Biennale and Dak'art have provided new options for African artists. "Lacuna: Uganda in a Globalizing Field," by Sidney

Littlefield Kasfir, takes up a narrative on Uganda's artists at a point where Sanyal left off (before the bloody wars of 1966–1986) and brings her account into the present. Kasfir reflects upon local art worlds throughout Africa before turning to her recent interviews with Ugandan artists who participate in a thriving national arts scene. Till Förster's "Painted Visions under Rebel Domination: A Cultural Center and Political Imagination in Northern Côte d'Ivoire" compares two stages in the lives of murals painted for a cultural center in a city in the northern half of Côte d'Ivoire. Both sets of images refer to the recent civil war in that country, expressing experiences of oppression in the modern state as well as depicting hopes for a more peaceful future modernity. "Postindependence Architecture through North Korean Modes: Namibian Commissions of the Mansudae Overseas Project," by Meghan L. E. Kirkwood, evaluates the work of North Korean architectural teams that have completed projects in a dozen African countries. Kirkwood notes the "declarative, modern voice" of these monuments, and argues that their clarity of purpose and their simplified narratives of revolution appeal to contemporary African politicians. The volume concludes with "Concrete Aspirations: Modern Art at the Roundabout in Ugep," by Gitti Salami. In her study of local discourse surrounding the concrete sculptures created for the town of Ugep, Salami finds that local artists, politicians, and community groups see themselves as addressing a global audience. She argues that concrete sculptures in Ugep owe their modernity to their very groundedness in indigenous epistemology. Casting doubt on the universality of European paradigms of modernity and modernism, and questioning their centrality to Nigerian modernism, she thus reminds viewers of one of the central, recurring themes of the entire book.

Lacunae and Disjunctures

Unlike volumes in the Wiley Blackwell series that assign each of the most salient features of a period to an art historian specializing in that topic, this publication is not a compendium of views on well-established narratives. The level of synthesis one might expect in this type of publication is not yet possible; all scholarship in the field of African art history is relatively new (see dele jegede's section on the development of the discipline in chapter 18), and documentation for modernism on the continent is still largely undigested. Even the discourse on African modernity is still in the process of being formulated.²⁷

The groundbreaking nature of this volume can be seen in a quick survey of the existing literature on African modernism. John Picton, in his chapter, summarizes pivotal exhibitions and publications, and offers a major reassessment of Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores*,²⁸ he clearly demonstrates that the discussions of the last two decades have yet to be fully assimilated into a historiography.²⁹ While lists of artists and copious illustrations of African contemporary art are provided by some important recent publications, including *Angaza Afrika: African Art Now*, by Christopher Spring,³⁰ and *Contemporary African Art since 1980*, by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu³¹ – and, increasingly, on websites and blogs – only a few books offer substantive texts that provide information on a wide range of modern and contemporary art from Africa: these include N. Fall and J.-L. Pivin's hefty *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century*,³² and S. L. Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*.³³ The case studies in this Wiley Blackwell *Companion to Modern African Art* thus

comprise a much more representative sample of contemporary discourse on modernism in Africa than is available in any other single publication, even if they cannot claim to provide a comprehensive survey of the topic. Rather than defining or refining a canon of African modernist art, they raise issues and identify concerns that may, in the future, allow surveys of the material to be written.

Given the ambitious aims of this project, and the breadth of its purview, it is useful to remind the reader of how much material could not be included in its discussions. Obviously, given the vast territories of the continent, and the diverse experiences of African populations, 29 chapters were inadequate for comprehensive coverage of its *geography*. For example, we could not include a chapter on Sudan, or the development of the School of Khartoum.³⁴ Such a study would surely have included artists such Ibrahim El-Salahi, who has worked internationally for over 50 years, and the other Sudanic artists (sculptors, printmakers, and ceramicists) who joined one of the earliest diasporas of the postindependence period. Ethiopia is also a crucial omission, for its artists began training abroad in the 1920s, and returned to Addis Ababa to form art schools active before and after the Italian occupation of their country. Yet the flight of Ethiopian artists to the USA in the 1980s transformed African American art, and some of Ethiopia's most influential artists are thus mentioned in the chapter by jegede. Kenya is given short shrift in Sunyal's and Kasfir's essays on neighboring Uganda, and the flourishing, nongovernmental organization-based art scene in Nairobi is thus not discussed. A contributor who has written a survey of the last 130 years of modern art in his native Madagascar was forced to withdraw because of ill health.³⁵ Mozambique is not included, nor is Angola, nor the art scene in Gabon. Although international arts festivals held in Mali and Burkina Faso are cited by Katchka, the national arts institutions of Mali, and many fascinating local adaptions of modernism in those nations, are omitted. Perhaps the bottom line is this: throughout the African continent, art that reflects experiences of modernity deserves to be recorded by art historians, but has not yet been the subject of serious study.

Despite the broad stretches of time covered in these studies, enormous chunks of *history* are also missing. For example, Ramadan's essay examines the discourse that allowed modern artists to justify their careers in early twentieth-century Egypt, but cannot introduce the names or achievements of the generations of talented artists that followed in their footsteps.³⁶ Geary introduces us to photography in Cameroon, but we do not have an essay on the influential artists working in Douala or Yaoundé today.³⁷ The lack of historical coverage is particularly acute in South Africa, where art historians have already published many substantial studies of modern art that do not directly intersect with the case studies on contemporary art forms from southern Africa that we include here.³⁸ We hope that the case studies in this book will encourage readers to seek out publications that may fill in these many chronological holes, perhaps beginning with sources in the references provided by each author.

Various *media* have also not received adequate coverage in this volume due to limitations of space. Okoye tackles a particularly important segment of Africa's architectural history, and Kirkwood's discussion of monuments adds to a fledgling literature on public art and architecture.³⁹ However, other modernist architectural expressions remain untapped. While chapters are dedicated to new technologies that formed artistic genres – photography in the nineteenth century, easel painting by the twentieth century, and mixed media installations, new media works, and performances intended for gallery settings by the twenty-first century, there are substantial

gaps. For example, video art and installations are only very briefly described in the chapter by Katcha.⁴⁰ There is no serious discussion of cinema, and its more scrappy relation, video production. Recent studies of Nigeria's informal video industry, known as "Nollywood," show the importance of debates on the creation, diffusion, and reception of video for both popular consumption and artistic expression.⁴¹

Of real concern to the editors of this volume is the underrepresentation of female artists in the discourse. Women's experiences as artists need to be more fully discussed not as a nod to feminism (in many ways a Western construct), but because female artists have made very specific contributions to our understanding of modernism. We should note that the lack of space (and even the lack of respect) afforded female artists in some African art worlds today may not be due to cultural bias (as African women have often held social and religious positions that were equal or even superior to those of men), but may instead result from imported or appropriated practices – such as the legacy of colonial education. Critic and scholar Nkiru Nzegwu complains that the national and regional structures for contemporary art may be becoming even more unfriendly to female artists.⁴² Yet contributors to this volume have been able to introduce new and relevant information about specific women; contemporary artists who are female are featured by Kasfir, Blackmun, Vogl, Pieprzak, Kwami, and Konaté. Drewal and Probst remind us of the importance of women as patrons, while Visonà and Ukpokodu look at notions of gender that are expressed through performance. It is our aim in this volume to lay the foundations for future narratives of African modernisms that will be more inclusive as well as multivocal.

Notes

- 1 See Lamoureux (2006) for a historiography on the avant-garde.
- 2 Ogbechie (2008).
- 3 Susan Friedman (2006, 434) points out that "modernity has a complex and contradictory relationship to its seeming opposite – 'tradition' or 'history.'" Even Jürgen Habermas, who defines modernity as "rebelling against all that is normative" concedes that it maintains a tie to the classical (Habermas 1998, 3–4).
- 4 Smith, Enwezor, and Condee (2008) provide a discussion regarding the nature of contemporaneity and how one might, if at all, reconcile the antinomies of art and culture in the postcolonial world with Europe's ever-changing definitions of modernism.
- 5 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009, 6).
- 6 Bharucha (2001, 224).
- 7 Hassan and Dadi (2001, 24).
- 8 See Monod (1890) and Bridges, chapter 3 this volume.
- 9 Tawadros (2001, 10).
- 10 Mazrui (2001).
- 11 Zeleza (2010, 76).
- 12 Britto Jinorio (2003); see also Farrell (2003).
- 13 Beier (1968).
- 14 Kennedy (1992).
- 15 Stanley (2003).
- 16 Deliss (1995).

- 17 Oguibe and Enwezor (1999).
- 18 Enwezor (2001).
- 19 Njami (2005).
- 20 Kent, Hobbs, and Downey (2008).
- 21 Anatsui (2003).
- 22 Rudolph (2010, 11).
- 23 Enwezor (2002).
- 24 Enwezor (2010) provides a detailed discussion of this exhibition.
- 25 Habermas (1998, 8).
- 26 Enwezor (2010, 615).
- 27 See Geschiere (2008); one particularly interesting and unconventional view is that of Piot (1999).
- 28 Vogel (1991).
- 29 Vogel (1991).
- 30 Spring (2008).
- 31 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009).
- 32 Fall and Pivin (2002).
- 33 Kasfir (1999).
- 34 Deliss (1995).
- 35 Andrianetrazafy (1991).
- 36 See Karnouk (2005).
- 37 Njami (2005).
- 38 In addition to the many excellent catalogues on contemporary South African art, specifically art historical studies include Peffer (2009) and Coombes (2003).
- 39 Arnoldi (2003); Hess (2006).
- 40 Hassan and Dadi (2001).
- 41 See the video distributed by California Newsreel: Sacchi (2007); also Rice (2012).
- 42 Nzegwu says that, like Ndidi Dike, the few women in professional practice “have the onerous task of confronting the creeping masculinization that is transforming the landscape of contemporary art” in Nigeria (Nzegwu 1998, 120).

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Part II



“Africa Has Always
Been Modern”

Local Transformations, Global Inspirations

The Visual Histories and Cultures of Mami Wata Arts in Africa

Henry John Drewal

Long before the contemporary transnational, transcultural moment, many elements of African culture and the arts were traveling back and forth across the Atlantic and Indian oceans (and beyond), shaping the lives of explorers, merchants, enslavers, and enslaved in myriad ways – creating a “planetary modernity,”¹ a vibrant hybrid of the multiple modernities that continue to circulate today.

“Our tradition has always been modern,” said the twentieth-century Nigerian/Yoruba artist Rufus Ogundele. In saying so, he was expressing the Yoruba concept of “tradition” (*asa*). As Olabiyi Yai explains, the verb *sa* means “to select, choose, discriminate, or discern” – thus tradition (that is, something from the past) is forever being *created, exchanged, or transformed anew*.² And that is for me the central meaning and definition of being “modern.” African art has also always been transitional, constantly on the move and transforming, very often transcultural, and increasingly transnational, transoceanic, and global. To be modern is to be present, up to date, “with it.”

Modernity is not a European invention. It is the result of the interactions and exchanges of diverse peoples across the planet over a long period of time.³ To give but two well-known examples, the “modern-ist” movement in European art at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely inspired by the artistry of so-called “primitive” African artists – those Baule, Fang, and other unnamed geniuses whose sculptures and masks figuratively and literally *transformed* European art. It was *African* art that “modernized” European art at the turn of the twentieth century – not the reverse. A second example is jazz, with its essence in spontaneous, creative improvisation and its undisputed roots in African and Afro-Caribbean vibrations in the hearts, minds, and bodies of enslaved Africans carried to the Americas over 400 years. The flows and currents of the modern are rarely unidirectional – they can go in any direction at any time, from Africa outward or to Africa from elsewhere, as the histories of modern arts for Mami Wata attest.

Images of Mami Wata and other female and male water divinities called mami watas and papi watas have circled the globe. Travelling in the form of mermaids, mermen, and snake charmers between Europe and Africa from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, as Hindu goddesses and gods between Africa and South Asia in the twentieth century, and as African queens and Afro-Catholic saints between Africa and the Black Atlantic world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they have expressed, inspired, and shaped diverse, inventive, multiple global modernities and meanings.

In Africa and the African Atlantic world, people recognize the essential and sacred nature of water by honoring and celebrating a host of water spirits. The identities of these divinities, however, are as slippery and amorphous as water itself. Only the frames of history, art, and culture can contain them, giving them shape, contour, substance, and specificity. Yet even these frames are subject to change, and when they undergo a metamorphosis, so do the attributes, personalities, identities, and actions of these fascinating and ambiguous spirits.

Mami Wata, often portrayed with the head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish, is at once beautiful, jealous, generous, seductive, and potentially deadly. A water spirit widely known across Africa and the African Diaspora, her origins are often said to lie “overseas,” yet she is thoroughly integrated into local beliefs and practices. Her powerful and pervasive presence results from a number of factors. She can bring good fortune in the form of material wealth and money and, as a kind of “protocapitalist,” her power increased between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, the era of growing international trade between Africa and the rest of the world.

Mami Wata’s very name, which may be translated as “Mother Water” or “Mistress Water,” is pidgin English, a language developed to lubricate trade. The countless millions of Africans who were torn from their homeland and forcibly carried across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of this “trade” brought with them their beliefs and practices honoring Mami Wata and other ancestral deities. They reestablished, revisualized, and revitalized these spirits and deities, who often assumed new guises: Lasirèn, Watra Mama, Maman de l’Eau, Mae d’Agua, or saint Marta la Dominadora.⁴ Subsequently, these “new” faiths flourished. Worshippers of Mami Wata have typically selected local as well as global images, arts, ideas, and actions; interpreted them according to indigenous precepts; invested them with new meanings; and then re-presented them in novel and dynamic ways to serve their own specific (and continually changing) aesthetic, devotional, social, economic, and political aspirations.

Mami’s powers, however, extend far beyond economic gain. Although for some she bestows good fortune and status through monetary wealth, for others, she can be essential for other (Pan-African) forms of wealth and well-being, especially progeny. She works to help with such matters as infertility, impotence, or infant mortality. Some are drawn to her as an irresistible seductive presence, one who offers the pleasures and powers that accompany devotion to a spiritual force. Yet she also represents danger, for a liaison with Mami Wata often requires a substantial sacrifice, celibacy, or even the life of a family member. Despite this, she is capable of helping women and men negotiate their sexual desires and preferences. Mami also provides a spiritual and professional avenue for women to become powerful priestesses and herbalists to heal both psychospiritual and physical ailments and to assert female agency in generally male-dominated societies. Rapid socioeconomic changes and the pressures of trying to survive in burgeoning African urban centers have increased the need for the curative powers of Mami Wata priestesses and priests.



FIGURE 2.1 Attributed to Annang Ibibio artist. Mami Wata shrine figure, 1950s–1960s. Wood, pigment, metal, sacrificial materials, 87.6 cm. Michael J. Carlos Museum, Emory University, 1994.3.9, gift of William S. Arnett. Photograph by Bruce M. White, 2006, courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.

Half fish and half human, Mami Wata straddles earth and water, culture and nature. She may also take the form of a snake charmer (Figure 2.1), sometimes in combination with her mermaid attributes and sometimes separate from them. And as if this formidable water spirit weren't complicated enough in her "singular" manifestation, plural *mami watas* and *papi watas* must also be acknowledged. They comprise a vast and uncountable "school" of indigenous African water spirits (female and male) that have specific local names and distinctive personalities. These are honored in complex systems of beliefs and practices that may or may not be shared with Mami Wata. This multiplicity and complexity of forms and images, beliefs and practices mirror both the past and the present global realities that defy any single narrative or perspective.⁵

Mami Wata, who can also easily assume aspects of a Hindu god or goddess without sacrificing her identity, is a complex multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People are attracted to the limitless possibilities she represents, and, at the same time, they are frightened by her destructive potential. She inspires a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worship her, those who fear her, those who study her, and those who create works of art about her.

This chapter explores the visual histories and cultures of Mami Wata and related water divinities, their myths and seductive powers. It is about art, belief, globalization, commerce, and contact, and the power of traveling images and ideas to shape the lives of individuals and communities as they deal with the constant flow of change, creating African modernities in global encounters. Further, it explores how human imagination and cross-cultural exchange serve as catalysts in artistic representations. It aims to trace various streams of the far flung, diverse, and complex artistic and devotional traditions for Mami Wata, for this is the history of Africa's engagement with global flows of images and ideas since at least the fifteenth century, and probably long before, during the era of expansive trans-Saharan trade routes linking Africa with distant regions of the world. Such transcultural encounters (whether happy or harrowing) foster innovation, striking juxtapositions, and radically new hybrids.

Tracing the visual cultures and histories of Mami Wata is surely a daunting task and, in view of the mutability of water itself, it seems appropriate to employ what Jan Vansina has termed “a streaming model” of history.⁶ Such an approach considers the dynamics of multiple sources; diffusions and dispersals; independent inventions; confluences, divergences, and reconvergences; rapid movements versus stagnation; depths in contrast to surfaces; and currents, ebbs and flows, whirlpools, and eddies. Water metaphors seem to make sense when we speak of the fluidity and complexities of visual cultures and art histories over time and space. The following offers a broad overview of possible histories and travels of African water divinity imagery, suggesting sources, exchanges, and currents for Mami Wata, *mami* and *papi watas*, and their global impact.

Sacred Waters: Ancient and Indigenous Arts for African Water Deities

From the first evidence of image making on the continent and throughout the millennia, diverse African cultures have stressed the value and power of water not only as a source of sustenance, but also as a focus of spiritual and artistic expression, often in the form of hybrid creatures, part human, part aquatic. In other words, the cosmological and artistic frameworks were already present in many local contexts to make the introduction of a hybrid creature, such as Mami Wata, a natural progression. Visions of hybridity evidence imaginative structures and a receptive, incorporative attitude to innovation and exchange. The ideas of hybridity and modernity are part of the same process.⁷

The earliest images of African water deities may be found in rock shelters painted over a period of some 28,000 years. They depict various underwater spirit beings that continue to populate the folklore of hunter-gatherers in southern Africa. In some of these paintings human-animal hybrids (not unlike the half-human, half-fish, mermaids and mermen who appear much later in time) float among various aquatic creatures including fish, snakes (ubiquitous symbols of African water deities), and the mythic “rain bull” of the San peoples.⁸ These depictions may be intended to represent the trance journeys of a shaman or healer attempting to find water or bring rain to the parched lands of southern Africa.⁹

Carved headdresses called Sowei or Nowo suggest an ancient artistic tradition that represented a primordial female water spirit sometimes known as Tingoi or Njaloi who epitomizes ideal yet unattainable beauty, power, and goodness. She presides over female initiation rites among various peoples in Sierra Leone and Liberia, including Mende,

Temne, Bullom, Vai, Gola, Dei, Krim, Kissi, and Bassa.¹⁰ Tingoi/Njaloi is often likened to a mermaid,¹¹ and Muslim Mende peoples speak of her as a female *jīna*, or spirit, with the lower body of a fish. It seems likely that this view represents a pre-Islamic tradition of female water spirits who permeate beliefs and merge with Muslim practices in this region.¹²

Sowi/Nowo initiation headdresses or “helmet-masks” from this region offer deep and complex allusions to Tingoi/Njaloi as well as to social practices and cosmic forces. They are worn by women elders during the initiations of young girls. A zigzag motif found on the forehead of some of these headdresses may be a glyph for water, and young girls are said to “go under the water” during the first part of their initiation.¹³ Among the Temne, as Frederick Lamp notes, “water is the gestating fluid of rebirth, called, in the esoteric language of initiation, *yankoila*, ‘Mother Water.’”¹⁴

Sowi/Nowo headdresses feature the idealized attributes and beauty of a young woman. A ringed neck suggests ripples of water, as if the spirit has just emerged from the depths.¹⁵ It is often called “rainbow neck” and captures the beautiful corpulence of young maidens. It may also resemble the chrysalis of a moth or butterfly as a sign of beauty and female transformation.¹⁶ Snakes are among the most frequent motifs depicted on Sowi/Nowo headdresses. Generally considered to be water creatures, snakes reveal a constellation of ideas about ancient African water spirits and later, Mami Wata. They are the guardians of the medicines of Sande/Bondo, and shrine sculptures often depict a female-headed coiled snake or a female head and neck encircled by a snake.¹⁷ Wall paintings of Tingoi/Njaloi sometimes show her as a serpent-fish with a human head adorned by elegantly arranged and luxuriant hair.¹⁸

Elaborate coiffures resonate with later descriptions and representations of Mami Wata. Among the Sherbro, rich, full hair is a sign of beauty and health, and women interweave black cotton with their own hair to achieve volume.¹⁹ For the Mende, the thickness and length of hair are emblematic of the productive organic growth and fertility essential to femininity.²⁰

These are but two of countless examples of arts for water spirits on the African continent. Despite enormous diversity in styles and imagery, such works frequently fuse human and aquatic creatures (snakes, crocodiles, etc.) emblematic of hybridity and spiritual transformation. These ideas and images prepared the way for the arrival and incorporation of another part-human, part-fish creature, the mermaid from overseas.

Afro-Mami Meets Euro-Mermaid: A Fifteenth-Century Sapi Synthesis

The first Europeans to arrive on the West African coast were the Portuguese, who in 1462 made contact with the Sapi people on Sherbro Island off present-day Sierra Leone. They commissioned the sophisticated stone and ivory Sapi sculptors to create saltcellars, pyxes (Christian liturgical vessels), spoons, fork and knife handles, and oliphants (hunting horns) based on European models, probably prints or book illustrations.²¹ It was during these encounters (1490–1530) that a Sapi sculptor carved a mermaid on an ivory saltcellar, probably inspired by a European image given to him by one of the Portuguese sailors or merchants (Figure 2.2).²² Though the mermaid was copied from a European model, the Sapi sculptor immediately “Africanized” her, for she is flanked by two crocodiles, ancient African symbols for water spirits and a central image associated with water spirits among the descendants of the Sapi,



FIGURE 2.2 Attributed to Sapi artist. Saltcellar, Sierra Leone, late fifteenth century. Ivory, 16 cm. The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photograph © The National Museum of Denmark, Ethnographic Collection.

the Bullom, Temne, and other peoples in Sierra Leone. Crocodiles are prominent in stories of many peoples in the region (Temne, Bullom, and Baga): “A Bundu woman plays tricks with crocodiles. A strong and fearsome swimmer, she dives amidst the reptiles and stirs them from sleep, calling to them as she flirts the water into their eyes, making them follow her as she swims rapidly away.”²³

As their familiarity with European mermaid lore increased, Africans interpreted, adapted, and transformed the image of a European mermaid (and later, other images) into a representation of an African deity – Mami Wata – and developed elaborate systems of belief and sacred visual and performance arts in the process. This is but one example of the incorporative creativity of African artists, their openness to new images, and their ability to translate, transform, and domesticate foreign and global concepts to serve local needs.

The Mermaid: A Floating Signifier

Mermaids and, to a lesser extent, mermen, have populated the human imagination for millennia. Some of the earliest have their origins in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia (e.g., the merman spirit of River Urat, circa 900 BCE, in the Museum of

Ethnology, Berlin-Dahlem), and the Mediterranean world of the Phoenicians, Minoans, Greeks, and Romans. For the Greeks and Romans, mermaids – like the part-bird, part-human sirens – symbolized danger. In Christian Europe of the Middle Ages, the mermaid entered bestiaries and other arts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where she usually appeared in a strongly moralizing context as a symbol of vanity, immorality, seduction, and danger.²⁴

By the fifteenth century, when Europeans began to explore beyond Mediterranean waters and Atlantic coasts, they carried with them beliefs and images of mythic creatures – dragons, griffins, unicorns, centaurs, and, especially, the mermaid. It was in 1493 that Christopher Columbus sighted three mermaids off the coast of Haiti, then known as Hispaniola, in the Caribbean. He wrote that they “came quite high out of the water” but were “not so beautiful as painted, though to some extent they have the form of a human face.”²⁵

These images assumed different forms within the material culture of sailors, merchants, and explorers and might appear as book illustrations, prints, playing cards, musical instruments, flags and other heraldic devices, trademarks, watermarks, and tattoos. Songs, dances, and games may also have made direct reference to sirens or mermaids.

And what did Africans think and do when they first saw Europeans and their depictions of water spirits or mermaids? Unfortunately we do not have those oral African accounts of encounters, and the European written ones we have are filled with Eurocentric misconceptions and misapprehensions. The same might be said of African perceptions at this first encounter. According to the accounts of some of the earliest European travelers and to some African oral traditions, many Africans associated Europeans with the sea and their own water spirits, an impression that would have been reinforced by the sight of these large sailing vessels coming into view from below the horizon. One of the earliest European accounts of African ideas about Europeans was written by Alvise da Cadamosto, who voyaged to the western coast of Africa near Cape Verde in the years 1455 and 1456. He interpreted their reactions as naive and amusing, whereas they were actually quite logical given the shocking novelty of new technologies:

It is asserted that when for the first time they saw sails, that is, ships, on the sea (which neither they nor their forefathers had ever seen before), they believed that they were great sea-birds with white wings, which were flying, and had come from some strange place . . . some of them . . . thought that the ships were fishes . . . Others again said that they were phantoms that went by night . . . Thus, as they did not understand the art of navigation, they all thought that the ships were phantoms.²⁶

These curious-looking visitors, their possessions, and especially their icons, must have made a profound impression on Africans of the time. João De Barros’s fifteenth-century accounts described “Abbyssinians [Africans]” who “bowed down and adored the figurehead of the Portuguese flagship – a wooden statuette of the Angel Gabriel.”²⁷ Written descriptions from the centuries that followed these fifteenth-century encounters tell a similar tale. Thomas Astley, for example, includes an incident that occurred during the voyage of the Frenchman Andre Brue to the islands of Bissao and Bissagos in 1700.²⁸ An African visiting Brue’s ship sacrificed a rooster, and when questioned,

he explained that “the People of his Country looked on the Whites as the Gods of the Sea; that the mast was a Divinity that made the Ship walk, and the Pump was a Miracle, since it could make Water rise-up, whose natural Property is to descend.” Cross-cultural encounters encourage reflection, reaction, and innovation that lead to transformative, *modern* practices.

Others have documented similar responses in the twentieth century. Amaury Talbot cited an origin myth for Kalabari Ijo masked dances in honor of water spirits that links them with Europeans.²⁹ G. I. Jones noted the Igbo belief that Europeans originated from the water.³⁰ Kongo people had their own views about Europeans as water spirits for they were “white” and came from the sea, the passage between this world and the next, and they brought “rich gifts unknown in ‘this’ world.”³¹ Despite the difficulties encountered in interpreting early European accounts, which are drenched in prejudice and ignorance about Africa and Africans, the number of such reports from different parts of Africa and different eras may offer certain insights for assessing the early African reception of Europeans and their visual culture.³² At the same time, these early encounters attest to African agency in transforming and reinterpreting startling images and ideas for local needs.

Although the wellspring of the visual culture and history of Mami Wata may always remain conjectural,³³ I would suggest that much textual and visual evidence indicates that the concept of Mami Wata, if not her name,³⁴ originated long before the massive dispersal of Africans to the Americas (from the sixteenth to nineteenth century) and the colonial era (1900–1957). The antiquity and prevalence of indigenous African beliefs in water deities, widely imaged as hybrid human–aquatic creatures,³⁵ served as a basis to understand and translate European mermaid myths and images into African ones from the first momentous Euro-African contacts in the fifteenth century.

Given their ideas about Europeans, Africans could have quite easily come to regard European icons, such as the figureheads on ships and other marine sculptures, as representations of water spirits.³⁶ Several works have been documented in African water spirit shrines in widely dispersed locales in Africa that support this supposition. Among the Bidjogo on the West African coast, a Baroque-style (1550–1750) figurehead still dominated a shrine on Formosa Island in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁷ A figurehead from a ship wrecked off the coast of southern Africa in the 1870s was allegedly acquired by Africans and incorporated into a shrine in honor of local sea divinities.³⁸ Another, a Janus-headed marine sculpture, was allegedly used for many years in south-eastern Nigeria before 1975. It originally came from a trading vessel plying the West African coast. Red pigmentation around the eyes, often used on people and on sculptures in eastern Nigeria,³⁹ suggests that it may have been used in a ritual context.

Field data that I collected in Nigeria in 1975 and 1978 link Mami Wata with specific European marine sculptures in Nigeria. In one case, a figurehead given in about 1910 to a Yoruba man who worked for a British trading company in Lagos was identified by its owners as Mami Wata. Among the Awori Yoruba, a famous local carver, Olaniyan, copied a figurehead for use in a shrine around the end of the nineteenth century. When that copy rotted, its owner, a devotee of the Yoruba water goddess Yemoja, brought it to Kilani Olaniyan, grandson of the sculptor, to have it reproduced.⁴⁰ The effort made to preserve the original form of the European sculpture – a three-quarter female figure with long flowing hair – in its two African/Yoruba reproductions further suggests the impact of foreign objects in African water spirit and Mami Wata worship.

In the port city of Old Calabar, at the mouth of the Cross River in southeastern Nigeria, Efik traders dealt with European ships anchored offshore for over three centuries prior to the colonial era. Beginning in the 1890s, Efik women in nearby Duke Town developed a tradition of punch-decorated work on imported brass trays that may have represented the water divinity Nnimm in the form of the mermaid, later to be known by the name Mami Wata.⁴¹ They served as gifts during the rites of passage held for young girls who were transitioning into womanhood. This tradition manifests complex connections between several cultural phenomena: local water spirits, in particular Nnimm, who presides over the rites; the institution of secluding the girls in a “fattening room” (*ufok nkubo*) and the fattening-room girls (*mbobo*); the men’s society of Ekpe; and *nsibidi*, the local pictographic script for initiates. As Robert Farris Thompson has written:

Women had their secrets too, knowledge of supernatural underwater transformations, lore about fish that were really leopards, leopards that were really kings, and many other forces. They slyly interposed some of these “heavy,” awesome images in the decoration of outwardly secular objects – calabashes, stools, and trays – confident that the deeply initiated would catch the glint of power veiled by decoration.⁴²

The Double-Tailed Mermaid in the Art of Benin

Another version of the mermaid, one with a double tail, was probably introduced by the Portuguese in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. This image has had a major impact on the West African coast in the Benin kingdom and among the neighboring Owo- and Ijebu-Yoruba. Although a Portuguese example has not yet been found, several Italian ones exist. A fifteenth-century Venetian medallion and a carved relief dating to the fourteenth century that dominates the entrance to Saint Michael’s Church in Lucca, Italy, illustrate this mermaid variant. A third, a large bronze sculpture dating from the sixteenth century (1570–1590), was commissioned by an important Roman family, possibly the Colonna.⁴³ For its Italian audience, this image signified, among other things, the aberrations that could follow a departure from Christian morality.⁴⁴ In Africa, however, it had a very different significance.

A Janus-faced, double-tailed figure crowns a fine Benin ivory ritual bell. Below this, a standing, “mudfish-legged” figure with a crown, sword, staff, snake, and fish represents the king of Benin, the *oba*, and his divine link with the god of the sea and wealth, Olokun. Juxtaposed on the opposite side, the image of a Portuguese man with straight hair, a beard, and a hat refers to Benin beliefs about the visitors from overseas, their luxury goods, and their connection to the watery realm and riches of Olokun.

Douglas Fraser made a detailed study of the double-tailed figure, its possible sources, and its diffusion to West Africa. He notes that the figure grasping its own double tail (i.e., self-dompting), a very arbitrary, systematic, and imaginative theme, is greatly elaborated in Benin and Yoruba art.⁴⁵ While there are no known African parallels, “the image in many ways resembles the European mermaid,” an idea first proposed by Felix von Luschans.⁴⁶ Even though Fraser recognized that some elements of this motif (the grasping of the double tail, the baldrics, deep navel, and scalloped skirt) “might have been independently invented in Africa,” he thought that this

seemed unlikely since “the whole ensemble constitutes a coherent formal system that normally travels together.” He argued that “three important canons of art historical authenticity (degree of centrality to the culture, agreement with local style, and duration as shown by breadth of dispersal and functional differentiation) strongly indicate that the fish-legged figure in Nigeria predates the advent of the Portuguese to West Africa” and concluded that “the visual evidence strongly suggests that the Nigerian images were influenced by concepts stemming ultimately from the Eastern [Byzantine] Empire, probably in the first millennium A.D.”⁴⁷ While I agree that the image may initially have come from the ancient Near East, Egypt, or classical Mediterranean world (via trans-Saharan or Nile Valley routes), I believe Fraser underestimates the inventiveness of African artists and their penchant for transforming, that is, Africanizing, images seen on imported goods.⁴⁸ The aforementioned Sapi sculptor’s ivory mermaid with crocodiles is but one example. At Benin, images of the Portuguese were quickly incorporated into the royal arts of the court (ivories, bronze sculptures, plaques, musical instruments, textiles, and so forth) because these newcomers were immediately associated with wealth from the sea; Olokun, the god of the sea; and, therefore, the divine ruler on land, the king, or oba. Judging a motif’s “centrality to culture” can be highly problematic. Its reception and integration depend on where and how it fits within an existing, evolving cultural system, a concept that is crucial in the complex histories of Mami Wata images and ideas. Encounters between preexisting African water spirit ideas, images, and practices and the double-tailed European mermaids of the twelfth through sixteenth centuries help to explain their rapid reception and integration. They are the more likely source for the fish-legged figures in Benin and Yoruba cultures.

The mudfish that is seen forming the legs of the oba is a species of scaleless fish with long, straight, whisker-like feelers around its mouth that are called barbels. Benin depictions of the Portuguese emphasize long, straight hair and beards, and several Benin objects (including the famous sixteenth-century ivory pendants of the Iyoba, or the mother of the oba, now in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) either alternate the heads of Portuguese with the heads of mudfish or use them interchangeably in similar compositions.⁴⁹ As Blier has noted, “What is significant in these masks is the formal equivalence created between mudfish and Portuguese through the complementary conflation of features.”⁵⁰ Abundant hair, like that of the Portuguese, or the barbels of a mudfish, is a widespread sign of spiritual presence and power in Africa. It became an important element in Mami Wata imagery (see below). Mudfish also burrow into the mud (estivate) to survive during the dry season and are then “reborn” when the rains come. Moreover, certain mudfish (*Malapterurus electricus*) are shock-producing.⁵¹ This attribute probably symbolizes the sacred energy associated with the oba, a divine king who never dies, and may explain why several Benin artworks depict an oba with mudfish legs.

The association of the Portuguese with the sea, wealth, and Olokun may also be seen in Benin export art in ivory where the majority of animals carved on the stems of spoons are

denizens of Olokun’s realm – fish, pythons, snails, and crocodiles. Crocodiles and fish regularly accompany the Portuguese on plaques, and their occurrence on Bini-Portuguese works may again allude to the symbolic associations of the European “other” with Olokun and wealth.⁵²

In contemporary Benin, Olokun is linked with Mami Wata who is sometimes described as his wife or “consort.”⁵³ Two Yoruba-speaking peoples, the Owo and Ijebu, who had close, long-term interactions with the kingdom of Benin, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, share a number of their images, including the mermaid, and associations with the sea divinity Olokun.⁵⁴

Mami Wata and the Image of the Snake Charmer

A wide variety of these half-human, half-serpent images for water spirits, widespread throughout Africa, set the stage for the arrival and incorporation of a very particular European image of an “Oriental other” – a snake charmer – that came to resonate deeply within African water spirit arts. But before we consider the how, where, when, what of this snake charmer image in Africa, let us consider it in nineteenth-century Europe.

The West has had a long and enduring fascination with the “exotic.”⁵⁵ During much of the nineteenth century, with its generally rigid social norms and growing awareness of other ecological and cultural worlds, people turned to the exotic to provide a “temporary *frisson*, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre.”⁵⁶ Institutions such as botanical and zoological gardens, ethnographic museums, and especially circuses provided vehicles for such escape.

One of the most significant centers for such developments was the northern German port and trading center of Hamburg, which was in many ways Europe’s gateway to the exotic. It was an important member and leader of the Hanseatic League, a group of wealthy independent city-states on the North Sea that developed powerful import/export companies with vessels that plied the world’s oceans between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hamburg’s contacts with distant lands fed the popular European appetite for things foreign.

While illustrated accounts of adventures abroad proliferated in books, magazines, and newspapers, the exotic became tangible as a growing number of African, Asian, and Indian sailors appeared in the port of Hamburg and other European maritime centers.⁵⁷ Carl G. C. Hagenbeck worked as a fish merchant in St. Pauli in the port area of Hamburg. This area was also a popular “entertainment” center for sailors and others. In 1848, a fisherman who worked the Arctic waters brought some sea lions to Hagenbeck, which he in turn exhibited as a zoological “attraction.” The immediate success of this venture led to a rapidly enlarged menagerie of exotic animals from Greenland, Africa, and Asia.⁵⁸

Sensing the public’s enormous appetite for the bizarre, Hagenbeck decided to expand his imports to include another curiosity – exotic people. The first of these arrived in 1875, a family of Laplanders, who had accompanied a shipment of reindeer. This was the modest beginning of a new concept in popular entertainment known as the *Völkerschauen*, or “People Shows.”⁵⁹ In order to advertise his new attractions, Hagenbeck turned to Adolph Friedländer, a leading printer who quickly began to produce a large corpus of inexpensive color posters for Hagenbeck.

Hagenbeck hired a famous hunter named Breitwieser to travel to Southeast Asia and the Pacific to collect rare snakes, insects, and butterflies. In addition to these, Breitwieser brought back a wife, who under the stage name “Maladamatjaute” began to perform as a snake charmer in Hagenbeck’s production.⁶⁰ A Hamburg studio photograph taken about 1887 shows Maladamatjaute attired for her performance.⁶¹

The style and cut of her bodice, the stripes made of buttons, the coins about her waist, the armlets, the position of the snake around her neck and a second one nearby, the nonfunctional bifurcated flute held in her hand, and her facial features and coiffure are all present in a snake charmer chromolithograph reprinted in 1955 in Bombay, India, by the Shree Ram Calendar Company from an original sent to them by two (Indian?) merchants in Kumase, Ghana.⁶² In a letter to me dated June 17, 1977, the manager of the Calendar Company stated that the print had been copied “without changing a line even from the original.”⁶³

While the original chromolithograph from the Friedländer company has not yet been found, another very similar one has recently come to light and probably dates to the 1880s.⁶⁴ There can be little doubt that Maladamatjaute was the model for the image. Her light brown skin placed her beyond Europe, while the boldness of her gaze and the strangeness of her occupation epitomized for Europeans her “otherness” and the mystery and wonder of the “Orient.” As Maladamatjaute’s fame as a snake charmer spread, her image began to appear in circus flyers and show posters for the Folies Bergère in Paris,⁶⁵ as well as in the USA. Soon after, and probably unknown to Maladamatjaute, her image spread to Africa – but for very different reasons and imbued with very new meanings.

The Snake Charmer as Mami Wata in Africa

Not long after its publication in Europe, the snake charmer chromolithograph reached West Africa, probably carried by African sailors who had seen it in Hamburg. European merchants stationed in Africa may have also brought Maladamatjaute’s seductive image to decorate their work or domestic spaces.⁶⁶

For African viewers, the snake charmer’s light brown skin and long black wavy hair suggested that she came from beyond Africa, and the print had a dramatic and almost immediate impact. By 1901, about 15 years after its appearance in Hamburg, the snake charmer image had already been interpreted as an African water spirit, translated into a three-dimensional carved image, and incorporated into a Niger River Delta water spirit headdress that was photographed by J. A. Green in the Delta town of Bonny.⁶⁷ Green’s photograph documents how closely the headdress resembled the Hamburg chromolithograph: the long, black hair parted in the middle, the garment’s neckline, the earrings, the position of the figure’s arms and the snakes, and the low-relief rendering of the inset with a kneeling flute player surrounded by four snakes. The image of Maladamatjaute, the “Hindoo” snake charmer of European and American renown, had begun a new life as the primary icon for Mami Wata, an African water divinity with overseas origins, joining and sometimes replacing her manifestation as a mermaid.

The style and iconography of the print help to explain its rapid, widespread acceptance. Its naturalism contributed to its being understood by Africans as a “photograph” of a foreign spirit. As one Igbo priestess told me, “someone must have gone under the water to snap it.”⁶⁸ As a product of modern technology, this “photograph” was an instance of the medium reinforcing the message. The snake, an important and widespread African symbol of water and the rainbow (especially along the Ghana/Togo/Benin/Nigeria coast), was a most appropriate subject to be shown surrounding, protecting, and being controlled by Mami Wata. The position of one snake arching over the head of Mami Wata reinforced its link with the rainbow.⁶⁹

Other elements in the print linked it with myths and images of mermaids. The snake charmer shared the complexion, facial features, long, flowing hair, and breathtaking appearance of mermaids. Without exception African respondents have stressed the extraordinary beauty and power of her bold, intense gaze and composure. Golden armlets, earrings, neckline, pendant, and waist ornaments in the print combined to evoke the riches that Mami Wata promises to those who honor her.

As nineteenth-century arts from West and Central Africa usually depicted complete figures the rendering of Mami Wata as a half figure in the chromolithograph was taken to be significant by African viewers. In discussing this aspect of the print, Mami Wata devotees pointed out that the unseen lower portion of the snake charmer indicates the deity is “hiding her secret,” that is, her fish tail. The ambiguous rendering of the cloth below the waist, which is reminiscent of scales, probably reinforced this idea. The overall blue-green background and the absence of contextual images such as buildings or a landscape (except for the rocks in the inset with the flute player) contribute to the impression of an underwater scene – features that have inspired the shrine environments of some Mami Wata devotees.⁷⁰

In Hamburg in the early 1900s, the Dralle company created and marketed a perfume called “Mami Water.” It was intended specifically for the African trade and more specifically for devotees of Mami Wata. Its label depicts a mermaid, combing her long hair and admiring herself in a mirror. She is accompanied by a snake. This Mami Wata perfume label served as the model for a wonderful wall mural in eastern Ghana which combines three streams of Mami imagery – mermaid, snake charmer, and a Hindu goddess (see below). It seems that the perfume and its label were later reproduced in Nigeria.⁷¹ This chain of reproduction illustrates a remarkable fluidity of image, imagination, devotion, and entrepreneurship – both European and African. Whether inspired by the search for profit or other rewards, cross-cultural encounters of the trade variety (like Dutch/Indonesian wax print cloth made for the African market)⁷² foster innovation and contribute to the “with-it” modernizing process.

In the more than 100 years since the arrival of the snake charmer print in Africa, the image has traveled widely, first in West and subsequently in Central Africa. In the 1960s the snake charmer print was also reproduced in London (and other locales as well), with stronger color contrasts and a darker complexioned Mami Wata. Artists in many different places, inspired by the image, have created an imaginative array of forms celebrating the deity. The impulse to be modern, to innovate and move with the times, derives in no small measure from transcultural encounters. Various copies of copies continue to circulate widely in sub-Saharan Africa where, as of 2012, the influence of the print can be discerned in at least 60 cultures in more than 20 countries, from Senegal to Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, and beyond. They also exhibit inventive elaborations and responses inspired by the chromolithograph that have shaped beliefs and patterns of worship.

Mami Wata and Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the vast majority of visitors from overseas that Africans encountered were European or American. By the early twentieth century, however, as Europeans established a colonial presence in Africa, other peoples from European-dominated areas, such as Lebanon and the British colony of



FIGURE 2.3 Joseph Kossivi Ahiator (b. 1956, Aflao, Ghana). *Indian King of Mami Wata*, 2005. Pigment on cloth, 225 × 267 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA, x2005.5.1. Museum purchase. Photograph by Don Cole, courtesy of the Fowler Museum.

India, began to arrive. They came as traders and, like the Europeans before them, were associated by Africans with wealth from overseas.

In the 1930s and 1940s (possibly inspired in part by Mahatma Gandhi's successful campaign for India's independence), Indian (mostly Hindu) material culture in the form of images in books, pamphlets, films, and popular devotional chromolithographs, as well as the votive practices of Indian traders living in Africa, came to have a profound impact on Mami Wata worshippers, their icons, and ritual actions,⁷³ and led to the next episode in the development of the visual culture of Mami Wata that began in the 1940s–1950s. The popularity of the snake charmer lithograph and the presence of Indian merchants (and films) in West Africa led to a growing fascination with Indian prints of Hindu gods and goddesses. In various places, especially along the Ghana–Nigeria coast, people began to interpret these deities as representations of a host of *mami wata* spirits associated with specific bodies and levels of water (Figure 2.3). Using these prints as guides for making icons in wood, clay, and other media, performing rituals, and preparing altars known as “Mami Wata tables,” devotees expanded the pantheon of water spirits, fostering an ever-growing complexity in Mami Wata worship, which includes elements of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, astrology, European spiritualist, and occult beliefs and practices.⁷⁴ The openness of such belief systems offers “eternal potential.”⁷⁵ As Dana Rush notes, the Hindu chromolithographs that have since the 1950s flooded “vodunland” (i.e., Ghana, Togo, and

Benin) possess both external and internal mobility. They are easily reproduced and transported, and they are “inwardly mobile” since their “inherent forms and meanings do not remain stationary.”⁷⁶ They continually move, change, shift, and multiply.

Take for example, the chromolithographic image of the triple-headed, multiarmed Hindu deity Dattatreya. For Mami Wata worshippers among the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, it represents Densu, a *papi wata* spirit associated with a river in Ghana. He is called the “triple gift giver” and is a source of enormous wealth as explained by the artist of the mural in the shrine of renowned Mami Wata priestess Affi Yeye in Benin. In the shrine of Igbo healer and Mami Wata priest Dido in Nigeria, the spirit has a different name but still serves to give valuables with its many hands. One Nigerian variant copies the print closely, while another from Ghana combines the multiple heads and arms of Densu with the fish tail of Mami Apouke,⁷⁷ a fusion probably derived from the visions and divinations of its former owner to serve her or his personal needs.

Another popular Hindu image that has inspired innovative interpretations, not only within the context of Mami Wata worship but in related faiths such as Thron and Atingali, is that of Hanuman, the monkey king of *Ramayana* fame. For Mami Wata worshippers, he is a *papi wata* of great strength. For Atingali followers, he is the warrior Fulani who carries an angel on each shoulder and captures and kills witches. In contrast, among the Fanti peoples of Ghana, he is not a deity but a cultural hero.⁷⁸ Other works exhibit the impact of Hindu imagery in a variety of ways, such as the presence of iconic elements including the forehead dot (*bindi*), worn to protect against the “evil eye.”

As a Yoruba Mami Wata devotee who sells popular Hindu prints in Togo has explained:

formerly, during the colonial period, we had the pictures [Hindu images], but we didn’t know their meaning. People just liked them to put in their rooms. But then Africans started to study them too – about what is the meaning of these pictures that they are putting lights, candles, and incense there every time. I think they are using the power to collect our money away, or how? So we started to befriend the Indians to know their secret about the pictures. From there the Africans also tried to join some of their societies in India and all over the world to know much about the pictures. Reading some of their books, I could understand what they mean.⁷⁹

His account illustrates how meanings are constructed, as well as how Mami Wata ritual practices evolve and spread so dramatically. The print seller uses books on Buddhism, Hinduism, and occultism as references for his synthesis of foreign and indigenous divinities and the paraphernalia necessary for their worship. When African clients express an interest in the deities illustrated in particular prints, the print seller provides the English, Hindu, and African names of the gods and goddesses and explains their powers, attributes, and the materials required for their worship. Each spirit, he explains, has its own incense or perfume because Mami Wata likes pleasant scents, and the fragrances “drive away evil spirits.” He adds that Mami Wata abhors filth and loves beautiful things. Therefore, her shrine must be spotless, well arranged, and covered in white cloth or clean sand. The remaining requirements include flowers, “sweet” foods (such as candy, bananas, oranges, and eggs), candles, either a bound notebook or sheets of paper (see below), money, perfume, and talcum powder, as well as sweet music to soothe Mami Wata’s heart.⁸⁰

These shrines or altars are transcultural ensembles of icons that inform ritual acts. Myriad shrine elements, placed on cloth-covered platforms, constitute what devotees refer to as “Mami Wata’s table.” The use of the term “table” is itself revealing, for it suggests modernity in new forms of worship and is therefore seen as attractive to Mami Wata. The “table” is probably inspired by multiple sources, some local⁸¹ and others global. One source is the dressing tables of European ladies, filled with the cosmetics so dear to Mami Wata. Another is the dining table set with a white cloth, flowers, and fruits. Among the Ewe and Mina peoples in Togo, knives, forks, and spoons are ritual implements that are kept on Mami’s altar or table and are used in ritual repasts conducted in the style of a Western banquet.⁸² The Christian altar with its crucifix, candles, ritual vessels, and flowers is also an inspiration. Finally, since about the 1940s, Hindu household altars, replete with pictures, candles and incense, and the paraphernalia depicted in Hindu chromolithographs have proved inspirational.⁸³

Communicating with Mami Wata: Writing, Reflecting, Calling

Not only do prints serve as the models for statuary, paintings, and complex altar environments, they suggest procedures that facilitate interactions with the spirit. As mentioned above, the Yoruba print seller from Togo also has notebooks in his inventory. These are for recording dreams, which are “messages” from Mami Wata. Requests made to Mami are also written down, as well as the accounts of each day’s business transactions, presumably because Mami Wata is the source of all wealth and serves as a spiritual “accountant.”⁸⁴ Money received as income is placed on the shrine to be blessed, and a portion is left as a gift to the spirit. These and other practices are not only based on imported images and texts but also on the observable practices of Hindus and other foreigners living in Africa. Literacy has thus come to play an important role in Mami Wata worship. According to some Mami Wata devotees, books complete the construction of a “proper” Mami Wata table. As people began to study, or rather to identify and interpret, what they saw in popular Hindu prints, they noticed the presence of books, scrolls, notepads, and sheets of paper covered with unrecognizable symbols. These items suggested new worship patterns that were then incorporated into Mami Wata initiations and daily rituals.⁸⁵

Familiar with mermaid lore, devotees consider the mirror to be one of the most prized possessions of Mami Wata as well as an instrument essential for communication with her. The surface of a mirror is likened to the surface of the water.⁸⁶ It is thus a boundary between the cosmic realms of water and land, a symbol of the permeable threshold crossed by Mami Wata when she enters the bodies of her mediums and they go into possession trance. At the same time, it is the threshold crossed by those troubled by Mami Wata when they voyage to her watery underworld in their dreams. Furthermore, the mirror allows not only passage between water and land, but between the present and the future. As one Ewe devotee explained about her Mami Wata mirror, “I can see the future in it; the mirror can answer my questions. It does so at night during my dreams.”⁸⁷

At another level, the mirror is a metaphor for the very process by which devotees construct their worship and ritual performance. In their effort to become one with Mami Wata, devotees recreate her world by mirroring data from a variety of sources – popular imported prints, dreams, foreign literature, trade goods, and the actions of those from

overseas – Europeans and Indians. Yet this mirroring is not simple reproduction, rather it is a creative interpretation and re-presentation of the things they see and experience. It is mimesis with a difference.⁸⁸ Using these sources as models for behavior, devotees impersonate Mami Wata during rituals, recreate her attire, and reconstruct her watery world in their sacred spaces. In other instances, Mami Wata manifests herself and communicates through ventriloquism.

Using a variety of techniques, a priest or priestess will go into trance in order to communicate directly with Mami Wata. In this state, the spirit changes the medium's voice and the words of Mami are heard, sometimes directly before visitors or clients and sometimes emanating from behind a curtain. The use of modern technologies, like the telephone, is also a part of communications with the deity. Some priests have a tall pole in front of their compounds from which a telephone wire descends into their house or shrine. This “telephone” is used to send and receive messages from Mami Wata.

Troubled Waters: From Saint to Sinner

As Mami Wata's popularity increased and spread from the colonial period to the 1970s, many devotees came to conceive of her as resembling a Christian saint who used her spiritual powers for the benefit of her followers. Seeking to strengthen this resemblance, they modeled their arts and devotional practices on those of Christianity and a generalized “European” etiquette.⁸⁹ In the Republic of Benin, “Papa Nouveau,” the Christian “prophet” of an independent church, became very influential because he was believed to be the husband of Mami Wata.⁹⁰

Within the last 20 to 30 years, however, Mami Wata's engagement with modernity, morality, Christianity, and Islam has led to dramatic transformations in the ways she is depicted and understood. For some, her dangerous and seductive attributes align her with the forces of Satan. Mami has thus become a primary target of a widespread and growing religious movement led by evangelical (Pentecostal) Christians and fundamentalist Muslims who seek to denigrate and demonize indigenous African faiths.⁹¹ For these groups, Mami Wata has come to personify immorality, sin, and damnation. She is considered one of the most powerful presences of Satan, one whose work is to seduce women and men away from the “path of righteousness.”⁹²

Two newspaper articles from Congo (then known as Zaire) focus upon Mami Wata, the “evil seductress.”⁹³ The first tells the story of five market women who are believed to be *mami watas*. When people buy foodstuffs from these women and prepare them, they have no taste and their quantity rapidly diminishes. The women are described as “brown” in color with “a beauty like the Virgin Mary.” All day they remain seated on containers that are reputed to hold “fetishes.” Their lower bodies are covered with cloths in order to hide their fish tails. The women are said to live with *bisimbi*, male spirits who dwell under the water. The leader of these market women is claimed to be ruled by Satan.⁹⁴ The second story praises the musician Mayaula-Mayoni for composing a song entitled “Mamie-Wata” that criticizes prostitution by women (*mami watas*) who “excel in the commerce of charm” and use their “bodies instead of their intelligence,” to make money for their boyfriends/pimps.⁹⁵

A third example is the Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto (aka “Almighty God). After a religious conversion in 1991 he joined the Living Faith Centre Pentecostal Church and began to create moralizing pictures based upon his new faith and expressing his

opposition to smoking, drinking, prostitution, and seduction by Mami Wata.⁹⁶ His painting entitled *Do Not Go to Maame Water* depicts his religious torment and shows the seductive mermaid crossed out.

Ghana also became known for dramatic entertainments known as “concert parties” and later a burgeoning local video-film industry (and also in Nigeria where it is known as “Nollywood”) that often reflected the dramatic rise of Pentecostal Christianity and its obsession with witchcraft and Satanic forces.⁹⁷ In both Ghana and Nigeria, Mami Wata is recast as a “Christian demon in league with the Devil.”⁹⁸ The advertisements for such films are often large-scale, hand-painted posters executed by the vast army of sign painters (including Kwame Akoto) throughout the country. Such graphic artists used to create larger murals for Mami Wata shrines and for other indigenous faiths, but as the devotions to Mami Wata and other ancestral deities have come under attack, these commissions have greatly diminished. Now they create movie posters, one inspired by the Hollywood film *Splash*. The somewhat muscular and aggressive appearance of the mermaid in one poster may have been calculated to evoke fear of Mami Wata, who is described by Pentecostals as a “fallen angel” driven out of heaven with Satan.⁹⁹ Birgit Meyer, a scholar who has done extensive work on contemporary Ghanaian religions and Mami Wata, argues that

Mami Water is an image that condenses the eroticism of forbidden, yet compelling pleasures and speaks to urbanites’ ambivalent views about modern life . . . [This image shows] how in Christian imagination, Mami Water appears to be virtually uncontrollable.¹⁰⁰

Painted as a dangerous, destructive, and immoral force, Mami Wata has become the focus of attacks on the dangers of terrible “marine spirits” who must be avoided and conquered at all costs. In twenty-first-century Africa, with the spreading issues of economic dreams deferred and growing crises in leadership, corruption, and violence, Mami Wata (as the embodiment of a perplexing, fearful modernity) and other indigenous faiths continue to be blamed.

The arts, beliefs, and practices surrounding Mami Wata exemplify a modern state of mind, body, and being – an openness and embrace of the new in an ever-changing world. African art is part of a planetary modernity, and always has been.

Notes

- 1 Friedman (2010).
- 2 Yai (1994, 113).
- 3 Anne-Marie Boutiaux, in the Introduction to *Fetish Modernity* (2011), expressed a similar opinion: “The essentialist vision of cultures that carry on today an existence that has not changed for centuries is a myth that Western society, in particular, likes to perpetuate, as if it alone held a monopoly on any form of modernity and intellectual vivacity. Everywhere, and in every era, modernity is the result of trade-offs with tradition and vice-versa: both combine incessantly, reach compromises with each other, negotiate their respective places.”
- 4 The outline of the visual histories and cultures of Mami Wata and other water deities sketched here reveals the fluidity and dynamic creativity of arts, beliefs, and practices

celebrating water spirits in Africa – a story that continues across the Atlantic in different places, and in various guises. As my colleague C. Daniel Dawson reminds us about the enslavement and forced migration of Africans (to the Americas and other parts of the world), “they may have come empty-handed, but not empty-headed.” Mami Wata, like other African cultural and arts traditions (music, dance, cuisine, etc.), has been “commuting” back and forth across the Atlantic for hundreds of years. In the seventeenth century, Africans in Suriname used devotions to *Watramamma* to assert their agency (Van Stripiaan 2008). In the nineteenth century, Afro-Brazilians who were either exiled to Africa, due to their involvement in revolutionary activities, or returned voluntarily because they had been able to purchase their freedom, became intermediaries in transatlantic trade (Verger 1968) that included sacred art objects and images. See Drewal (2008a, chapter 11) for the story of Mami Wata and her spiritual “sisters” Yemanja and Oxum in Brazil. In the twentieth century, soon after Mami Wata’s snake charmer chromolithograph was reprinted and widely disseminated throughout West Africa, that image crossed the Atlantic where it soon acquired new meanings to serve the needs of believers in the Americas. Ironically, whereas Pentecostal Christians in Africa denigrate Mami Wata, in some parts of the African American world she has become a venerated Afro-Catholic saint called Santa Marta la Dominadora (Drewal 2008a, chapter 10).

- 5 This historical overview is complemented with detailed case studies and extensive images in Drewal (2008a, 2008b) that demonstrate how, why, and where specific persons and communities have created and honored Mami Wata in their own individual and collective ways for their own purposes. Both macro and micro perspectives help us comprehend the extraordinary diversity and complexity, similarities and differences, of the circumstances that shape artistic, religious, and cultural practices and the lives of the people who engage in them.

6 Vansina (1998, 185–195).

7 See Latour (1993).

8 Drewal (2008a, fig. 5).

9 Lewis-Williams (1981). But also see Anne Solomon (1999) who critiques Lewis-Williams and offers another perspective on the issue of “meaning” in San rock art.

10 Lamp (1985); Boone (1986); Phillips (1995, 37).

11 Phillips (1995, 53–54).

12 Mermaid images may also have entered Africa via Islamic culture. If present traditions of a *jinn* spirit in the form of a mermaid (*nguva*) along the Swahili coast of eastern Africa are old, then Arab and South Asian sailors traversing the Indian Ocean since the seventh or eighth centuries could have brought her (Moyer 2008). Mermaid *jinn* ideas may also have come with the spread of Islam into sub-Saharan Africa beginning in the tenth or eleventh century, as part of widespread beliefs and practices associated with healing trance cults such as Bori in Nigeria and Niger and Zar in Sudan. Tigani Eltahir (personal communication, March 30, 2000), who has done extensive research on Zar in Sudan, told me about one category of *jinn* that manifests as “ladies, Egyptian maids, and mermaids.” Their color is pink. Another reference to water *jinn* and Mami Wata comes from Timbuktu, Mali. The Hawka, a Muslim brotherhood, honors Harakoy, mother of spirits, vault of the sky, and mistress of water. Harakoy is represented by the 1955 Indian edition of the snake charmer print of Mami Wata (Pâques 1964, fig. 585).

13 Boone (1986, 50, 170).

- 14 Lamp (1985, 42).
- 15 Lamp (1985, 36).
- 16 Lamp (1985, 32).
- 17 Phillips (1995, 146, fig. 7.6).
- 18 Phillips (1995, 54, fig. 3.6).
- 19 MacCormack (1980, 106).
- 20 Boone (1986, 96–97, 138). See Jell-Bahlsen (2008) for a discussion of Mami's hair among the Igbo.
- 21 Bassani and Fagg (1988, 111).
- 22 A second Sapi ivory saltcellar from Newcastle-on-Tyne on loan to the British Museum depicts “semi-nude female figs with fish tails” (Fraser 1972, 275–276).
- 23 Lamp (1985, 34), quoting nineteenth-century sources.
- 24 See Hassig (1999).
- 25 Columbus (2001, 154).
- 26 Cited in Crone (1937, 20–21).
- 27 Cited in Jayne (1970, 47).
- 28 Astley (1968, 104–105).
- 29 Talbot (1967, 309).
- 30 Jones (1937, 79).
- 31 Hilton (1985, 50; translation mine). My thanks to Johannes Fabian for bringing this reference to my attention.
- 32 For a detailed and insightful discussion of African (Sapi, Benin, Kongo) perceptions and representations of Europeans in the era of first contact, see Blier (1993).
- 33 One Mami Wata priestess (Hunter-Hindrew 2004) believes her ancient origins are in Mesopotamia and Egypt. One writer (Paxon 1983) has suggested an origin among Africans in the New World and a return to Africa. Several scholars theorize that Mami Wata is a colonial-era invention (Coote and Salmons 2008).
- 34 Historical evidence of a pidgin Dutch name for Mami Wata in the African Atlantic world comes from Suriname in the eighteenth century (1775) with discussions of Watra Mama dances feared by whites, something that may have been introduced by Papa/Popo Africans (Ewe-Mina, coast of Republic of Benin) who came in large numbers between circa 1675 and 1775 (Van Stripiaan 2008).
- 35 One aquatic creature, the manatee – a mammal that suckles its young – may have also fostered ideas about mermaids and wealth from the sea. See Borgatti (2008) for a discussion of *achikobo* among the Okpella, although the name (*achi*=horse, *kobo*=coin money/penny) suggests the colonial era. Holas (1952, 426–427) notes another widely dispersed tradition that seems to bridge ancient indigenous aquatic spirits possibly derived from manatee lore with Mami Wata. He discusses and illustrates wall paintings depicting “Mami Ouata.” She is shown with her hair parted in the middle, a fish body and tail, two human legs, and high-heeled shoes on her feet. Holas said that Mami Ouata is widely dispersed all along the coast from eastern Liberia, through Côte d’Ivoire, to the border with Ghana.
- 36 Saints’ statues carried aboard ships found their way into African shrines by the seventeenth century (Garrard 1984, 177–179).
- 37 Bernatzik (1944, pl. 177).
- 38 Pinckney (1940, 27, 130).
- 39 Jones (1984, 33).
- 40 Kilani Olaniyan, personal communication, 1978.

- 41 Coote and Salmons (2008).
- 42 Thompson (1983, 247).
- 43 This sculpture is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY collection (2000.69).
- 44 See Hassig (1999).
- 45 Fraser (1972, 273).
- 46 Luschan (1919, 402, note 1, 406, note 1, and illustrated on p. 522, fig. 889).
- 47 Fraser (1972, 277–287).
- 48 The Portuguese male figure grasps an object in his right hand. His closed fist with projecting thumb may allude to the “gathering up of riches” that the people of Benin link with both the Portuguese and Olokun, god of the sea, creativity, and wealth (Cole 1989, 143). It may be significant that the popular snake charmer image of Mami Wata, showing her left hand clenched in a fist with projecting thumb, may have been understood by Benin observers as evidence of her “gathering up of riches.”
- 49 Fagg (1963, fig. 51); Drewal (2008a, fig. 23).
- 50 Blier (1993, 385).
- 51 Ben-Amos (1999, 73).
- 52 Curnow (1990, 43). Olokun, who was associated with the Ethiope River near Benin City, was regarded as “the source of all the rivers and oceans of the world.” The spirit world lay “across the waters” from whence the Portuguese came (Ben-Amos 1994, 120).
- 53 In 2002 Paula Girshick Ben-Amos sent me a photograph of an Olokun shrine with the Mami Wata snake charmer print on the wall. Another modern image of Mami Wata – as a double-snake-legged, self-dompting figure with a massive head of hair parted in the middle – was illustrated in the Christie’s auction catalogue of December 5, 1979 (p. 66, fig. 208). It is identified as Ijebu, but is more likely from Benin and created by the Omada carvers (see Ben-Amos 2002).
- 54 For Owo- and Ijebu-Yoruba examples see Drewal (2008a, 44–49).
- 55 By the end of the eighteenth century and with the development of Romanticism, exoticism became a theme of growing importance in the arts and in culture. Romanticism, with its focus centered on “any time but now, and any place but here” sought its inspiration in the past, in nature, and in the exotic (see Fleming 1980).
- 56 Clifford (1981, 542).
- 57 Cf. Bitterli (1976); Debrunner (1979).
- 58 Niemeyer (1972, 247).
- 59 Benninghof-Luhl (1984).
- 60 See Drewal (2008a, 212, n. 21), for the story of Maladamatjaute.
- 61 Drewal (2008a, fig. 30). My sincere thanks to Wilhelm Zimmermann and his Circus Archive for valuable information on his photograph of “Maladamajaute ca. 1887 im circus C. Hagenbeck, spätere Frau Breitwieser.”
- 62 Drewal (2008a, fig. 31).
- 63 Manager, Shree Ram Calendar Company, Bombay, India, letter to the author, June 17, 1977.
- 64 My thanks to Ruth Malhotra for much information on the Friedländer posters. She noted that some of the early examples in the 1880s were numbered – perhaps the “#4” at the bottom of the 1955 Bombay edition was copied from the original. The style of the work is very similar to that of Christian Bettels, the chief lithographer and one of the few artists working for Friedländer who signed his work (Ruth Malhotra, personal communication, 1980). A second, slightly different version (with the snake’s

- head dropping to the right rather than over the head of the charmer), came to light thanks to the archival work of C. Daniel Dawson. And, most recently (2013), Paul Faber, curator at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, has found a third version.
- 65 Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, poster no. 480.
- 66 A nineteenth-century photograph of the Kauffman Traders shop in Caracas, Venezuela, circa 1894, shows two men surrounded by walls covered in framed paintings, photographs, and prints of a variety of subjects, but mostly women in sedate “pinups” (Museum für Hamburger Geschichte Bildarchiv). The same could have occurred in Africa. Two major Hamburg companies (Woermann and Brigg) were doing business in Liberia, Dahomey (present-day Benin), and Lagos by the mid-nineteenth century. See also Anderson and Peek (2002, 62, figs. A3, A4) for nineteenth-century views of a trader’s quarters in New Calabar and a warehouse in the Niger Delta, with many pictures, prints, and photographs on the walls.
- 67 Drewal (2008a, fig. 32). I found this image buried in a folder of random photographs in the archive, along with others by Green, a Bonny photographer who documented many aspects of life in the Delta, including the presence of Europeans. Many of his photographs are in the Unilever PLC archives. Martha G. Anderson, Lisa Aronson, Christraud M. Geary, and E. J. Alagoa are conducting research on J. A. Green with the support of a Getty Collaborative Research Grant. The project includes archival research in the USA and Great Britain as well as fieldwork in Nigeria. They plan to organize an exhibition of the late photographer’s work. For additional references, see chapter 4 in this volume.
- 68 Margaret Opara (Owerri-Igbo priestess, Lagos), personal communication, 1975.
- 69 According to Dana Rush, who commissioned (January 2005) a large painting from sought-after shrine artist Joseph Kossivi Ahiafor for the Fowler Museum-UCLA, the artist began having vivid dreams of a 19-headed Indian king spirit together with his nine-headed queen. He dreamed that he was swimming with them in the ocean and thereafter called the male “King of Mami Wata” and his queen “NaKrishna.” An Indian print he had seen in 1977 served as inspiration for this work. While he could not remember the name of the male Hindu deity, it may represent Vishnu in universal form. The female may be based on a Hindu image of Ravanna. When Rush commissioned the piece, Ahiafor suggested that he paint it on cloth so she could hang it in her bedroom in order to “study it during her sleep.” He noted that visitors to his painting would be able “to travel to India if they studied his painting well” (Rush, personal communication, 2007).
- 70 Drewal (2008a, chapters 3 and 5).
- 71 Herbert Cole, personal communication, 2002.
- 72 See Picton and Mack (1989).
- 73 Indra Sharma was one of the major artists of Indian calendar art depicting Hindu gods and goddesses. He began to paint in 1942 and launched his professional career in 1951–1952. From 1946 to 1960 he lived in the poor Borivili district of Bombay before moving to Peddar Road. In the early years he struggled to make a living with portraits of wealthy Gujarati businessmen and cinema posters (paid on the basis of one rupee per foot). Then the S. S. Brijwasi and Sons Company hired him to paint calendar pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses (probably in the 1950s). He also worked for Daburs company in Bombay and Graphite Private Ltd. in Calcutta and continued to produce calendar art from 1975 to 1995, completing about 35 to 40 paintings a year (Bae 2003, 23–24). It is the millions of cheaply produced copies of his paintings

- and those of other artists before him (see Rush 1999, 63) that have crossed oceans to enter the minds and hearts and shape the devotions of Mami Wata's followers.
- 74 Drewal (1988a, 1988b); (2008b).
- 75 Rush (1999, 61, 1992).
- 76 Rush (1999, 62).
- 77 Drewal (2008a, chapter 3).
- 78 Rush (1999, 66–67).
- 79 Michael Ogunbiyi, personal communication, 1975.
- 80 Drewal (2008a, chapter 3, and 2006).
- 81 Egonwa (2008).
- 82 Drewal (1988a, 178–181).
- 83 The comparison of a Mami Wata table belonging to an Ewe priestess (Drewal 2008a, fig. 3.17) with the iconography of chromolithographs available in the area where she lives is instructive. The centerpiece of her table is the “old” type of Mami Wata clearly based upon the snake charmer print. That print, however, illustrated none of the objects that cluster profusely around the main figure. These accessories or offerings may be observed in more recent prints, such as one known as “Mami Titi,” which for Hindus is the image of the goddess Lakshmi. The Mami Titi print shows a figure flanked by attendants, animals (elephants and swans), and flowers, items that also appear on the Mami Wata table. Plastic dolls represent the flanking figures seen in the print, rubber ducks in the foreground allude to the swans, and plastic fish reinforce the theme of water. The halo, or nimbus, that surrounds the head of Lakshmi in the print is understood as the reflecting surface of a mirror placed behind the head of Mami Wata.
- 84 The importance of books and writing in Mami Wata beliefs and practices seems to have been inspired by writing associated with overseas strangers and the presence of books in some Hindu chromolithographs, especially those for Lakshmi (Drewal 1988a, 45, fig. 13, 1988b, 122–123, figs. 11, 12).
- 85 See Jewsiewicki in this volume on the impact of literacy and new technologies in Central African paintings. The Mami Wata priestess Margaret Opara (personal communication, 1975) explained to me that the first thing one must do to become a Mami Wata worshipper is to make a table for the water spirit in the house. In the early stages, the initiate “writes notes” (prayers, questions, or requests) to Mami Wata and leaves them on her table. Mami Wata writes a reply that guides the initiate in making decisions and in worshipping. Later, upon becoming more adept, the initiate can speak directly with Mami Wata, hear her responses, and invoke her voice. One group of worshippers in Igboland calls itself the Harriet Vocal Mermaid Society. The most senior members of the society channel the voice of Mami Wata during trance.
- 86 The polished back of a mirror or fan, ritual implement of the Yoruba river deity Osun, has long served this same symbolic role.
- 87 Chesi (1980, 57).
- 88 See Taussig (1992).
- 89 See Drewal (1988b, 176–180) for a description of The House of the Holy Trinity (*La Maison de la Sainte Trinité*) in Togo.
- 90 Augé (1969), 184–186, 195.
- 91 See Gore (2008) and Nevadomsky (2008) for more contemporary disputes and negotiations between Mami Wata followers and Pentecostal Christians in Benin City, Nigeria.

- 92 See several essays on this topic in Drewal (2008b); see also Michelle Gilbert (2003, 353–379, and n. 17) who cites a similar situation in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone.
- 93 My thanks to Zoë Strother for sending me these newspaper articles.
- 94 *Forum des as* (1995).
- 95 *Le compatriote* (1995).
- 96 Ross (2004, 74).
- 97 Gilbert (2003).
- 98 Meyer (2008).
- 99 Meyer (2008).
- 100 Meyer (2008, 385).

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Part III



Art in Cosmopolitan Africa

The Nineteenth Century

Loango Coast Ivories and the Legacies of Afro-Portuguese Arts

Nichole N. Bridges

Hybrids at Hello

The delightful, virtuosic tension created as pendant serpents and crouching canines meet tête-à-tête along the base of an ivory vessel succinctly epitomizes the convergence of African and European visions (Figure 3.1). This exciting sculptural detail appears on a distinctive “Afro-Portuguese” saltcellar that was created during the sixteenth century by a Sapi sculptor in western Africa, and which is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As artful ivories crafted by African artists for sale to foreigners, “Afro-Portuguese” works are predecessors to the nineteenth-century “Loango ivories” that were fabricated centuries later further south along Africa’s Atlantic coast, around the mouth of the Congo River.

The late fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Afro-Portuguese ivories were produced at centers along the West African coast by Sapi artists in the area of Sierra Leone (also see Figure 2.2), Bini sculptors at the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria, and Kongo carvers at the kingdom of Kongo in the modern Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Portuguese visitors to those regions commissioned refined ivory prestige goods in forms as varied as oliphants (sounding horns), saltcellars, spoons, pyxes, and more to present to the patrons who sponsored their voyages. Although these items’ forms and decorations were often based upon printed illustrations or existing models of European manufacture that the travelers evidently introduced to the sculptors, Afro-Portuguese ivories are considered to exhibit a hybridized aesthetic rooted in both foreign and indigenous visual lexicons and functions.¹ For example, the Sapi-Portuguese saltcellar described above demonstrates attenuating contours resembling European chalices, while the central spherical lidded container suggests a gourd, a type of hard-shelled fruit that has long served as container throughout sub-Saharan Africa and is often decoratively engraved. The saltcellar’s exquisite surface carving, openwork, and figurative elements seamlessly merge African visual elements with European ones. The



FIGURE 3.1 Attributed to Sapi artist. Lidded saltcellar, fifteenth–sixteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Paul and Ruth W. Tishman, 1991 (1991.435a, b). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Permissions via the Images for Academic Publishing initiative).

figures are portrayed frontally and in “Africanized proportion” (where the head measures 1:3 or 1:4), and the decorations incorporate geometric and interlace surface designs and snake imagery (a symbol for rebirth and linkage to the afterlife). European qualities are evident in the style of surface ornamentation, rosette motifs, and hunting dog imagery.

In contrast, the corpus of nineteenth-century Loango ivories, crafted by Kongo artists on the Loango coast north and south of the mouth of the Congo River, is comprised of full elephant tusks carved in relief with scenes of local life, figurines representing an array of local personages, and assorted decorative domestic items for use in European homes. The elaborately carved full ivory tusks are perhaps the most iconic of these. They feature vivid scenes characterizing the bustling atmosphere of contact and commerce among foreign traders and Africans involved in transatlantic trade. Each Loango tusk is uniquely carved in a representational style with narrative subject matter, qualities already integral to arts made for Kongo purposes but which artists enhanced to appeal to nineteenth-century European preferences in decorative arts.

Loango ivories’ imagery commonly documents the commercial activity of the coast, such as caravans of porters bearing loads of trade goods and ivory tusks overhead, captive Africans restrained by chains and chokeholds, and European traders receiving trade goods or shaking hands on a deal. Imagery also captures direct relationships between Europeans and Africans, such as African porters carrying Europeans in hammocks or African men and women serving European merchants – many of

whom may appear as stand-alone, three-dimensional ivory figures. Yet whether three-dimensional or bas-relief, Loango ivories' rich subject matter suggests that their Kongo-Vili carvers were keen observers of and commentators on their society.

The scholarly and marketplace profiles of the Loango ivories diminish drastically in comparison with the Afro-Portuguese ivories. Ostensibly, the former lack the age, rarity, and consistent high quality of craftsmanship for which the latter are celebrated.² Nonetheless, Loango ivories were created and collected prior to and contemporaneously with "traditional" masks and ritual statuary, which have largely come to be regarded as canonical, "classical" African art. Loango ivories rank among the most immediate primary sources presenting direct Kongo perspectives from a distinct period of contact and flux in the Lower Congo region. In their vivid representation of a specific historical moment, Loango ivories disrupt seemingly steadfast Western preconceived ideals for historical African art. Formal qualities such as abstraction and contextual origins in ritual practice that reinforce notions of "timelessness" and "purity" have come to define "authentic" African art since the early twentieth century and continue to influence scholarship and collecting tastes today.

This chapter offers a close reading of the Loango ivories in historical context with the earlier Afro-Portuguese artworks, demonstrating how these hybrid forms in ivory serve as important innovations in the course of African artists' engagement with the changing courses of modernity in Africa. The Loango ivories, created in a context of active and longstanding transcultural traumas, place in stark relief the many ways in which they differ from their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century predecessors. Returning to the Metropolitan's saltcellar, its suspenseful standoff between African and European-derived creatures evokes the curiosity, sizing up, and unpredictable leap toward opportunity and danger that characterizes the historical contexts of encounter. This meeting, which served as the backdrop for both the Afro-Portuguese and Loango ivories' creation, set Africa's modernity in motion. These earliest and later material manifestations of "Atlantic Creole" culture embody and interrogate their specific, fraught historical moments and keenly illustrate hybridity as a quintessential element of modernity – a rich ground for social commentary whether among friends or foes.

Contact and Catastrophe

The Afro-Portuguese ivories' context of early contact has been characterized as a period when Europeans reportedly considered Africans neutrally with "relative compatibility and mutual respect."³ In contrast, the mid-nineteenth-century setting for souvenir Loango tusks might be best described not as contact but catastrophe, although I do not discount that Renaissance encounter was any less traumatic.⁴ By the nineteenth century, European rationales for difference and alleged European superiority were deeply entrenched, justifying European plundering of Africa, its people, and resources. Over the three centuries since the initial Portuguese contact, the Loango coast had developed into a major commercial port for varied European interests including the Portuguese, Dutch, Germans, British, French, Spanish, and also the Americans.⁵ Not only were the Europeans present in the area diverse, but the African populations in the region had also grown more complex, with many peoples from the interior (traders, laborers, and enslaved Africans or remnants thereof from both the Atlantic and local slave trades) settled among and with majority Kongophone peoples including the Vili.⁶

The quantity and quality of Afro-Portuguese and Loango ivories attest to their divergent circumstances of creation. Afro-Portuguese ivories are old and rare. Bassani has documented just over 200 extant examples in museum and private collections worldwide.⁷ The corpus demonstrates consistent stylistic refinement, evidence of the stringent controls that African leaders placed on ivory supplies and artistic production. Loango ivories are by comparison more recent, abundant, and stylistically unpredictable. Their prolific production, at an inestimable corpus totaling at least several hundred, underscores the disruptive historic and social trajectories unleashed since the earliest contexts of Western contact. Despite a rich core of Loango ivories that display exceptional sculptural skill and were likely carved by artists trained in a lineage of royal ivory carvers from the Loango kingdom, there is a high proportion of simplistically carved examples that were produced by a wide range of opportunistic carvers. Besides compromising the genre's reputation, Loango ivories' inconsistent sculptural quality produced by an unwieldy range of hands denotes the chaotic nature of their setting. Whereas Afro-Portuguese ivories' stylistic constancy underscores the stately restrictions under which they were created, Loango ivories' stylistic unruliness embodies the messiness of their particular modernity.

The circumstances of ivory supply and acquisition differed dramatically between the 1500s and 1800s as well. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, elephants and their ivory abounded near coastal West and Central Africa. The substance was relatively inexpensive although indigenous leaders closely managed supplies.⁸ In Benin, for example, the king (*oba*) regulated the ivory supply by requiring as duty one tusk from each elephant felled by hunters, and the option to purchase the second. The royal guild of ivory carvers received ivory from these hunters to create royal objects and, strictly by the *oba*'s permission, objects for foreigners.⁹ By the nineteenth century, the ivory trade had run amok. European trade and agreements with local leaders had eliminated many indigenous controls on natural resources. Whole elephant carcasses were left to waste after being killed solely for their highly valued tusks. No longer restricted by a powerful indigenous elite with its exclusive guilds of artists, ivory supplies were now accessible to anyone who could afford them for any purpose. The disruptions caused by the trade in enslaved Africans and colonial exploitation had severely weakened traditional power structures. African traders and middlemen who lacked inherited status could now gain wealth and power through trade.

Loango ivories also document the increased democratization of sailing and commerce over the centuries. Unlike the Afro-Portuguese ivories that were created for the noble European sponsors of the explorers' voyages, most Loango ivories were carved for an expanded clientele of middle and working class Western traders and sailors employed by trading companies. Patterns of European domination in the Congo region during much of the period of Loango tusk carving were erratic. The Loango coast was a veritable free for all as assorted European interests competed for advantages in trade and the export of raw materials.¹⁰ Colonial partitioning would not occur until after the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which fomented further unsettling as France, Belgium, and Portugal divided the Loango coast into three sections for administrative and economic control. Once the colonies were established, concessionary companies rapidly expanded in order to extract natural resources such as ivory, rubber, and palm oil, which were so crucial in the metropoles for the rising industrial age.¹¹ Most of these efforts exploited indigenous peoples for labor, often exerting unfair and abusive practices – most notoriously in the Congo Free State.¹²



FIGURE 3.2 Attributed to Loango (Vili) artist. Detail from a carved elephant's tusk, nineteenth century. Collection of The Walters Art Museum (71.586). Photo © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.

The trade in ivory was dependent on the capture and oppression of interior populations.¹³ Coastal supplies of ivory had been depleted, requiring ivory seekers to hunt further inland. Caravans searching farther in the interior for ivory also encountered more populations to exploit for the trade in enslaved Africans. Austrian explorer Josef Chavanne reported that Dom Pedro V (r. 1859–1891), the acknowledged king of a much-weakened kingdom of Kongo, acquired ivory tusks for the royal treasury by selling slaves to passing caravans.¹⁴ Captive Africans, commodities themselves, served as beasts of burden carrying ivory among other trade goods and supplies for transport to and from the coast. This violent history of ivory at any cost, concomitant with the enslavement and exploitation of Africans, characterizes the catastrophic timbre of the era so graphically portrayed on Loango carved tusks that depict caravans of captive Africans and forced laborers (Figure 3.2).

Afro-Portuguese Ivories

Thus, for at least four centuries, Europeans negotiated with African leaders to obtain ivory, valued as “white gold,” and other goods and commodities that would appeal to the European market. Besides seeking supplies of raw ivory, the Portuguese voyagers were fascinated by the intricate ivory sculptures and the tremendous skill of ivory carvers they encountered in the royal enclaves they visited. Soon thereafter, African artists crafted sumptuous Afro-Portuguese ivories specifically for export to Europe. Coined by William Fagg, the hyphenated appellation for these works acknowledges both African maker and European clientele. The ivories were destined for the personal collections of European elite, often to be kept in *Wunderkammern*, or “cabinets of curiosity,” for the display of rare and exotic objects. The Sapi works comprise the

earliest Afro-Portuguese ivories, dating to roughly 1490–1530, produced until social disruptions in that region during the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁵

Many Sapi- and Bini-Portuguese oliphants display specific heraldic motifs and European hunting imagery that clearly reference printed Western sources.¹⁶ For instance, a Sapi-Portuguese example in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art features heraldic shields that date the horn to 1494–1500, and identify it as having been a gift from Crown Prince Manuel I of Portugal to King Ferdinand V and Isabella of Castile and Aragon.¹⁷ Bini-Portuguese saltcellars are distinguishable by their closely observed Portuguese figures that encircle the vessel and faithfully detail the men's beards, caps, and garments down to their textures and finishings.¹⁸ On the other hand, contemporaneous oliphants from the kingdom of Kongo, distinct from the nineteenth-century narrative tusks from the Loango kingdom, are embellished with intricate surface designs drawn strictly from indigenous sources. The Kongo oliphants' expertly incised designs mimic the dramatic woven chevron patterning and texture of velvet-like pile and complex knotted and embroidered textures of historical Kongo textiles, hats, and baskets.¹⁹ Because they lack the ostensible visual hybridity of the Sapi- and Bini-Portuguese oliphants, Bassani and Fagg were initially uncertain about whether the Kongo oliphants and other forms in ivory were made first for indigenous use or if they were created expressly for the Portuguese. The authors thus categorized them as "apocryphal" examples of Afro-Portuguese ivories.²⁰ It is now generally accepted that the Kongo oliphants that entered European collections during this early time were commissioned by Kongo elites to be dispatched as royal gifts to European rulers. Ivory oliphants used for indigenous court contexts among Kongo peoples feature a lateral embouchure but otherwise lack the lavish surface ornamentation and lug holes apparent on those Afro-Portuguese oliphants produced for export.²¹

These royal gifts exchanged between Kongo and European nobility were created during a momentous period of cross-cultural exchange between the kingdom of Kongo and Portugal. The Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão established contact with the Kongo kingdom after arriving at the mouth of the Congo River in 1482, and later returned in 1485. In 1491, Nzinga, king of Kongo, converted to Christianity, and the religion flourished across the kingdom, particularly after the 1506–1543 reign of Nzinga's son, Afonso I. Throughout this period, until the kingdom's demise in the mid-seventeenth century, the Kongo elite dispatched diplomatic envoys to Portugal and the Vatican and corresponded extensively with European political and religious leaders.²²

Besides the Kongo Afro-Portuguese ivories, this rich history of cultural convergence influenced Kongo art forms that were created for indigenous use. Most evident is the Kongo corpus of Christian sculpture, such as crucifixes and icons, which were owned and used in local, Kongo forms of Christianity.²³ The Kongo crucifixes particularly demonstrate how Kongo peoples negotiated Christianity on their own terms. This visual integration suggests how Kongo peoples appropriated the tenets and symbols of Christianity and integrated them with Kongo ones.²⁴ The cruciform was already an important Kongo symbol for the crossroads between the living world and the afterlife, and for the progression of the life cycle.²⁵ The crucifixes appear to have evolved, appearing more and more hybridized over time. The earliest interpretations appear closer to their European models, while later renditions portray figures that are more Africanized in proportion and features but retain the essential iconographic attributes of the Christ figure or saints represented.²⁶

In addition to the Kongo Afro-Portuguese ivories and Kongo crucifixes, the Loango ivories that succeeded them may also be considered late modern manifestations of an “Atlantic Creole” culture of hybridity that flourished in the Kongo kingdom and its environs during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Kongo peoples adopted and adapted many cultural imports from Portugal, Christianity among them, in ways that retained indigenous perspectives and practices.²⁷

The Loango Ivories

As nineteenth-century visual vestiges of Atlantic-Creole heritage, the Loango tusk sculptures’ foreign attributes and appeal do not negate their indigenous relevance. The African artists who produced the Loango ivories drew upon both indigenous and foreign visual sources in creating new forms for sale to a foreign clientele. The artists, from a Kongo class of middlemen and traders known as Vili, were inheritors of the Vilis’ long history as mediators of commerce between foreigners arriving on the coast and indigenous peoples in the hinterlands since the sixteenth century.²⁸ Although presumably they remained in stationary workshops, these ivory carvers nonetheless continued to act as middlemen by making souvenirs for Europeans and profiting from them. This legacy of cross-cultural trade and interaction likely informed the artists’ sensibilities in crafting hybrid artworks that appealed not only to their patrons but also adhered to long-standing indigenous practices of visual expression.

Loango ivories’ most pronounced visual link to the earlier Kongo-produced Afro-Portuguese ivories is the dominant spiral organization of the Loango carved tusks. The spiral pattern echoes that of the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century carved oliphants (side-blown horns) that were commissioned by Kongo elites as gifts to European nobility. The spiral on Loango ivories mirrors the spiraling geometric designs of these earlier tusks, providing an important, enduring link between the two Kongophone sculptural traditions over three centuries. Although not likely to have been functional, Loango tusk sculptures allude to the side-blown horn form of the earlier ivories by exhibiting a lateral hole. As objects embellished with scenes of daily life, the spiral is a fitting guide for a Kongo perspective. The spiral visualizes the Kongo concept of the life cycle or *luzíngu*, literally “the coil of life” in Kikongo,²⁹ also connoting the spirit’s longevity in many dimensions of the afterlife. Further, the spiral form evokes a serpent that, because it moves fluidly between water and the earth, embodies the Kongo concept of the soul’s cyclical movement through the living world and the afterlife.³⁰ The spiral on Loango ivories is often explicitly rendered as a serpent, through incised scale-like patterning along the spiral band and the head of the serpent emerging as the finial or extending along the base of the tusk.

While Loango carved tusks are largely recognizable for their spiral organization, parallel registers formally structure some one-quarter of the corpus. Although the sense of narrative on any carved tusk is largely discontinuous, with scenes appearing more as an assemblage of vignettes, the composition likely takes advantage of scenes seen together vertically from any particular angle.³¹ Whatever the compositional principles at play, prominent spiral or parallel bands combined with relief-carved figurative imagery demonstrate Loango ivories to be important manifestations of Kongo ideo-graphic arts. Similar visual segmentation appears with bas-relief figures and symbols that are organized in parallel registers on Kongo leaders’ staffs as well as on funerary

ceramic vessels (*maboondo*) that were placed atop Kongo graves.³² Many visual elements and subject matter seen on Loango ivories also appear on Kongo-Woyo wood potlids (*mataampha*). The lids' tops are decorated with figurative elements that serve as visual proverbs whose messages were selected to set the mood for particular meal-time gatherings.³³ Furthermore, the narrative function of Loango carved tusks' relief-carved, figurative imagery echoes that of Kongo "scepter-slates" (*lusumu*). Kongo leaders used these flat, pointed wooden forms, carved in bas-relief with figural forms and abstract signs, to recount cosmology and local history to their communities.³⁴

"Authenticity": Drawing the Line

As artfully wrought ivories created by Africans for Europeans, the Loango ivories have received far less academic attention and have lower market value than the Afro-Portuguese ivories. Lauded for their hybrid convergence of European and African aesthetics, and for their association with the High Renaissance, the Afro-Portuguese ivories are prominently displayed in museums and attain high prices on the market for their artistic accomplishment and tremendous rarity. Sidney Kasfir encapsulates Afro-Portuguese ivories' high status in the field:

[T]hey suffer no disapprobation and are not classified as tourist art by museums or collectors" due to their pre-colonial context, great age at about five hundred years, their demonstration of artists' virtuosity, and the expense and finery associated with their ivory substance.³⁵

The Loango ivories, however, have been considered a "degeneration" of the Kongo Afro-Portuguese ivories.³⁶ Although this characterization ignores the many Loango ivories that exhibit tremendous artistic skill, it epitomizes a general ambivalence among connoisseurs toward perceived "contact arts" fabricated after the Renaissance. Loango ivories are often unintentionally misattributed. Two artworks presented in a recent auction catalogue highlight the valuation disparity between Afro-Portuguese and Loango ivories: a piggyback figurative sculpture described as an Afro-Portuguese staff finial is estimated at \$12,000–15,000, while a relief-carved tusk described as "Luango" is estimated at \$1,000–1,500.³⁷ A third ivory, a priest or saint figure also described as Afro-Portuguese, has a low estimate at just \$1,500–2,000.³⁸ Yet I attribute all three as Loango ivories, consistent in style with the earliest documented Loango ivory figurines and carved tusks.³⁹ Old museum records often mistakenly attribute to Loango ivories origins as varied as Benin, Cameroon Grasslands, and even Goa. Apart from the first item's Afro-Portuguese attribution, it is also the identification of the object as a staff finial (a "ritual" object) that increases its perceived value. However, it is more likely that this object was a peg used as a handgrip for European passengers of hammocks carried overland by African porters.⁴⁰ The catalogue does not attribute dates to these objects, but it does seem to boldly promote a more expansive use of the term "Afro-Portuguese" than is typically employed, inadvertently highlighting the Loango ivories' role as important successors to the legacy of Afro-Portuguese ivories.

The notion of "authenticity" is likely the primary basis for ambivalence toward Loango ivories. Shelly Errington argues that the rise of "primitive art" was concomitant with the rise of modern art, and that the romantic ideals valued by modernist

sensibilities, such as timelessness, precapitalist economy, and non-naturalistic aesthetics render tourist art as transient, non-durable “rubbish from the vantage point of celebrants and believers in authentic primitive art.”⁴¹ These sensibilities, as illustrated so articulately in recent exhibitions such as *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2007 and *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* at the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC in 2009, would capture the imaginations of European modernists after the start of the twentieth century and inform not only the course of modern art, but also the pursuits of African art history and collecting today.⁴² Loango ivories challenge views that typically value African art as “authentic” for ritual significance, aesthetic Otherness, and timelessness. Loango ivories were sold and secular rather than sacred, are narrative rather than symbolic, naturalistic rather than abstract, and historically specific rather than “timeless.”

An auction house representative once told me that the firm “draw[s] the line” at Loango ivories.” The implication was that Loango ivories are not sufficiently “authentic” or valuable. The presence of Loango ivories in auction catalogues has diminished dramatically since the 1990s, although Loango ivories of the highest quality have recently sold privately for more than the approximate minimum values appearing among contemporary auctions of African art. The grounds for this new exclusion from many auctions are likely due to old misgivings: their status as commodities rather than sacred objects (an attitude that fails to recognize that all African artworks are manifestations of a patron and client exchange and are treated as commodities once they enter the market), their having been made for sale rather than for indigenous use, and their representational and narrative rather than abstract (read modernist) form.

While the Afro-Portuguese ivories have been highly valued and celebrated for their hybridity, Loango ivories have likely been closeted (literally) *because* of theirs. Both Loango ivories and their Vili sculptors defy the “one tribe, one style” paradigm that has come to define authentic African art. This schematic, which attempts to delimit stylistic qualities by culture group and geographical boundaries, ignores the realities of intercultural exchange and movement throughout history.⁴³ Both Loango ivories and their artists have been derided as impure and ruined. In 1903, one Belgian missionary to the Loango coast described Vili peoples as “‘The fallen [*les déchus*]’ because of their mixing with other absolutely barbaric tribes.” He continues: “Due to their long relationship with Europeans, the [Vili] have become very adept in certain occupations, but their morals are terribly depraved and their language is not more than a jargon full of foreign words.”⁴⁴ Even today on the Loango coast, locals refer to Vili language as a “patois,” although the other two languages most commonly spoken there, Munikituba (a dialect of Kikongo) and Lingala, may be considered vehicular as well. In 1904, a French colonial official discounted the Loango ivories as being “most likely of foreign origin.”⁴⁵ Loango tusk sculptures have long been evaluated as objects that are derivative of European models and that acquiesce to foreign tastes.

Although Loango ivories lack the age and rarity of Afro-Portuguese ivories, Loango ivories present a more complete picture of the modes of artistic expression and expansiveness of makers, patrons, and activity found in the region during this era. Both the Afro-Portuguese and the Loango ivories were created in “contact zones.” In addition to working on the Loango coast, Kongo-Vili carvers also produced Loango ivories for foreign clients while living in “Loango villages” constructed within at least two World’s Fairs: the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889 and the Pan-American

Exposition in Buffalo, New York in 1901.⁴⁶ Coined by literary critic Mary Louise Pratt, contact zones designate sites where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations.”⁴⁷ Contact zones are ripe for the production of transcultural expressions such as the Afro-Portuguese and Loango ivories. These hybrid forms demonstrate that Western influence has not deculturated or “corrupted” indigenous artistic elements in the ivories. Instead, Western aspects are appropriated and synthesized with indigenous artistic elements to create a new, transcultural art form.⁴⁸

Besides their stylistic discrepancies, most Loango carved tusks do conform to a range of tropes, or “souvenir standards” in terms of their subject matter.⁴⁹ Such scenes as porters bearing containers of trade goods overhead, figures wearing assorted cloth wrappers as well as European attire, palm-wine tapsters aloft a palm tree, fishermen carrying their catch on poles, assorted local animals, typically appear from tusk to tusk. Such visual shorthand is typical of souvenir arts, which are meant to appeal to the expectations and preconceived notions of their patrons as well as those patrons’ social milieux once the souvenir is brought home to share.⁵⁰ Loango ivories accomplish this by fulfilling Victorian imaginings of “Africa,” as much of the imagery corresponds to scenes most commonly illustrated in contemporary printed travelogues, to which Vili carvers likely had access.⁵¹ Certain sensationalist and disconcerting themes are among the most provocative of these. Humans wrestling with all sorts of beasts and frequent portrayals of African figures as chained captives and as victims or perpetrators of brutal physical attacks are alarming. Amidst seemingly benign, souvenir-suitable imagery, why the presence of scenes as disturbing as the chained, choke-held captives, physical abuse, or redundant depictions of animals attacking humans?

The Loango ivories’ erratic aesthetic presents the nineteenth-century Loango coast as a contact zone on the edge. Coupled with the persistent appearance of violence and hardship across the corpus, Loango ivories’ visual volatility suggests an insurgent attitude that the stylistically constant Afro-Portuguese ivories, not produced in a colonial context, do not display. Therefore, the Loango ivories are quintessential “colonial hybrids,”⁵² embodying qualities of the foreigner while simultaneously conveying indigenous significances.

Pointed Imagery

Loango ivories’ stylistic and topical unruliness makes them more than vestiges of contact. Loango ivories critique contact and catastrophe by vividly addressing the social inequalities that are inherent to the contact zone. For critical theorist Homi Bhabha, colonial power is fundamentally precarious. He writes, “[T]he colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.”⁵³ This observation captures the historical context of Loango ivories’ creation. Yet it may also help to illuminate understanding of violent, obscene, and indiscernible subject matter portrayed on Loango ivories. In true souvenir-standard fashion, violent imagery on Loango ivories appealed to foreign stereotypes about an inherently brutal Africa and reinforced foreign desires to see cause for and evidence of imperialist presence, control, and effects on the region and its peoples. But just as hybrid arts exhibit both foreign and indigenous visual elements, Loango ivories also embody both foreign and indigenous conceptual underpinnings.

As creative output can be a space where dominant power loses authority,⁵⁴ Loango ivories may be agents of resistance through coded imagery that draws upon historical use of Kongo visual proverbs. In considering the possibility of carvers' agency through coded criticism, "signifyin'" – black double-voicedness and rhetorical play – is a useful lens here.⁵⁵ To resituate signifyin(g) in the nineteenth-century Lower Congo coast, one of its Black Atlantic sites of origin, Loango tusk imagery could reinforce foreign expectations by depicting scenes of violence and barbarity while simultaneously "signifyin(g)" through them.

By adapting recognizable tropes that align with European dominance and notions of superiority, Loango tusk imagery "reimplicates its [European authority's] identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power."⁵⁶ Sometimes, this return of the gaze occurs quite literally. A vignette showing a European or perhaps an African photographer concealed beneath the drape of his camera before a "native sitter" appears on a Loango carved tusk in a private Belgian collection.⁵⁷ On another sculpture, a European man peers through binoculars, presumably to survey the procession of African figures ahead.⁵⁸ A carved tusk at the National Museum of African Art recreates, in relief, four postcard images that were photographed by the commissioner of the tusk, German collector Robert Visser.⁵⁹ In all cases, the Loango carvers return their surveyors' surveillance.

Frantz Fanon states that Europe's wealth belongs to the third world.⁶⁰ Likewise, so do Europe's attitudes about the third world belong to the third world. Loango tusk carvers' adherence to Eurocentric stereotypes about Africans reinforced those misconceptions, making the notions themselves as much the creation of Africans as Europeans. This, therefore, locates sites of transculturation via Loango tusks on both the Loango coast and in Europe. Kongophone agency is not only evident in signifyin(g) imagery, but also quite literally in that wealthy or high-status indigenous Loango coast inhabitants may have also acquired carved Loango tusks for themselves. Some may have purchased carved tusks as luxury and status objects after their Western visitors, and others, such as Lemba practitioners, may have transformed the tusks' commodity status to serve ritual purpose.⁶¹ Lemba, an initiation society specializing in commerce, trade, and healing was active throughout regional networks in the Lower Congo area north of the Congo River during the early seventeenth to early twentieth century.⁶²

Loango ivories and the elephant's teeth upon which they are carved are embodiments as well as agents of transculturation. It is likely that Loango ivories have been ignored because they disturb and unsettle viewers as well as the categories and attributes that valorize "traditional" African art. But perhaps more treacherously, Loango ivories literally bare their teeth. Pointed in both form and content, Loango ivories jab back.

At least two nineteenth-century visitors to the Loango coast acknowledged the potential for Loango tusk carvings to express humor, ridicule, and critique through their imagery. Fleuriot de Langle, a French naval officer, noted seeing Loango tusk sculptures on the Loango coast during his 1867–1868 tour and questioned whether a particular detail on a tusk sculpture suggested indigenous skepticism towards foreigners. He points out a finial of a tusk sculpture that he interprets as portraying a foreign trader seated upon a trunk whose lock and key are behind him, out of the figure's sight. De Langle asks whether this image suggests that all the fruits of the trader's labor have escaped without his knowledge and states that such a scene must be a "piquant touch of irony and that among the sculptors, there are likely some

philosophers and humorists.”⁶³ Some 40 years after de Langle, Father Campana, a Spiritan missionary at the Landana Mission, said of the Loango tusk sculptures, “It is very strange, one sees whites and assorted people represented with a great talent for observation and mockery.”⁶⁴

Both de Langle’s and Campana’s suspicions that Loango ivory sculptors might express satire and critique through their artistic representations would be echoed some 50 years later by the German scholar Julius Lips. *The Savage Hits Back*, Lips’s 1937 book, argues that many artists of the peoples affected by imperialism – African, Oceanic, indigenous American, and Asian – portrayed white figures and their accoutrements with careful observation, often with biting satire and subversion.⁶⁵ Among the many cross-cultural arts represented, Lips included several examples of Loango ivories to illustrate his points, although many of these are misidentified as having been created by artists from Cameroon, Lagos, or Mozambique.⁶⁶ Lips’s statements speak to the awareness that a colonial subject may hold toward the foreign imperialists among his or her local society, and how the merest inconsistency in the public image of imperialists can instigate agency and critique.

By referring to the “secret” of the white man’s “mortality and weakness,” Lips evokes the instability of colonial rule to which Bhabha refers, as well as a dominating or occupying society’s constant need to reinforce its stance. Just as Lips recognizes the potential for indigenous artists’ agency through the visual arts, so does James Scott identify this possibility in assorted expressive traditions of subjugated groups. Speaking in terms of the public and hidden transcripts of both dominant and subordinate societies, Scott’s analyses provide a useful framework for considering imagery on Loango ivories that cannot be so easily described or dismissed as innocuous souvenir scenes. Much like signifying, where a subordinate’s hidden transcript expressing “dissent and self-assertion”⁶⁷ becomes public, it does so obliquely.

In the spirit of signifying and dissenting via coded and veiled means, I suggest that Loango coast ivory carvers exerted subversive criticism through selected imagery, making Loango ivories elaborate forms of political disguise that use both elementary and elaborate methods. Artists, after all, possess the “experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences, and lapses available to them.”⁶⁸ Interspersed amidst more standard souvenir scenes, an unsuspecting client or a dismissive art historian may actually be confronted by evidence of a Loango coast artist’s successful bait and switch, akin to realizing that one has an incorrect takeout order only after it is home. The subversive imagery of Loango ivories yields enigmatic and disturbing surprises upon closer examination.

Frequent imagery representing captive Africans and graphic instances of corporal punishment and abuse may appear to be straightforward and documentary. However, these seemingly observational images reflected the desires and biases of both client and artist. While on the one hand such imagery may have fulfilled Western narcissism, the same imagery may also capture the artists’ cool gaze upon or protest against catastrophic social realities. Ostensibly meeting the client’s demands, such imagery was not openly assailant or assailable, and therefore not specifically or enforceably defiant.

Many Loango ivories reflect artists’ observation and documentation of the relentless abuse and extraction of resources both human and environmental. Similarly, throughout the colonial period Congolese individuals and communities coined critical names in indigenous tongues that described and critiqued the characteristics and

behaviors of the colonials in their midst.⁶⁹ Scenes showing captive Africans in chains, yokes, or roped together abound among Loango ivories. Such scenes typically appear in the context of a trade caravan, usually portraying a series of African porters bearing assorted trade goods overhead, often with various foreign authorities, who are being transported by porters, monitoring, or receiving and accounting for goods from the caravan. There is a group of Loango ivories, carved by a master hand or his workshop that is distinguished for their intensely poignant and expressive portrayals of scenes of aggression and hardship.⁷⁰ There are likely scenes of capture, where an unarmed figure struggles with another bearing a knife, or in which a captor threatens a captive from behind or drags captives behind him. This artist's works convey fear and subjugation among captives and porters, who endured harsh and grueling work conditions and often were forced or poorly paid laborers themselves. For example, a kneeling porter apparently toils to lift up his bundle of trade goods overhead and chained captives cover their faces with their hands.

Illustrations of corporal punishment and torture further attest to the captivity and abuse of Africans (also see Figure 17.3). Two other tusk carvings, by the same hand that are in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, illustrate several such scenes. One scene illustrates a flogging: a figure holds a stick in one hand and a captive by the wrist in the other. That both figures appear to be Africans illustrates how Africans were either complicit in colonial activities or made to do the “dirty work” of colonial officials. In another scene, two aggressors restrain a victim by the wrist and neck while a European figure (or African in European official garb) watches and holds a spiral-like stick, likely a whip known as the *chicotte*, a sharp and twisting whip made of hippopotamus hide.⁷¹

More Animal Tales

A vignette: A leopard clenches its teeth on the ankle of its human prey. An elephant pins down a man who lies prostrate beneath the pachyderm’s front legs and tusks. A crocodile clamps its jaws on a man’s leg and somehow stands upright to suspend the victim upside down. These spectacular scenarios each appear in miniature as one of many different (and less violent) motifs on Loango tusk sculptures. Although the examples described above appear on two specific tusks, one from UCLA’s Fowler Museum and the other from Smithsonian collections, similar attack scenes (animal versus human, as well as human versus human) reappear on many other carved Loango tusks.⁷² Such images make the sculptures ideal souvenirs which coalesce with Victorian preconceived notions about life in Africa, notably those stereotypes regarding Africa as a locus for savage and irrational violence.

Yet there is more to these vignettes. Each animal attack scene also incorporates rescue. A man prepares to stab the leopard’s back with a knife. A man aims a rifle at the elephant’s head. A man attempts to wrestle the victim out of the crocodile’s grip, while another man standing behind the reptile hoists a machete overhead. These repetitive “defeat and rescue”⁷³ scenes, particularly those involving animals attacking humans, will be explored here. Animals may play symbolically critical roles on Loango ivories, as they often do in folktales, and it is possible that this imagery invokes coded commentary through signifying techniques. For example, the frequent animal attack and rescue scenes, which often include a rescuer in addition to the victim and attacking

beast, may encode carvers' messages about Africans overcoming subordination by invoking beings from other realms. Just as signifying folktales in the African diasporic communities feature tricksters in the form of a spider, monkey, or rabbit, among others, animals are frequently invoked in tales of power reversal.⁷⁴

The depiction of animal "defeat and rescue" scenes on carved Loango tusks may be alternatively read vis-à-vis regional belief and history about theriomorphic power and occurrences of murders committed by "leopards" and other "animals." One remarkable aspect about the rendering of animals on carved Loango tusks, whether in attack scenes or elsewhere, is that they usually appear comparable in size to humans. Although this may be attributable to *horror vacuii*, a compositional tendency to fill up as much available space as possible, the relative scale between animals and humans may be more telling. For among many indigenous beliefs across Africa, animals not only hold powerful symbolic meanings all their own but they may also be humans transformed.⁷⁵ Citing reports from as early as Olfert Dapper's mid-seventeenth-century descriptions to R. E. Dennett's late nineteenth-century writing, Birger Lindskog describes such beliefs from the Loango coast area: "It is reported from the Vili that some had the power to transform themselves, or the misfortune to be transformed unwillingly. The animal forms used were, among others, the leopard and crocodile."⁷⁶ Among these, the leopard is perhaps the most potent theriomorphic symbol throughout central Africa and beyond. The leopard symbolizes for equatorial African societies "[t]he quintessence of leadership."⁷⁷

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, traditional kingship among Vili peoples on the Loango coast had long ago succumbed to the power afforded by wealthy classes of middlemen and brokers who participated in the Atlantic trade. The changing circumstances of the slave trade led to further decentralization as Vili traders dispersed into scattered trading points along the coast to participate in covert slave trading and to establish direct European contacts to participate in legitimate commerce. Insofar as the animals portrayed in these images – elephants, leopards, crocodiles – are indigenous symbols for power and leadership, perhaps "defeat and rescue" vignettes were allegorical representations of the Vili carvers' own ancestral legacy. Alternately, these scenes may more generally represent contemporary phenomena of insurgent leopard-man and other theriomorphic attacks, and thus document sociopolitical reactions to European presence.

Equatorial leopard-man and other theriomorphic groups originated as secret "magical-religious" societies that enforced justice and collective order within communities. However, after the arrival of Europeans, many of these groups developed into fierce terror organizations.⁷⁸ As seen with the Vili, trade with Europeans took its toll on traditional society and upset power structures. Might animal attack scenes carved on Loango tusks document various traditional leaders' desperate but failed efforts to enforce their authority? That traditional leaders may have instigated leopard-man attacks in order to reassert their increasingly declining power during times of dramatic social change is a constant theme in scholarship about leopard-man terrorist activity in Central Africa during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Although we know from Lindskog that Vilis believed traditional leaders could transform themselves and others into powerful animals for the purposes of carrying out revenge, I have been unable to locate specific historical accounts of such attacks in the Loango region. However, a number of historical reports that are contemporaneous with the tusks' making do exist from surrounding areas within the reach of the Vilis'

extensive trade network, and thus within a “cultural current” of shared belief and ritual practice that Wyatt MacGaffey suggests was facilitated by Vili trade along the coast from northern Angola to Gabon, extending eastward through Mayombe.⁷⁹ Leopard-men attacks in Libreville during 1877–1879⁸⁰ and lion-men attacks among the Tabwa during the 1880s and 1890s⁸¹ are contemporaneous with the mid- to late nineteenth-century dates of carved Loango tusks’ making.

As mentioned above, animal attack scenes on Loango ivories also involve rescue – one human freeing another from the animal’s grip. These images may represent not only power struggle but also power *reversal*, by which common people vanquish the old form of leadership. Historically, this phenomenon correlates with the rising importance of wealthy Vili middlemen over traditional Loango kingship. It is also evident in the increased independence of women and slaves from “big men” in Libreville, and the increased independence of those closely involved with Christian missions among the Tabwa. Viewed in this way, Loango tusk animal “defeat and rescue” scenes document the demise of traditional authority. Despite theriomorphic terrorist activity, traditional leaders ultimately lost out to colonial rule. Yet, might these scenes also have been warnings to the Europeans purchasing the tusks about the possibility of common Africans to rise up against them as well? As in the historical case studies discussed above, the animal attacks presented on Loango ivories emerged out of fraught social circumstances and interpretations about them must also remain ambiguous and unresolved.

Double-Take

My analysis of carved Loango tusks in the context of the Afro-Portuguese ivories offers a case study for transcultural arts and arts of the contact zone as an important facet of the definition of modern African arts. Such forms, these “colonial hybrids,” may exert agency and resistance through hybrid forms which appropriate and subvert the colonizer’s signifiers. Michel-Rolph Trouillot encourages us to address narratives as primary objects of study that demonstrate “Historical actors [as] narrators and vice versa.”⁸² Loango ivories tell stories, but they make, interrogate, and complicate narrative as history as well. Through standardized imagery that corresponds with their patrons’ preconceived notions, Kongo-Vili carvers represent “themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms.”⁸³

Loango ivories take on an unassuming guise. Generally perceived as inconsequential tourist art, surprising images on many examples sneak up on a viewer and force a second look. In this essay, I have attempted to re-regard Loango ivories in order to acknowledge and explore the agency that has long been denied them. While their hybridity has been the basis for their past rejection, I argue that the ivories’ hybridity is the source of their agency.

What do Loango ivories *do*? They unsettle the complacency with which they have been disregarded, they disturb notions of authenticity in African art, and they critique and jab back at their recipients, patrons and mere viewers alike. Alfred Gell has argued that beyond symbolizing, art objects themselves can be agents as well as proxies for the agency of their artists.⁸⁴ Loango ivories exert their makers’ acts of bold observation, critique, and resistance against the foreigners who encroached to dominate them. Call it “signifyin(g)” or “political disguise,” Loango ivories’ near-documentary,

disturbing, graphic, and arcane imagery convey masterfully critical and yet oblique messages that capture and critique catastrophe. Loango ivories are “souvenirs” – memory objects – not solely for their foreign clients but also for their Kongo makers.

Notes

- 1 Bassani and Fagg (1988); Curnow (1983); Fagg (1959).
- 2 In a recent auction, a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Afro-Portuguese cup sold for 268,000 euros or just over 300,000 US\$ (Sotheby’s PF1208, June 12, 2012, Lot 45). While Afro-Portuguese ivories may sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, Loango ivories may fetch hundreds to the low tens of thousands contingent upon quality – which varies drastically.
- 3 Peter Mark in Bassani and Fagg (1988, 26).
- 4 Spitta (1995, 2).
- 5 Martin (1972).
- 6 Janzen (1982, 37); Vansina (1990, 200–202).
- 7 Bassani (2000, 285–302); Bassani and Fagg (1988, 224–250).
- 8 Bassani and Fagg (1988, 24).
- 9 Bassani and Fagg (1988, 154). See Blackmun, chapter 20 this volume.
- 10 Martin (1972).
- 11 Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972).
- 12 Hochschild (1999).
- 13 Insofar as Loango ivories can be dated through collection records, scenes of slave trade and captivity appear consistently throughout the span of Loango ivories’ popularity and creation, until around 1910. The Atlantic slave trade persisted alongside legitimate trade – as well as local systems of slave trade – on the Loango Coast even after the 1859 abolition. Traders developed ways to circumvent the system until ships carrying the US flag were also subjected to British antislaving naval searches in 1862 (Martin 1972).
- 14 Chavanne (1887, 276–277).
- 15 Bassani and Fagg (1988), 147; Fyfe (1979, 11–12).
- 16 Bassani (2000, 289–300); Bassani and Fagg (1988, 111–122, 156–178).
- 17 Kreamer (2007, 69). For illustration, see Kreamer (2007: 69, cat. 15).
- 18 For an example illustration, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1972.63a,b>, retrieved March 26, 2013.
- 19 For example, see illustrations of a Kongo oliphant, pile cloth, and hat (*mpu*) in Bassani and Fagg (1988, 46, cat. 13–16).
- 20 Bassani and Fagg (1988, 197).
- 21 Felix (2010, 178–221).
- 22 Thornton (1984).
- 23 Wannyn (1945); Volper (2011).
- 24 See Thornton (1984) for an overview of the history of Christianity in the kingdom of Kongo.
- 25 Fu-Kiau 2001 (1980, 17–43); Thompson and Cornet (1981, 43–52).
- 26 For example illustrations, see <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1999.295.4>, retrieved March 26, 2013. Ongoing research and analysis on early

- Christian arts from the kingdom of Kongo will further illuminate these important visual developments and their historical contexts. For example, see Fromont (2011).
- 27 Heywood and Thornton (2007).
- 28 Martin (1972), MacGaffey (1986), and Vansina (1990) offer insights on Vili identity in broader historical contexts.
- 29 Bunseki Fu-Kiau, personal communication, 2004.
- 30 MacGaffey (1986, 63–89); Thompson and Cornet (1981, 83).
- 31 Strother (2009, 52).
- 32 See Thompson and Cornet (1981, 76–94) for more about *mabondo* including illustrations.
- 33 Cornet (1980).
- 34 Thompson and Cornet (1981, 52).
- 35 Kasfir (1992, 48).
- 36 Fagg in Bassani and Fagg (1988, xx).
- 37 Bonhams (2011, 138, 158) (Lots 308, 349).
- 38 Bonhams (2011, 171) (Lot 385).
- 39 Bridges (2009a, 79–80).
- 40 Felix (2010, 234–253).
- 41 Errington (1998, 62–63).
- 42 Grossman (2009); LaGamma (2007).
- 43 See Kasfir (1984).
- 44 Boumans (1903, 40–41).
- 45 Cureau (1904, 692; translations from the French are mine).
- 46 See Bridges (2009a, 45–59).
- 47 Pratt (1992, 2).
- 48 See Ortiz and De Onis (1947) for the foundational definition of “transculturation” informing my analysis.
- 49 Bridges (2009b, 27–28).
- 50 A number of works assessing the characteristics of artists’ strategies and patrons’ expectations for souvenir arts in global and more contemporary contexts inform my conjectures about the Loango ivories. See, for example: Ben-Amos (1977); Phillips and Steiner (1999); Kasfir (1999); Jules-Rossette (1984); and MacCannell (1975).
- 51 Carl Steckelmann, who collected several carved Loango tusks during the 1880s and donated them to the institution that would become the Cincinnati Art Museum recalled from his visits to the Loango Coast that the Kongo-Vili ivory carvers often hung “picture papers” inside their dwellings. “Congo: Native Carvings on Ivory Tusks” (summer 1889), newspaper clipping, Steckelmann (n.d.).
- 52 Bhabha (1994, 158–166).
- 53 Bhabha (1994, 153).
- 54 Scott (1990, 105).
- 55 Gates (1988).
- 56 Bhabha (1994, 160–161).
- 57 For illustration, see Bridges (2009a, 169).
- 58 Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden inv. 1092–113. For illustration, see Bridges (2009b, 169).
- 59 See Patton and Freyer (2008, 54–55).
- 60 Fanon (1965, 102).
- 61 Janzen (1982, 233).

- 62 Janzen (1982, 1990, 2009).
63 De Langle (1876, 298).
64 Campana (1895, 81).
65 Lips (1966).
66 It is more likely that such misattributed locations cited for the Loango ivories in question indicate the sites of collection rather than manufacture. Loango ivories likely reached these costal regions through trade at various points along the coast of both West and southeastern Africa.
67 Scott (1990, 138).
68 Scott (1990, 138).
69 Likaka (2009). Also see Langenohl, chapter 8 this volume.
70 Previously, I have identified a number of stylistic groupings among Loango ivories (Bridges 2009a). For an example illustration by this particular hand or workshop, see <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1993.382a,b>, retrieved March 26, 2013.
71 Hochschild (1999, 120). Two Loango carved tusks in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, inv. nos. 1890.1352 and 1890.1354, illustrated in Bridges (2009a, 176).
72 For example illustrations, see a leopard scene on a Loango carved tusk from the collection of the UCLA Fowler Museum, inv. no. 91.297, illustrated in Ross (1994, 108–109), and elephant and crocodile scenes on a tusk from the National Museum of African Art, inv. no. 96–28–1, illustrated in Nicolls (1998).
73 Nicolls (1998, 7).
74 Scott (1990, 169–170).
75 Lindskog (1954).
76 Lindskog (1954, 151).
77 Vansina (1990, 74).
78 Joset (1995, 178–180).
79 MacGaffey (1986, 217).
80 Rich (2001).
81 Roberts (1986).
82 Trouillot (1995, 22).
83 Pratt (1992, 7).
84 Gell (1998, 20).

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Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices

From Modern to Vernacular Photography in West and Central Africa (1850–1980)

Christraud M. Geary

**“COME ONE! COME ALL! and secure
the shadow ere it fades”**

With these words, A. A. H. Obafemi, the proprietor of the Hope Studio on Broad Street in Lagos, advertised his services in the *Lagos Standard*. The year was 1900. He appealed to his clientele, the Lagosian elite, with another bold line that read “PHOTOGRAPHS, PHOTOGRAPHS, PHOTOGRAPHS!” Obafemi promised to “attend to any one in his studio . . . between the hours of 7–11 a m and 2–5 p m daily; Sundays excluded” and described his charges as moderate.¹ His was just one of many similar advertisements by African photographers in newspapers up and down the West and Central African coasts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – a testimony to the huge success of this new medium that had come to African shores during the 1840s, soon after its inception in Europe.² It gave rise to a new profession and forms of self-presentation by those who patronized the photographers. Photography became a means of articulating African modernity, one of the aspects explored in this chapter.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, when Obafemi placed his ad, the profession of photographer had become part of the urban landscape, and studios attracted clients, members of older and emerging coastal elites who desired to have their portraits taken. Obafemi and his colleagues, who belonged to the same class, had not only mastered the technology, they had also learned how to cater to their patrons. Obafemi’s advertisement attests to the fact that he and his African colleagues were familiar with print media and with advertising language used by photographers in Great Britain and North America to offer their services. The expression “secure the shadow ere it fades” is an abbreviated version of “Secure the Shadow, Ere the Substance Fade, Let Nature imitate what Nature made,” one of the earliest poetic slogans promoting daguerreotypes in the English speaking world, which in the USA

first appeared in advertisements in 1847.³ Alluding to the memorializing aspects of the photographic image, the use of this phrase itself demonstrates the links of practitioners on the African continent with photography in Europe, North America, and, for that matter, other parts of the world.

This chapter briefly examines the spread and adaptation of photography in West and Central Africa, in other words the trajectories of photographers and photographic practices in time and space. The first part focuses on the period from about 1870 to 1910, when images by African pioneer photographers greatly contributed to the way in which Europeans and Americans imagined Africa, and at the same time served the needs of globally linked African elites in coastal communities from Sierra Leone to present-day Gabon. The second part explores local appropriations of the medium, that is, the vernacularization and democratization of photographic practices from the 1930s into the 1980s. In the form of a case study, it examines the biographies of several photographers who worked in the town of Fumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom in Cameroon.⁴

Two terms appearing throughout the text need explanation. To speak quite generally of “African photographers” is, of course, problematic and misleading because it seems to imply common backgrounds beyond geography, when, in fact, there has been great diversity on the continent. Here the term designates image makers of and from the continent, as distinct from white photographers of Europe and North America.⁵ What distinguished the African photographers from their peers, in addition to their skin tones, were their careers and roles in society. Another term, “photographic practices” in the plural form is also a deliberate choice, indicating that an exploration of the histories of photography and its image objects, a term referring to the materiality of the photographs in the form of daguerreotype and photographic prints, needs to consider variation on the continent. The constant movement of ideas, goods, and peoples to, from, and within Africa facilitated the spread and adoption of photographic technology, while specific local contexts, colonialisms, economic, educational, and other cultural forces shaped its creative appropriations and adaptations.

Toward a History of Photography in West and Central Africa

Any writing about early African photography at this point (in 2012) remains a challenge, as becomes obvious given the relatively short history of its study. In the 1980s, the first publications by pioneer researchers, who were mostly anthropologists and historians, focused on photography by colonial practitioners. “Colonial practitioners” here comprises photographers of many different backgrounds such as explorers, military men, administrators, missionaries, anthropologists, and merchants, all of whom came from Europe and North America. Based on paradigms of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, authors problematized colonial photography as a political and cultural instrument, even a weapon, which grew out of, supported, and shaped particular political formations. Scholars perceived colonial image making as an aggressive act, which in many cases it was, and suggested that the dissemination in the colonial metropoles of pictures showing the “African body” under white domination visualized the symbolic subjugation of African peoples.⁶ British anthropologist and scholar of photography Christopher Pinney points out that much of this writing inserted

photography into a preexisting postcolonial discourse which assumed that the pictures did “political” work. This, he argues, proposes “inflexible links between formal qualities and effect” when in fact images are malleable and can do different work in different epistemes.⁷ The following will revise some of the simplistic assumptions about the nature of so-called “colonial” photography and its producers.

By the 1990s, research began to focus on African photographers, a field of inquiry anticipated by the late Stephen Sprague, himself a photographer, in several groundbreaking 1970s articles describing portrait photography among the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria.⁸ Anthropologists, among them Tobias Wendl, Heike Behrend, and Liam Buckley, demonstrated how photography has shaped and reshaped itself to conform to local cultural practices.⁹ Thus, the spaces photography has occupied, and the ways people assign meaning and use photography’s image objects, differ across the continent. Publications now include several detailed historical studies of the earliest generation of African photographers and the spread of photography across regions. They have added to our knowledge about little-known image makers, and have moved photography into the center of explorations of modernity and modernist practices in Africa. To give several examples: in a pivotal study French historian and photographer Erika Nimis traced the labor migration of Yoruba photographers throughout West Africa, American art historian Erin Haney examined the history of the Ghanaian Lutterodt dynasty of photographers, and Swiss historian Jürg Schneider followed the career of Francis W. Joaque, one of the earliest African practitioners who was active along the West and Central African coasts.¹⁰ Other areas of research have emerged, among them studies exploring the agency of African subjects in the photographic encounter and the way in which images have been consumed and transformed both in African and Euro-American settings.¹¹

Concurrently, curators, art historians, and writers such as Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe, and André Magnin approached photography in terms of Africans’ engagement with modernity and the creation of distinct identities.¹² Working in collaboration with collectors, these passionate promoters of African photography have put select photographers on an equal footing with other internationally recognized artists in an emerging global market. By moving the photographs of luminaries such as Malians Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé as well as Cameroonian/Chadian Samuel Fosso out of local environments on the continent into art museums and galleries outside Africa, they stimulated the recognition and the monetary value of works by African photographers. Much remains to be done to publicize contemporary photography in Africa. Fortunately, several studies are currently underway which will present fascinating insights into photography’s other histories, to paraphrase the title of an important collection of essays edited by Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson.¹³

Pioneer Photographers and Their Customers along the West and Central African Coasts

The dissemination of photographic technology and practices in West and Central Africa depended on the flow of peoples, goods, ideas, and practices in the Atlantic world, a space linking the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. For centuries, economic and social interactions and cultural constructions have unfolded in this transcontinental and transnational setting.¹⁴ Photography’s arrival in Africa was thus

closely tied to the maritime trade and journeys by Africans and expatriates to, from, and within the continent. *Travel* as chronotope of the modern draws attention to the spatial-temporal connectedness linked to the spread and adoption of photographic technology and its practices.¹⁵ Photography initially took hold in the major ports along the West and Central African coasts from Saint-Louis in today's Senegal to Luanda in present-day Angola. These harbor towns were contact zones, places where cultures had met and grappled with difference ever since the first European vessels, with their traders and soldiers, began to arrive in the fifteenth century.¹⁶ In return for slaves, gold, and raw materials, goods from Europe flowed to and through these ports, among them books, engravings and paintings. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, these imports included daguerreotypes, photographs on paper, and lantern slides, as well as cameras and photographic products such as the studio backdrops necessary for image production. In fact, all early photographers (whether Africans or expatriates) depended on supplies brought to the African coasts through the maritime trade.

By the mid-nineteenth century – at the dawn of the colonial era – African coastal elites were familiar with imagery, literate, multilingual, and often well traveled. Intermarriage with Europeans was common. In Gorée and Saint-Louis in today's Senegal, a métis community of merchants engaged in trade, most famously conducted by *signares*, wealthy women entrepreneurs. Influential merchant families in harbor towns along the Gold Coast (now Ghana) such as Cape Coast, Elmina, and Accra, counted Dutch, German, English, and Danish men among their forebears, a fact reflected in their family names. Powerful chiefs and kings in the Niger Delta of present-day Nigeria controlled the trade with the hinterlands and were well acquainted with European ways, selectively adopting foreign elements into their lives, among them pictures and printed materials.¹⁷ Along the coasts of the ancient Kongo kingdom and present-day Angola, similar processes gave rise to cosmopolitan and mixed race elites. Other momentous developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century contributed to the blend of peoples and cultures and created a fertile environment for the introduction of photography. For example, with the end of the slave trade, which was officially banned in 1807, but continued clandestinely into the 1860s, slaves were freed when their vessels were intercepted, and repatriated to African shores, although not to their original homelands. Liberated slaves also returned to the African continent from North, Central, and South America and often maintained connections with the countries they had left behind, linkages that provided important conduits for the spread of photography.¹⁸

The first generation of professional photographers, whether returnees or born on African soil, emerged from these multicultural and cosmopolitan settings. How and from whom they acquired their technical skills is open to speculation. Some had already mastered photography before they came back to Africa from countries such as Brazil and the USA. Others likely learned their trade from local, among them white, practitioners of various backgrounds, for as French writer Frédérique Chapuis stated in an essay about image makers in Saint-Louis, photography "had the power of forging common bonds and transcending cultural and social barriers."¹⁹ The most accomplished pioneer photographers catered to both African and European clients. African kings, chiefs, rich merchants, and other well-to-do members of established and emerging elites commissioned portraits, the most common type of imagery produced for African patrons (see Figure 4.1). The photographers took portraits of both African and European sitters, pictures of the growing colonial infrastructure, documented

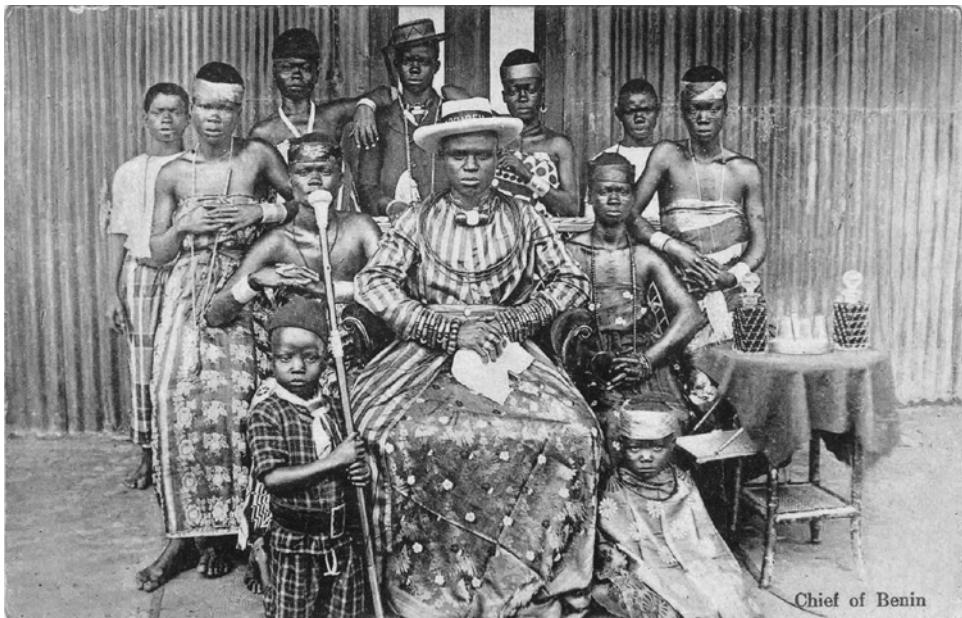


FIGURE 4.1 Jonathan Adagogo Green. Chief of Benin (a king from the Warri area in the Niger Delta, Nigeria), circa 1895. Postcard, printed circa 1907. Courtesy of Christraud M. Geary.

events such as the arrival of governors and other ceremonious occasions, and, judging by images preserved in albums and archives, were perfectly at ease with European conventions of portraiture and documentation.²⁰ For their colonial clientele, African photographers also offered stock photographs depicting ostensibly “scientific” views of men and women who were illustrations of ethnic “types” and “native rituals” at times staged for the camera. Portraits of African women, who often wore fewer clothes than European women, appear in colonial collections as well. It remains to be examined whether these titillating images and other pictures now in colonial albums, archives, and circulating on early twentieth-century postcards, were in fact originally taken of and for African patrons and then repurposed for colonial consumption. Malleable as images are, they may have moved out of the private domain into the Euro-American imaginary of Africa.

Pioneer image makers traveled as well to inland regions, where they encountered populations with whom they shared neither language nor culture. It has been surmised that their skin color gave them a rapport with such communities, providing them with an access their white counterparts did not enjoy. Yet they also stood apart, for, like their white peers, they were distant observers and became “ethnographers,” fulfilling the demands of their patrons for this kind of imagery. In short, their position resembled that of other *middle figures* or *intermediaries*, terms referring to African employees of Europeans, either in the private sector or in the colonial service, and in a variety of functions, such as interpreters, clerks, and secretaries. Because of their cultural knowledge, these intermediaries were able to navigate both African and European worlds, which provided them with power and influence.²¹ These

intermediaries were often widely traveled, had crossed boundaries, and had cosmopolitan outlooks, as will become obvious in the following short biographies of several pioneer photographers. The image makers thus assumed betwixt and between positions similar to those of other African middle figures, and acted, I suggest, as *visual intermediaries*.

Well into the 1970s, the names of these prominent photographers were unfamiliar to outsiders or mistakenly believed to refer to European practitioners, even though in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century their images circulated widely in print media ranging from books to postcards. Hints in early accounts resemble two sentences in a 1910 book by Richard E. Dennett entitled *Nigerian Studies; or, The Religious and Political System of the Yoruba*, in which the author mentions the sources of the illustrations. “Mr. H. Dodd took the photographs of the fishermen and hunters. A native photographer, Mr. Holm, has supplied the rest,” he states.²² Indeed, a Mr. Dodd contributed two images, while Neils Walwin Holm, a photographer from the Gold Coast whose career will be traced below, supplied nine pictures. Many of these images have been assumed to be the work of colonial practitioners, simply because of their accomplished execution or the subject matter, or both.²³ We have yet to fully fathom the involvement of African pioneer photographers in imag[in]ing Africa during this time period, but it now appears to be substantial.

From Monrovia to Libreville: The Careers of Several African Pioneer Photographers

The earliest hub of photographic activity on the continent was Monrovia in Liberia, a colony for freed African Americans founded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) and declared independent in 1847. The town became the home of one of the first documented professional photographers in West Africa, Augustus Washington (1820–1875), a freeborn African American and accomplished daguerreotypist who had operated a well-known photographic studio in Hartford, Connecticut, before moving with his family to Monrovia in 1853.²⁴ In Liberia, Washington successfully took portraits of many sitters who immediately sought him out and paid well for his services. Versed in the Anglo-American photographic conventions, he catered to African patrons as well as those born abroad. Soon he expanded his range and clientele beyond Monrovia by traveling along the coast to Freetown in Sierra Leone, to the Gambia, and to Senegal, where he advertised his arrival in local newspapers. He also received commissions from the ACS to take scenic views, a task that did not always succeed due to technical difficulties.²⁵ At times, he struggled with supply problems because all his photographic materials came from the USA. By the 1860s, when his other economic ventures became successful, Washington devoted less time to his photographic business. As daguerreotypes went out of fashion, and new photographic techniques (such as the wet-plate collodion process allowing multiple paper prints) became available, Washington apparently did not move on to the new processes.

Other early African image makers followed in Washington’s footsteps. Highly mobile and in search of new opportunities and clients, they voyaged on steamers and other vessels with accommodations for African passengers, moving up and down the West and Central African coasts.²⁶ Constantly crossing cultural, linguistic, and later colonial boundaries, they were inveterate travelers, cosmopolitan in their approaches

and ideas. Freetown, a place where Washington had conducted his business, became a port on their routes, and soon developed into a center of photography. The town's elites, referred to as Creoles, were of diverse origins. Among them were freed slaves who had returned from the USA and from the Caribbean as well as so-called recaptives, slaves whose vessels had been intercepted on the way to the Americas. The Creoles developed their own, distinct culture, looked to England, traveled extensively, and enjoyed innovation. By the 1880s and 1890s, during the early days of colonial rule, Creoles, also referred to as "Sierra Léonais" in francophone regions and Saro in anglophone parts of West Africa (such as present-day Nigeria), had found employment in the colonial administrations or established businesses (including photographic studios) all the way to the Congo and Angola. Other African photographers soon followed them to the same places.

Several Creole photographers active in the second half of the nineteenth century relied on networks of compatriots. They conducted lucrative businesses, making a living among fellow émigrés, locals, and Europeans. One of them was Francis W. Joaque (c.1845–c.1893), the son of Richard Vincent Joaque, whose parents had been taken by slavers through Popo (present-day Bénin) to a Portuguese territory, possibly Brazil, and then returned to Sierra Leone. We do not know how and when Joaque took up photography, but by 1870 he was on the island of Fernando Poo (now Bioko, Equatorial Guinea), a center for migrants attracted by its plantation economy in need of a large workforce. By 1880, he had opened a studio in Libreville (present-day Gabon), but ultimately moved back to Freetown shortly before 1890. Joaque's repertoire consisted of accomplished portraits of Africans and European sitters as well as images of the growing infrastructure and ethnographic scenes, and so called pictures of "types," anthropometric and denigrating renderings of African peoples common in the nineteenth century. Some 200 of Joaque's images have been preserved in archives in Europe and appeared in books in the form of engravings, woodcuts, and lithographs, which were produced by European draftsmen based on these photographs.²⁷

Similar to Freetown, the ports of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) developed into centers of photographic activity. Among the first African image makers was Accra-based Frederick Grant, who took up photography in the 1870s. His few surviving pictures, among them a portrait of the Müller family and a view of Cape Coast taken around 1873–1874 (both in the Mission 21 archives in Basel, Switzerland), as well as a larger group now in the British National Archives, establish him as an accomplished photographer.²⁸ In the second half of the nineteenth century, members of the Lutterodt family became the most prolific Gold Coast photographers of their time.²⁹ Among the first was Gerhardt Lutterodt (b. c.1850), whose Danish grandfather Georg Augustus Lutterodt had arrived in the Gold Coast around 1805. Presumably, Gerhardt traveled to Germany where he became acquainted with photography.³⁰ By the 1870s, he moved along the coast from Freetown to Fernando Poo and beyond, advertising his services as a portrait and landscape photographer in local newspapers. His nephew Frederick R. C. Lutterodt entered the family business in 1883 and took commissions from cosmopolitan local elites as well as from colonial administrators and other foreigners.³¹ Other family members excelled both as photographers and business men.

A rare carte de visite of two young men by "Photographers Lutterodt Bros. & Cousin, Gold-Coast Colony" captures the studio setup commonly used by early African practitioners and casts light on the photographic encounter (Figure 4.2). In this image,

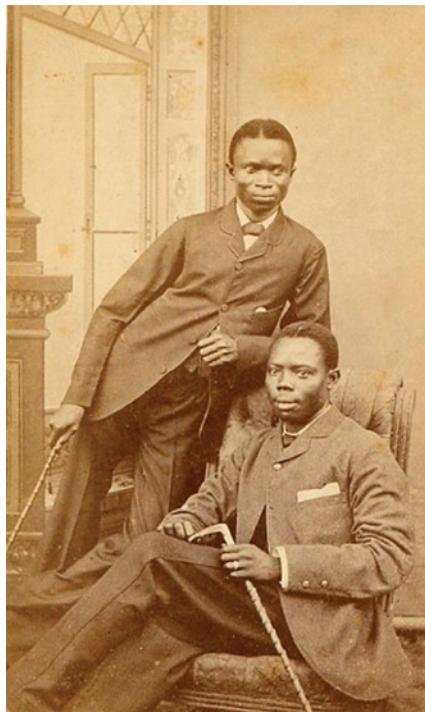


FIGURE 4.2 Lutterodt Bros. & Cousin. Untitled [portrait of two young men], circa 1900. Carte de visite. Courtesy of Michael Graham-Stewart.

the studio space is set up outside as the ground visible on the lower right indicates. The painted canvas backdrop, evoking a classical interior with a window opening to an imaginary outdoors, could have well been part of a studio in England. Indeed, successful photographers ordered such backdrops from England, where companies specialized in their production, and catalogues offered hundreds of different themes, ranging from interiors, gardens, and parks, to bucolic landscapes.³² An elegant chair completes the setting and allows the two gentlemen to assume striking poses. The seated man looks at the viewer and crosses his legs, while the other casually leans on the backrest of the chair and gazes into the distance. These are poses late nineteenth-century Victorian sitters would have assumed in Europe or North America, whereas the proper etiquette for self-presentation in that region of the West Africa (as we know from sculpture as well as from other photographs) would have required both men to frontal face the camera, rest their hands on their knees or in their laps, and sit erect and still. The two are dressed in similar suits, wear white shirts with vests and cravats, and hold identical canes. They are anonymous, although one might guess that they were perhaps relatives or members of an association or club. The photographer skillfully evoked their modern persona and both image maker and sitters authored this magnificent picture.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, more men engaged in the lucrative and attractive photographic profession. The career of Neils Walwin Holm exemplifies the

international nature and the entrepreneurial aspects of the business.³³ Holm was born in 1865 in Christiansburg in the Gold Coast, the fourth son of a wealthy merchant with British forbearers. He went to school in Accra and by 1883, at the age of 18, had become a photographer. The studio in Accra was his home base, but he traveled widely on business. His trips included several stays in London, and in 1896 he relocated to Lagos, a thriving cosmopolitan city. Here he joined other renowned photographers serving both local and foreign clienteles and his commissions included the documentation of colonial ceremonies and portraits of African and white patrons. In 1897, he became a Fellow in the British Royal Photographic Society, a rare accomplishment which indicates his connectedness with the larger photographic field in Europe and his familiarity with Victorian photographic conventions. Around 1900, he added a lucrative postcard business to his ventures and published images he and other African photographers had taken. Then, in 1910, he handed over his Lagos studio to his son, photographer J. A. C. Holm, and enrolled in the prestigious Lincoln's Inn of London, where he began legal training in 1911. After he was called to the Bar in 1917, he returned to Lagos and established himself as barrister-at-law. His career demonstrates the entrepreneurial nature of the photographic practice, a profession marked by both physical and social mobility of modernist travelers.

Only recently has another African photographer, Jonathan A. Green, received attention. Although his accomplished images have been published for decades, they were thought to be the work of a European image maker because of his English sounding surname.³⁴ Born to a prominent Ibani Ijo family in Bonny, in the Niger Delta, Green attended the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) high school in his home town. The missionary society relied heavily on clergy and teachers from Sierra Leone who were accustomed to photography and brought images with them. African photographers from other regions of West Africa arrived as well and received commissions from the CMS and private clients. John Parkes Decker from the Gambia, for example, worked in the Niger Delta during his peregrinations along the coast and was responsible for portraits of members of the CMS. Whether the presence of these professionals inspired Green to become a photographer, and to establish a business in Bonny, is open to speculation. Suffice it to say that during his short career – he died at the age of 32 – he was much sought after, accepting commissions from British colonials as well as local chiefs and elites.³⁵ Many of his images proudly carry his studio stamp on the back, which reads “J. A. Green, Artist Photographer, Bonny, Opobo, &c., &c.,” indicating his self-perception and aspirations.

Among Green’s most famous commissions for British clients was a series of portraits showing Oba (king) Ovonramwen of Benin being held captive on the British yacht *Ivy* in 1897, on his way into exile in Calabar. One of these photographs, depicting the seated king with three African soldiers standing behind him, enjoyed such popularity among colonial audiences that it became a postcard and circulated well after Green’s premature death.³⁶ Other portraits of rulers in the Niger Delta by Green were authored by both the photographer and the sitter. A portrayal of a king in the Warri region, posing with wives and children (Figure 4.1), is a tour de force in self-presentation and the photographer’s sense of aesthetics and technical expertise. Taken in front of a corrugated iron wall demonstrating the king’s access to such prestigious imported materials, it shows the ruler seated in an armchair at the center of the symmetrical composition. His legs spread apart, as behooves an important man, he looks straight into the camera and authoritatively holds a kerchief in his hands. His dress of

prestigious imported cloths and beaded accoutrements indicate his rank, as does the fashionable hat modeled on European prototypes. Two imported decanters and glasses on a small table to the right are yet other luxury items signifying his modernity and connectedness to the outside. One of his sons displays the king's staff, an insignia of royalty, visually indicating his status. Images such as this were popular with foreign residents and appeared in the albums they compiled and brought back to Europe. In all, there are approximately 300 Green photographs in archives and private albums in Europe and North America, ranging from portraits and ethnographic scenes to architecture and landscapes.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, other photographers permanently established themselves in bustling commercial centers and did not lack local patrons. However, it seems that, just as in previous generations, they kept their options open and often pursued a variety of professions or enterprises. We know the names of quite a few photographers working in these decades, but often have only sketchy information about their backgrounds and operations. There are exceptions such as Alphonso Lisk-Carew (1887–1969), a member of a distinguished Creole family, who, at the age of 18, opened a photographic business in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Soon his brother Arthur joined him and the brothers became famous for their studio portraits and stock prints showing Freetown, its inhabitants, and scenes and peoples of the hinterlands. Besides taking photographs, they also offered stationery and photographic supplies in their popular store and turned hundreds of their images into commercially successful postcards. They had many British patrons and it comes as no surprise that the brothers received the official commission to photograph the 1910 visit of the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, an event memorialized in their studio imprint, which read “Patronized by HRH the Duke of Connaught.”³⁷

Until well into the twentieth century, men from Afrique Occidentale Française (French West Africa), which included present-day Senegal, Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, migrated to other francophone colonies in search of labor and opportunities. Some took up photography, among them an enigmatic professional who was active in Libreville in the first decade of the twentieth century. He only used his first name, Khalilou, which indicates that he was from Senegal or Guinea. His compatriot Demba N'Diaye, a merchant who also worked in Libreville, distributed his photographs in the postcard format. The caption on one of the postcard reads “Cliché Khalilou, photographe, Libreville. Diplôme [diploma] 1906–1907” announcing to the world that his skills were officially recognized by the French administration. Some 50 of his cards show portraits of African sitters, buildings in Libreville, European trading establishments, and landscapes.

Meïssa Gaye, another photographer from French West Africa, was born in 1892 in Coyah (in the western part of what is now Guinea) and later moved with his parents to Saint-Louis in present-day Senegal. This bustling harbor town, where Augustus Washington once had practiced his craft, became a hub of photography when several French photographers established businesses as early as 1890, among them Blaise Bonnevile (1824–1906) who maintained a studio from around 1883 to 1887.³⁸ Senegalese photographers soon followed suit. Gaye, although certainly familiar with photographs while growing up in Saint-Louis, learned the photographic techniques from a Frenchman in the Congo where he worked as an apprentice carpenter for his uncle. Upon his return to French West Africa in 1914, he became an employee of the French colonial administration in various capacities and places, but continued his

engagement with photography and even ran his own business on the side. After the Forensic Identification Service in Saint-Louis, operated by the French colonial government, hired him as a photographer in 1939, he also began to document official events and took portraits of important personalities. When he retired in 1945, he opened his studio Tropical Photo in town. Meïssa Gaye died at the age of 101 in 1993,³⁹ and his remarkable career exemplifies the role of photographers as *travelers* and middle figures. He served the residents of Saint-Louis with his photography, and at the same time mediated between the local population and the French judicial administration.

Meïssa Gaye's long career unfolded during a period when other prominent African photographers in the tradition of middle figures or visual intermediaries continued to work for both African and foreign patrons. Their ranks included the Togolese photographer Alex Abaglo Accolatse (1880–1975) who operated a studio in Lomé; the Nigerian photographer H. Sanya Freeman, whose dates are unknown at this point in time and who acted as photographer-in-chief to the governor of Nigeria; George Goethe (1897–1976), a Sierra Leonian who established himself in Douala (Cameroon) and opened his studio “Photo Georges” in 1931, and A. T. Monor Lawson, who hailed from Togo but traveled and photographed widely in West Africa, to name just a few.⁴⁰ All these practitioners also engaged in the production of picture postcards, which circulated in Africa and around the world. At the same time, photography began to spread widely and other kinds of practices emerged.

The Democratization of Photography: The Case of Fumban, Cameroon

By the 1930s, entrepreneurial men all over West and Central Africa seized opportunities for economic and societal advancement by taking up the new profession and serving local clienteles. To the best of my knowledge women did not engage in the photographic business then. Photography became vernacularized and largely democratized because now many more people desired to be photographed and could afford to pay for pictures. Labor migration, the consolidation and expansion of colonial administrations, and technical innovations such as the introduction of cheaper, handheld cameras facilitated these developments. The integration of photography and images into cultural practices differed from region to region, as Tobias Wendl noted in a seminal essay about the history of media in Ghana, observing that “the photographic medium has been continuously shaped, reshaped and even transformed in order to fit into the local fabric of imaging and imagining.”⁴¹

The history of the adoption of photography in the town of Fumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom, located in a highland area referred to as the Cameroon Grassfields, exemplifies these processes. My research conducted in 2002 and 2004 on the history of vernacular photography in a specific town was among the first such undertakings focusing on a particular locale. Other examples include Erika Nimis's study of photographers in Bamako and more recently McKeown's brief study on photographers in Mbuda, Cameroon, under the guidance of David Zeitlyn who himself has carried out several photographic projects.⁴² In 1884–1885, Cameroon came officially under German colonial rule, and German-speaking⁴³ military men, merchants, and missionaries of the Basel Mission arrived in the Bamum kingdom from 1902

onwards. They encountered its youthful monarch Ibrahim Njoya (ruled 1886/1887 until exiled by the French in 1931), who embraced modernity and with the support of young retainers at the palace began to refashion his kingdom. He accumulated luxurious foreign imports such as champagne glasses, clocks, and German military helmets, and introduced new dress forms based on European and Islamic styles. He invented an indigenous writing system,⁴⁴ and with his courtiers constructed a language (*shuumom*), exclusive to the royals and the palace elite. Based on the example of the Basel Mission school established in 1906, his own school allowed Bamum instructors to teach the writing system and *shuumom*, among other subjects. Many European residents and visitors to Fumban brought cameras and besides visually documenting all aspects of their own experiences they also took images of the king and the Bamum elite. An innovative and creative ruler, King Njoya soon realized that photographic portraiture provided a means of self-presentation and that photographs, including his, circulated widely in the colony and in Europe, appeared in missionary and colonial magazines, and as postcards. By presenting himself to the cameras of the foreigners as a modern monarch, he raised the kingdom's influence among other states in the Grassfields and in Germany, where he became famous for his exploits. The king thus carefully crafted his own "image," and even experimented with the new technology of visualization.⁴⁵

Around 1914, King Njoya took up photography himself, and transmitted the skill to one of his loyal retainers who carried the *shuumom* title Nji Derema.⁴⁶ When I interviewed the oldest photographers in Fumban in 2002 and 2004, testimonies about Nji Derema differed. Everybody agreed that he had been a student at the Basel Mission school, was a Christian initially, and spoke German. He then taught King Njoya's script and *shuumom* at the royal school and later became a Muslim, following the example of the monarch who adopted Islam around 1915, towards the end of German colonial rule. It is likely that Nji Derema was the court photographer who captured important events for posterity, such as the arrival of British military in 1916 after the defeat of the German troops.⁴⁷ Engagement with photography and images (called *fitu*, a word derived from the German *Foto* for *Fotografie*) remained mostly a royal and elite pursuit until the 1930s, when the French sent King Njoya into exile (where he died in 1933). By then, photography was more common and moved "to town," so to speak. There are contradictory testimonies as to whether Nji Derema ever took commissions outside of the palace. Some older Bamum suggested that Nji Derema was the earliest Bamum photographer in town, while others contended that Njoya Mathieu, one of Nji Derema's sons and a Christian, was the first Bamum practitioner to serve ordinary people in Fumban (see below).

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, other African photographers, referred to as *gah pie fitu* (the man who makes the picture appear)⁴⁸ in *shii pa mben*, the Bamum language, had already arrived in Fumban. They were part of a wave of young men who had traveled from as far away as Nigeria in search of customers and economic success. F. Clement C. Egerton, who in 1933 or 1934 visited Bangangté, a Bamileke kingdom some 50 miles distance from Fumban, noticed that the

country was full of [African] photographers with cameras and tripods, though the cameras were not much like mine. From time to time everybody was photographed, everybody who had money enough to pay the five francs charged for the operation.⁴⁹

The cameras were not much like his, because they were actually locally made and modified, integrating the darkroom into the wooden camera body. The photographer initially produced a negative directly on printing paper and then a positive by rephotographing this negative. The patrons thus received their image on the spot.

According to accounts by several retired Bamum photographers in 2002 and 2004, the first image maker in Fumban outside of the palace was a Bamileke man by the name of Kouadjon Elie, followed by Vincent from Bafang, a Bamileke kingdom south of Bamum, and Celestin, whose origin had been forgotten.⁵⁰ None of these photographers operated studios; rather they were *ambulants*, that is, itinerant practitioners who traveled with their heavy cameras mounted on tripods. Initially, many people in Bamum associated these photographers with magic because they were under a black cloth that covered the apparatus and their heads when taking pictures. This caused fear among people not familiar with the act and outcome of the photographic process. Since the image appeared vertically reversed in the camera's viewfinder, people also believed that "upside down" women would lose their wrappers and look indecent in the photographs. Thus some husbands initially forbade their wives to have their pictures taken. More importantly, there was suspicion that men, who engaged in this lucrative career, had harnessed evil forces or witches in order to accumulate riches. In return, it was thought, they had to sell their parents or other relatives to work for these witches. The notion that wealthy and successful people had entered into pacts with evildoers has been a common belief in the Cameroon Grassfields, especially among the Bamileke peoples who are neighbors of the Bamum. It manifests itself even today in *feymania*, a scheme to get tremendously rich through fraudulent and criminal practices.⁵¹ The initial association of photography with these beliefs demonstrates the way in which the new technology became embedded in the specific cultural fabric of Bamum and the larger region.

As mentioned above, the first Bamum photographer in town was Njoya Mathieu, who worked as an *ambulant* and died around 1968. Many people remember him not only as photographer, but also for his political stance. His photographic career ended around 1958 when political unrest shook this part of Cameroon and the French regime accused him of aiding the opposition.⁵² By then, he was elderly and "fatigué," that is "tired," and too old to work effectively with younger clients who enjoyed the rapport with the man behind the camera. He fell back on his second profession, that of a farmer (*cultivateur*), for – as was the case for most of his peers – he sought to advance himself in several economic domains. The next generation of Bamum photographers knew Njoya Mathieu, but learned their trade in the coastal regions of Cameroon where they had gone to school or found salaried employment. Ntieche Roger, a long-time catechist at the Catholic Mission in Fumban, became familiar with photography before 1948 as student in Nkongsamba, a commercial town near the coast. He purchased a Photax camera⁵³ in the Nkongsamba market and, after his return to Fumban in 1948, established a darkroom in his house developing film and prints with the help of a kerosene lamp before electricity arrived around 1960. He worked as an itinerant photographer, visiting markets and celebrations, and he made a name for himself among his patrons.

The two most prominent Bamum photographers, Nji Mouliom Oumarou and El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou, who operated studios from the 1950s through the 1980s, were both Muslims. Black and white photography flourished and studios sprung up everywhere during this period, which has been referred to as the golden age of black

and white photography in Africa.⁵⁴ Nji Mouliom Oumarou (b. c.1925), who proudly carried the nickname *Nji Photographe*, was the first Bamum to establish a permanent studio in the 1950s. He opened his business after acquiring the necessary know-how in Buea, then the administrative headquarters of British Cameroons.⁵⁵ His studio was a great success and people flocked to his establishment. Besides portraits, he also took identity card pictures in 1957, when the French administration introduced *cartes d'identité*. This was the picture everybody had to “sit” for, creating a lucrative business for all photographers at the time. Nji Mouliom Omarou also documented weddings, installation ceremonies of new lineage heads, and funerals, among many other photographic tasks. King Njoya’s son, Sultan El Hadj Seidou Njimoluh Njoya, who ruled Bamum from 1933 to 1991, officially appointed him as photographer at the palace, where he made images of the king, court officials, royal wives, and many events. Over the years, Nji Mouliom Oumarou became a wealthy and highly respected man. He retired and closed his studio in the early 1980s, but by that time several of his apprentices had established their own studios.

The second Bamum photographer to open a studio was El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou, the son of a farmer and hunter, and member of a prominent Bamum lineage. He went to school in Fumban, also watched Njoya Mathieu take pictures and decided early on that he wanted to follow in his footsteps. At the age of about 20, in the 1950s, he moved to Muyuka, a town in the coastal region of Cameroon in what was then the anglophone British sector, where he joined two of his older brothers to work in the plantations. At the same time, he became the apprentice of a photographer by the name of Maurice who was a Banyang (an ethnic group in western Cameroon) and in turn had learned the trade from an Igbo photographer, that is, a man from present-day Nigeria. El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou returned to Fumban in 1958 “as a photographer with his cameras.”⁵⁶ He began his business portraying men and even women, although he was still a bachelor, which might have raised the suspicion of the women’s husbands. Their worry was unwarranted, though, because according to El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou, he “did not see their [the women’s] beauty, but just wanted the money.” Two years later, he married his first wife and soon thereafter established the studio Le Noun, named for a river that marks the southwestern border of the Bamum kingdom. He successfully attracted clients because of his great skills and the excellent studio location right next to the mosque and the market. Like Nji Mouliom Oumarou, he received commissions from the palace and thus became accredited at the court. Photography turned into a family business, for El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou taught his sons how to take and develop black and white pictures. By 2002, his son Ibrahim Njoya was in charge of the studio Le Noun, while his son, Amidou Njoya operated Photocam, another studio in Fumban. Others became doctors, were in the military, government, or private employment, but knew how to photograph as well, so that they could earn an additional income if needed. El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou trained many apprentices. Among them were Njionsi, who established himself in Garoua in northern Cameroon, Boulay and Maurice, who were anglophones⁵⁷ from the neighboring kingdom of Nso, and Njoya Mamouda, a Bamum who also established a studio.

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the patterns of photographic apprenticeships and labor migration reflected in the biographies of image makers in Fumban resembled similar processes in large parts of West and Central Africa, fostering the development of a “photographic *ecumene*,” that is, a region of persistent cultural interaction and exchange, which by now extended from Senegal to the Congo region.⁵⁸ As a result,



FIGURE 4.3 El Hadj Ousmanou. Portrait of two young men, circa 1968. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Christrraud M. Geary, with permission of El Hadj Ousmanou.

studio setups and technical practices in large parts of West and Central Africa resemble each other to this day. Studio floor plans, such as the one of Le Noun, follow a standard three-room design. First, one enters the reception area with price lists and a display of images in different sizes offering the patrons an opportunity to judge the quality of the owner's work. Separated by a curtain is a more private room equipped with a camera, lights, backdrops, accessories, and accoutrements for the male and female clients, where the "photographic ritual" unfolds.⁵⁹ Finally, a small chamber hidden from the public serves to develop the black and white film and to produce prints.

El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou's studio portraits also resemble the work of his colleagues in large parts of this *ecumene* and attest to his technical skill and ability to show his clients in the proper light. A picture of two dandies from the late 1960s (Figure 4.3), demonstrates the vernacularization of portrait photography, when compared to the carte de visite of two young men by the Lutterodt studio some 60 years earlier (Figure 4.2). In El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou's portrait, studio lights evenly illuminate the subjects and flatten the space, so that the men seem to merge with the patterned backdrop. Like many practitioners, El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou offered a choice of backdrops, ranging from scenes painted by local artists (among them views of the modern city and the Ka'aba in Mecca for his Muslim clients), to patterned textiles or plain curtains. He purchased the textiles in the market and first photographed them without sitters to see how they appeared in black and white and whether they would please his patrons. The vivid cloth backdrop in this photograph (hung in front of a painted one) was a favorite of El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou and his clients and

appears in many of his portraits from that period. The photographer and his two sitters, whose names he no longer remembered, carefully composed the picture as if they were performing on a stage. Reminiscent of French tough guy actor and singer Eddie Constantine or American singer James Brown – both popular in Cameroon then – the men strike self-assured poses. With fashionable hats, tight-fitting bell bottoms (referred to as pants with *pattes d'éléphants* – elephant feet), and sunglasses, they exude confidence and project sophistication and modernity, similar to the two sitters captured many years earlier by one of the photographers of the Lutterodt dynasty (Figure 4.2). Both images, seen side by side, evidence the complex trajectories, adoption, and increasing adaptation of photography in West and Central Africa.

When color slowly replaced black and white photography in the 1980s, photographers in Fumban who made this change began to rely on laboratories for developing film and printing pictures. Initially they used a color laboratory in the large commercial center of Bafussam, some 40 miles away, until a Korean family opened Photo-Korea, a lab in the center of Fumban only a few steps away from the studio Le Noun. It became a profitable business and supplied many itinerant and newly established studio photographers with these services.⁶⁰ Neither Nji Mouliom Oumarou nor El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou made the transition to color photography. By 2004, El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou was semi-retired although he still came to his studio every day, sat at the door or in the front room, and chatted with patrons, while his son Ibrahim Njoya kept the studio going. El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou reminisced about times past and deplored the change in the business, now swamped with *ambulants* who snapped color portraits and pictures at events, even though they had never completed an apprenticeship. Photographers from other parts of Cameroon and Nigeria had opened small studios in Fumban as well, and people bought cameras to take pictures for personal use. “Earlier on, the photograph was a very important thing,” remarked El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou during an interview in 2004. “Now it is nothing. One learned how to take photos like one learned things in school – history or geography. Now everybody buys a camera and takes pictures. These people take pictures and don’t know how to develop them . . . Black & white is about to disappear.”

El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou uttered these words a little over 150 years after Augustus Washington, the first African photographer we know of, had established himself as a daguerreotypist in Liberia in 1853. Photographic practices had initially spread transcontinentally to the African continent, first arriving during the nineteenth century with European and African travelers in the Atlantic realm, among them Washington. With the emergence of African photographers as established and highly mobile professionals, the complex processes of adoption, modification, and adaptation occurred along the paths photographers traveled on the continent, and the technology moved across political, ethnic, and linguistic borders.

This chapter initially focused on the careers of several photographers of the earliest generation, who creatively worked within aesthetic conventions common in the Euro-American realm and were able to synthesize their own approaches with the demands of their African clients. They also took commissions from foreign patrons, and since they were familiar with European as well as African worlds, acted often as visual intermediaries. The brief case study of the arrival of professional practitioners in Fumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom in Cameroon, demonstrated photography’s spread away from the coasts into rural areas and to smaller towns. Over the decades, successive generations of photographers and their local patrons vernacularized the profession

and this medium, which has been so uniquely able to visualize modern identities. The history of photography in West and Central Africa – and for that matter other parts of the continent – is indeed one of the many “Other” histories of photography around the world, as this brief exploration of the roots and routes of photography and its development has shown. Closely linked to and constitutive of the modern, the ability of African practitioners to spread the photographic medium and its evolving practices throughout the continent reveals an alternative to the Euro-American hegemonic narrative that presents modernity as European in origin and supports the notion of a multiplicity of modernisms in different temporal and geographic spaces around the globe.

Notes

- 1 *Lagos Standard* (1900).
- 2 Theye (1989, 21–24); Haney (2010b, 23–25).
- 3 I thank several colleagues and especially William B. Becker, a historian of photography, for this reference.
- 4 I thank the Getty Foundation for funding the research in Fumban through a Collaborative Research Grant (2001–2004).
- 5 Elsewhere, such as in Egypt and in present-day Ethiopia, non-Africans were Syrians and Armenians, among others; along the East African coast, practitioners came from Goa in India and from the Arab peninsula.
- 6 Seminal publications that inspired this field of inquiry include John Tagg’s classic study *The Burden of Representation* (1988) and Alan Sekula’s (1989) essay “The Body and the Archive.” For a variety of approaches to colonial photographies see Landau and Kaspin (2002) and Hight and Sampson (2002).
- 7 Pinney (2003, 3) bases his critique on Ginzburg (1989, 35).
- 8 Sprague (1978).
- 9 Wendl and Behrend (1998); Buckley (2000).
- 10 Nimis (2005); Haney (2004, 2010a, 2010b, 28–30); Schneider (2010, 2011).
- 11 Geary (2002).
- 12 See for example *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (Enwezor et al. 1996), the writings by André Magnin such as *Seydou Keïta* (1996) and *Malik Sidibé* (1998), by Enwezor (2006), and by Bonetti and Schlinkert (2004) on Samuel Fosso.
- 13 Pinney and Peterson (2003).
- 14 See Gilroy (1993), who championed the “Black Atlantic” as a space of travel and exchange; in reference to Atlantic history see Mann and Bay (2001). Also see jegede, chapter 18 this volume.
- 15 Clifford (1992).
- 16 Pratt (1992, 4).
- 17 See Visonà, chapter 9 this volume.
- 18 See Okoye, chapter 6 this volume.
- 19 Chapuis (1999, 58).
- 20 Geary (2010).
- 21 Lawrence, Osborn, and Roberts (2006, 4–5).
- 22 Dennett (1910, ix).
- 23 See, for instance, Engmann on the work of Frederick Grant (2012).

- 24 Ann Shumard published the first comprehensive study of Washington's work (1999). Dalila Scruggs's PhD dissertation (2010) places him in the larger context of the American Colonization Society.
- 25 Shumard (1999, 12).
- 26 Haefliger (2005).
- 27 Swiss historian Jürg Schneider has traced Joaque's career and legacy in European archives; see Schneider (2010, 138–140 and 2011, 221–230).
- 28 Johannes Müller, a missionary of the Basel Mission, served in the Gold Coast from 1865 to 1898. See <http://bmpix.usc.edu/bmpix/controller/view/impa-m49240.html> (ref. nos. QS-30.002.0447.01 and QD-30.011.0016); Grant, Frederick (1884). *Fetish and Gold Coast*. Copy 1/368. Photo collection deposited for copyright at the British National Archives, London; Engmann (2012); Haney (2010b, 32).
- 29 Haney (2004, 87–112). I thank Erin Haney for kindly sending me a copy of her as yet unpublished PhD dissertation.
- 30 Wendl (1999, 144).
- 31 Haney (2010b, 28–30).
- 32 Wendl (1998, 29–30).
- 33 I thank Olubukola Gbadegesin for sending me her yet unpublished essay "Where in the World is Neils Walwin Holm? Tracing the Mobility and Enterprise of a Transnational Photographer."
- 34 The research on Green was conducted with the support of a Getty Collaborative Research Grant. The team included Professor Ebiegberi J. Alagoa, Martha Anderson, Lisa Aronson, and Christraud Geary. We thank the Getty Foundation for its generous support.
- 35 Anderson and Aronson (2011).
- 36 Geary (2007, 94).
- 37 Viditz-Ward (1999, 38).
- 38 Chapuis (1999, 51); David (2006).
- 39 Seye (1994, 67–69).
- 40 See David on Accolatse (1999) and Kwa (2003) on Goethe.
- 41 Wendl (2001, 79).
- 42 Nimis (1998); McKeown (2010); Zeitlyn (2005). Currently (in July 2012), René Egloff is completing his doctoral dissertation entitled "Fotografie in Bamenda" (Photography in Bamenda) at Basel University (Switzerland).
- 43 The term "German-speaking" is a deliberate choice because the earliest photographers hailed from the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, as well as Switzerland.
- 44 For an introduction to these writing systems see Tuchscherer (2007).
- 45 See in particular Geary (1988, 2004, and 2013).
- 46 *Nji* is the title of noblemen and can be inherited or awarded by the king for meritorious services. Derema was the designation of this court official in *shümmom*. The identity of Nji Derema may become clearer once the findings of the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project (www.bamumscript.org) have been publicly disseminated. According to various accounts by older Bamum, his name was Kouotou Ngnore (interview with El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou, June 7, 2004).
- 47 Geary (2013).
- 48 More recently, the term *cameraman* was another way of referring to a photographer.
- 49 Egerton (1939, 88).

- 50 McKeown encountered a similar scenario, namely that photographers were often known by their first names only (McKeown 2010, 183).
- 51 Ndjio (2008).
- 52 Geary (2004, 151).
- 53 The Photax viewfinder camera with a housing made of Bakelite, took 6×9 cm exposures on roll film. The first model launched in 1937, the final one in 1960. It was a popular, affordable choice among itinerant photographers.
- 54 Werner and Nimis (1998, 19).
- 55 Geary (2004, 152–158).
- 56 This information and the following quotes come from an interview with El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou conducted on June 7, 2004, which was part of the series of interviews in 2002 and 2004. I thank El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou and his family for their patience with my many questions.
- 57 Nji Mouliom Oumarou and El Hadj Njoya Ousmanou were both fluent in pidgin English, a lingua franca also widely spoken in francophone Bamum. In fact, when the Germans arrived in Fumban in 1902, they conversed with King Njoya in pidgin English.
- 58 For the concept of “ecumene” see Kopytoff (1987, 10).
- 59 Werner and Nimis (1989, 20).
- 60 By 2004, the Korean owners had just sold the business to a Chinese family.

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At Home in the World

Portrait Photography and Swahili Mercantile Aesthetics

Prita Meier

This chapter explores the role of photography as part of a larger spectrum of a *culture of things* cultivated by East Africans for the performance of selfhood. Taking the rich and diverse photographs of nineteenth-century coastal East Africa as a springboard, I consider how portrait photography not only documents and expresses a sense of belonging and identity formation – issues which have been explored by Africanists extensively – but also how the photograph, through its indexical quality and very materiality, circulated in and out of Swahili spaces and cultural codes. I focus on the role of photography as an object of Swahili personhood in relationship to the politics of globalization unfolding in East Africa. I argue that for East Africans, and Zanzibaris in particular, “being global” is a carefully crafted tactic of translation, making Swahili practices comprehensible and desirable to others in the world.

In established studies of African artistic modernism, the deployment of Western image-making technologies such as photography is often narrated as the “localization” of a “global” form. But I suggest the very interpretative framework of modernity cannot fully account for the ways Africans co-created cultures and aesthetic practices in and outside the African continent during the age of colonialism and global capitalism. I contend that Swahili “modernity” was not formed in the crucible of colonialism. Rather, the material framework of the Swahili city, its form and meaning, was an appropriative aesthetic system long before European interests began to impact the area. As will become clear, the port city of Zanzibar was designed as composite space, where visual culture mirrored the visual landscape of other ports across the Indian Ocean (and later the industrial north) in order to exist as a space *between* what outside observers might recognize as “the local” and “the global.” This chapter therefore does not focus so much on how Western forms were “localized” to make an African version of modernity, but rather questions what happens when Swahili practices of appropriation meet the appropriative systems of European colonialism and industrial capitalism. What becomes clear is that Western and Swahili systems of

significations did not exist in separate registers of meaning. Rather Swahili and Western ideas about selfhood engulfed and enframed each other to create composite ways of seeing and being.

“Modernity” in African Art History

Recent art historical studies of the colonial period have foregrounded why images and spaces produced in Africa need not be discussed simply as either continuities of, or ruptures with, precolonial cultural practices. Instead, Africanists assert that colonial-era arts must be analyzed as expressions of modernity and global connectivity. This focus on modernity in the field of African art history was in many ways inaugurated by the seminal work of Johannes Fabian. In his book *Time and the Other*, Fabian focused on the power of temporal concepts, such as “traditional,” “primitive,” and “tribal,” to dislocate Africa from the rest of the world in Western intellectual history. He called this the “denial of coevalness,” or the refusal to see Africa and the West as sharing the same temporal plane.¹ Africanists also began to engage the perspectives of postcolonial criticism to interrogate the ahistorical character of non-Western art history in comparison to the insistently temporal framework of Western art history.² Since the early 1990s Africanists and critics increasingly focused on the problem of modernity in African art history as a field of study.³ During the mid-1990s, individuals who were at some point associated with one of the vital modernist art schools or academies in Zaria, Nsukka, Dakar, Kumase, Khartoum, and Cairo became especially important to the emerging field of African modernism. These scholars and artists, such as Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe, Atta Kwami, Nkiru Nzegwu, Chika Okeke-Agulu, and Sylvester Ogbemchie, valorized formerly marginalized artists as significant players in the history of modern art. Modernist artists from Africa who trained in the Western metropole or in colonial fine art schools are invariably discussed as heroic figures who succeeded in creating a “truly” African, Nigerian, or Sudanese modernism.⁴

Two important exhibitions that introduced these ideas to a larger audience were *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (UK, 1996) and *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* (USA, 1990). These early projects focused on formal and aesthetic issues, considering questions of visual style, influence, and artistic “originality.” But curators of later exhibitions, such as *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (USA and Germany, 2001), distanced themselves from such formalist questions. These projects presented modernism as a “worldly” field of politics, focusing on the historical context of artistic production. Rather than being accounts of the appropriation of European forms, they framed African modernism as a tactic of subversion and rebellion.

Theorists such as Arjun Appadurai, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Paul Gilroy became particularly important to later studies of African modernism(s) because they emphasize the plurality of modernity.⁵ For example, Paul Gilroy’s theorization of the Black Atlantic as a site of hybrid modernity in many ways set the stage for much of the work on the multiple modernities of African art history because his work was most closely aligned with the field of African and African Diaspora studies. Elizabeth Harney’s groundbreaking *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (2004) was the first sustained study of the institutionalization of modernist art practices in an African nation-state. In her book she was not so much

interested in celebrating the “authenticity” or “originality” of African modernists, but understanding how and why different generations of Senegalese artists deploy “European modernist visual techniques and aesthetic concerns” over the span of several decades.⁶ Significantly, her work concentrated on moments in time, rather than cultural space: African artists and artworks are discussed in relationship to major sociopolitical *events*, such as the independence struggle, postcolonial nationhood, and neoliberal crisis.

Yet, studies of “African” modernity or modernism continue to be accompanied by a certain ideological anxiety. Scholars as well as art critics contend that the appropriation of “global” forms and ideas by Africans should not be viewed as an unbounded or “universal” cultural practice. Rather they argue that the Western modernism is “localized” and therefore the resultant artwork remains authentically “African.”⁷ In these scenarios Africa is always the local and the West the global. Clearly such narratives actually reproduce modernity’s analytic need to flatten a multiplicity of encounters into a dichotomy of the local versus the global. Furthermore, a central unresolved question remains: Why is it particularly effective to employ the category of the modern to counter ethnocentric visions of world culture, when from a historical perspective, modernity as a conceptual apparatus for global engagement is created by an imperial culture?

One response might be that modernity is an effective tool to counter the silencing of Africa’s global presence and impact because it is a comparative mode of perception. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued, modernity legitimates imagining a globally interconnected and interdependent community and therefore is also a potentially empowering paradigm to critique the marginalization of difference and otherness.⁸ Furthermore, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, with its bundled concepts (or fantasies) of rationality and the universal rights of man, modernity can be deployed by the marginalized as the potential site from which to force their recognition as rights-bearing members of a planetary community. While different places and different times remake and translate European thought for the production of locality, part of that strategy is anchored in an awareness that it is essential to be seen as “modern.”⁹ Similarly, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar argues that when residents of early twentieth-century cities such as Calcutta or Shanghai embrace modernity they “are not naïve, they are not unaware of its Western origins, its colonial designs, its capitalist logic, and its global reach.”¹⁰ Its embrace is not marked by an anxiety about losing “one’s culture.” Rather, by naming and making things modern it gives local residents the “license to play with form and refigure function according to the exigencies of the situation.”¹¹

It is clear that African artists embraced modernism precisely because it presents art as a “universally” relevant form that can do something about the gap between the promises of modernity and the social realities of modernization, such as colonialism and racism. As a creative practice modernism has been immensely generative for African and African Diaspora artists. Yet art historians often deploy modernity as a mode of analysis without acknowledging its full ideological apparatus and limitations. A key problem is that Africanists are intent on linking modernism to a bounded place, “Africa,” and that they often dehistoricize modernity and simply posit it as a marker of positive valuation.

Although often described and perceived as such, the Enlightenment project of modernity is not a phenomenon, like industrialization or modernization. Rather, as Walter Mignolo has argued, it is a conceptual apparatus created by an imperial culture (the North Atlantic world), perhaps as early as the sixteenth century, when an

interconnected world system began to be imagined as a result of the global expansion of capitalism. As an epistemic framework, modernity is unequivocally Eurocentered, since “the outside [colonized/Other] is named from the inside [colonizer/Europe] in the exercise of the coloniality of power.”¹² Similarly, “it requires an alterity, a referent outside of itself – a pre- or non-modern in relation to which the modern takes its full meaning.”¹³ Those judged to be too different became “nonmodern” in this comparative mode of seeing and experiencing the world. What makes modernity so compelling is that it claims to be a planetary system. It belongs to a bundle of terms that Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “North Atlantic universals” that have their inception in the West, but are now accepted as describing a placeless and universal experience. North Atlantic universals are “always seductive, at times even irresistible, exactly because they manage, in that projection, to hide their specific – localized, North Atlantic, and thus parochial – historical location.”¹⁴

The geographic marker “Africa” in a story about modernity always creates an illogical narrative because modernity is only capable of naming a site outside itself as “Other” or nonmodern, while studies of “African” modernism seek to make modernity do something that goes against its foundational narrative: to create a story about particularity and universality simultaneously. This would be a provocative intellectual project, but modernity as a theoretical apparatus set in place by nineteenth- and twentieth-century social philosophers cannot be deployed for such a reading. Or to put it in another way, studies of “African” modernism claim place-based particularity, while in fact modernity emphasizes temporality and can only account for a placeless modernism. A story about local modernism will always raise the specter of the “derivative” because modernism has to be placeless from the perspective of modernity.

As a field of inquiry, African art history fundamentally challenges the notion of placelessness because it is defined by the territorial boundaries of a continent. But Africanist art historians have yet to unpack the fissures and contractions created when modernism is linked to place in their attempt to create an intellectual project called the “study of African modernism.” African art history was founded on the “area studies” research paradigm established in the 1950s that was meant to “give voice” to formerly colonized regions and to redress the Eurocentrism of academic institutions in North America. It was part of the Cold War surveillance apparatus as well. While the former aspect of area studies was clearly laudatory, it also inadvertently entrenched the assumption that there is a constitutive and stable relationship between culture and place. “Area studies” research can and does focus on transregional interconnectivity, but it interprets the relationships between different things and peoples in territorial terms. A vaguely defined conceptual border or bounded space is presumed to have been “crossed” and place-based cultural authenticity is always imagined as the precursor to cross-cultural engagement. Thus, African art history is in fact locked into the modernist map of world culture, where non-Westerners move across space and Western culture is defined by change across time.

Challenging “Modernity” and “Place” on the Swahili Coast

The study of littoral visual culture demands that we rethink this still trenchant “area studies” model of African art history. Urban spaces on the “margins” – whether located on geographic or conceptual peripheries – highlight the ways art history

depends on geography to make sense of world culture. Especially in non-Western fields, such as Islamic or African art history, territorial boundaries are seen to define culture. Examining how culture is produced in such borderlands as the Swahili coast is an especially clarifying exercise because its port cities are fundamentally de-territorial cultural landscapes, defined by histories of oceanic movement and migration. While this cultural landscape is certainly geographically specific, since its center is located on the coast of east Africa, it nonetheless challenges normative notions about the relationship between place and culture. Here the relationship between social identity, belonging, and geography is particularly mercurial and their constructed nature is thrown into sharp relief.

Residents of the Swahili coast's principal port cities have long constructed their material world as a *cosmopolis*, a nexus of multiple ways of being, where objects and spaces of the "elsewhere" converge. Connected to the trade routes of the Indian Ocean and the African continent, the port cities of east Africa have been nodes of global convergence for millennia. At the height of their power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, cities such as Mombasa and Kilwa cultivated connections with the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, the inland cultures of Central and southern Africa, and South and central Asia. Their wealth depended on exporting African gold, ivory, and grains and importing luxury commodities for African consumption, such as textiles, copper wire, porcelain dishes, and jewelry. Between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries Swahili ports had increasingly to contend with outside military aggression and the destabilization of their established alliances with African polities. For example, the increased demand by British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese traders for enslaved Africans to work on European plantations in the New World and on Indian Ocean islands set the stage for the introduction of modern plantation slavery on Zanzibar Island in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Western nineteenth-century capitalist expansion and imperialism radically reconfigured East Africa's social, political, and cultural landscape. By the time Zanzibar became the seat of the Arab Omani Sultanate in 1837 and later a British Protectorate in 1890, East African networks were already connected to the commodity cultures of the North Atlantic world.¹⁶ Transformed by a set of new demands and desires forged in the expansive world of modern empire and nation-building, the visual culture of the Swahili coast was reconstituted until it became a layered palimpsest of multiple meanings. This very multiplicity created a tense and paradoxical landscape for the representation and construction of a changing social order.

Europeans have long been aware of and present on the Swahili coast. For example, the Portuguese empire sacked and then colonized such cities as Mombasa for several decades in the sixteenth century. Their views of Swahili culture are recorded in visual and written form. Yet when Europeans first appeared in larger numbers in the nineteenth century, the Swahili coast was interpreted in radically new ways. Modern Victorian sensibilities found the metropolitan cultures of the port to be strange and unruly. The Swahili coast challenged modern European ideas because the social and cultural landscape of its cities did not conform to modern civilizational norms about the "natural" difference between races. Locals *looked* strangely "hybrid," yet colonialism's rule of difference depended on managing the colonized as clearly segregated ethnic bodies. Categorizing external visual signs, dress and the arts of adornment, became central to the colonial project on the Swahili coast precisely because a formal morphology of the material world seemed to offer a more secure system of fixing

social difference *into place*. In fact, photography initially played a central role in creating a typology of difference for the coast because it stabilized visual difference.

Photography and the Colonial Moment

Photography as a novel form of image making was introduced into coastal East Africa as early as the 1860s.¹⁷ Today thousands of photographs can be found in national archives in East Africa and Europe, such as the Zanzibar National Archives and the British Library, as well as in personal family collections on the Swahili coast. Yet, these early photographs are simply stored in nameless boxes or files as part of the larger colonial archive. Even those residing in family collections have lost their specificity. It is clear that photography studios were first established by South Asians in Zanzibar to create a profusion of images, literally capturing local peoples for the viewing pleasures of Western clients and for official documentation of the colonial project.¹⁸ Thus, many of the thousands of postcards created during the Omani Sultanate of Zanzibar period (1856–1963), and during the following period of British influence leading to the 1890 British Protectorate, evoke a generalized sense of Zanzibar as site of exotic pleasure for the Western imaginary. Most present the female body for voyeuristic consumption. Studio images of women abound, clad in the lush local fashions of the day. These postcards depicted “Swahilis” as meeting the eye of the viewer either suggestively aggressive or with a bright smile of welcoming warmth. The stage set of the studio created a narrow pictorial space, allowing the physicality of the female body to dominate the picture plane. Unlike photographs kept by elite Zanzibari families, these postcards are not portraits of the individual women, but rather a mapping of the body and its potential pleasures. The nameless figures are dressed in local cloth, whose fantastic colors are “reconstructed” by hand-coloring the surface with bright hues of pink, purple, and yellow. Literally inscribed onto the surface of the image is the desire for “local” color.

This emphasis on “local color” as an index of the authenticity also signals the intersection of such images with the larger visual politics of Western knowledge-production and empire-building. As many scholars have argued, the seeming evidentiary power of photography was deployed as a “scientific” tool for recording anthropological knowledge and colonial “progress.”¹⁹ Yet pleasure and “empirical” knowledge always intersected in these images. Images of seductive women also documented “facts” about their ethnicity and place or origin. The text on such postcards cataloged them as either “Indian,” “Swahili,” “African,” or “Arab.” The ethnicity of the body was laid out as a terrain for the viewer’s gaze. The photograph therefore is posited as a scientific document, capturing the supposed visual specificities of an ethnic “type.” The social and biological body is therefore inscribed onto the physical artifact of photo – typical of the strategic deployment of the camera as an instrument of evidence and control, capturing the “real thing.”²⁰ Photographic profiles of the human face were also common. Here too voyeuristic pleasure is conveniently coupled with ethnographic knowledge and the head and planes of women’s necks and shoulders were often bared to document their “ethnic” physiognomy. Visualizing “ethnicity” was central to the colonial project on the Swahili coast. From the late nineteenth century onwards, residents had to contend with and define themselves in relationship to North Atlantic social hierarchies. Since colonial governance required a social body

that could be racially classified, coastal residents were pressed to take on an ethnic identity. The geographic, cultural, and linguistic designation, “Swahili,” was eventually transformed into an ethnic and racial marker.²¹

Scholars have interrogated at length such colonial and racist image and object regimes, especially for West and North Africa. But what can we say about these images beyond gathering generalized insights about Western fantasies of the imaginary “Other” and the violence of objectification? To reconsider these largely anonymous images, I want to think about them as things and performance in circulation. In fact, the very characteristics of photography that made it a document of control, also allowed it to be deployed for unforeseen means.

A Swahili Culture of Things

By the mid-nineteenth century, Zanzibar became the center of a powerful East African consumer culture that affected merchants, financial markets, and factories as far away as London, Bombay, and Boston.²² Seyyid Said, the first Omani Arab sultan of Zanzibar, was able to establish a new mercantile empire on Zanzibar in the 1830s by forging an alliance with the island’s hereditary leaders, the Hadimu and Tumbatu dynasties, and by connecting the existing east and central caravan economy to the growing global market.²³ Furthermore, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 travel time between Europe and East Africa decreased significantly and by the 1870s a daily stream of steamships connected East Africa to a global web of steamship routes.²⁴ The Sultan’s wealth depended in a large part on controlling the customs house of all Swahili port cities, where his representatives collected tariffs on all exports and imports. Yet while in the first half of the nineteenth century Zanzibar was first and foremost a mercantile economy, by the 1870s slave labour plantations that produced cloves for export became the cornerstone of the local economy.²⁵

Mass-produced commodities became cheaply available as old trade routes were now directly connected to the markets of the industrial north. Merchant vessels from all over the world docked in Zanzibar, including from Turkey, Europe, North America, and even Latin America. Remarkably, local consumer demand focused on objects “destined for the social realm of display and public communication,” such as cloth, beads, jewelry, and furniture.²⁶ This emphasis on exotic imports was not a recent phenomenon or simply a result of capitalist globalization. Rather, new mass-produced objects fulfilled an ancient need and desire for signs and things of foreignness. Sometime in the fifteenth or sixteenth century the hereditary leaders of Swahili port cities and towns began to cultivate an aesthetic of mercantile worldliness by collecting imported luxury goods, such as clothes, Chinese porcelain, jewelry, and precious objets d’art, for display on their bodies and in their homes. This “culture of things” was an expression and idealization of the port city itself. It celebrated mercantile mobility and the ability to acquire exotic objects. Great distances separated the ports of East Africa from the cities of the Middle East and Asia, but having direct access to the artifacts of those faraway places endowed the port with an aura of worldly sophistication. In a sense, one was also able to surmount distance by dressing in and living with things from faraway places.

Until the nineteenth century, sumptuary laws ensured that only patricians could control this image world and aesthetic practice. This culture of things was not only

about aesthetic pleasure and wealth, but it also played a role in policing social hierarchies by materially demarcating the difference between the free elite and the commoners and enslaved persons. The arts of dress and adornment were particularly vital in this regard. Only patricians and free members of society had the right to wear certain things. And most importantly, only free peoples controlled their own bodily display. To dress oneself and perform the codes of mercantile plentitude meant one had entered the matrix of autonomous personhood. Freeborn women were also the only ones who fully or partially covered their ornamented bodies in public. Only they had the privilege to demurely draw a veil over their head and chests. During the Sultanate years, Omani and Egyptian forms of dress became increasingly popular. Women sheathed themselves in imported silks and cottons. They also wore massive silver anklets, bracelets, and necklaces that were imported from the Arab peninsula and South Asia. The most important sign of patrician identity for men was an Omani turban and curved dagger. Wearing a fine Arab *kanzu*, an ankle-length white or cream-colored robe, with an embroidered head-cape, called a *kofia*, also became an increasingly popular form of free men's dress. The rich layering of ornamental mass on the body was often intentionally symbolic and even insistently nonfunctional because it negated the utilitarian or mundane function of certain things. For example, women wore extremely high platform sandals as a sign of their free status. The form of such locally manufactured sandals was based on Ottoman prototypes. In Turkey such sandals were originally been worn only for short trips to the restroom, but on the Swahili coast they became highly charged symbols of a woman's patrician pedigree. Photographs of such women from the turn of the twentieth show them wearing such sandals as they sat enthroned on massive carved chair, a *kiti cha enzi*, or "throne of power." The ability to stage one's self at rest, wearing fine clothes, meant one was in command of others, of their bodies and actions. Elders and colonial archives describe the poise and composure of patricians, as they sat stiffly erect for hours upon a *kiti cha enzi*, ever vigilant and in command of the movements of others.

Although a wide array of objects were coveted, cloth was the most important sign of mercantile plentitude and also the most valued commodity. In many precolonial African political economies imported textiles played a multivalent role, often acting as a form of currency, whose value was intimately linked to the value of people. As Joseph Miller argues in his seminal book *Way of Death*, throughout the transatlantic slave trade the African value of the enslaved was calculated as "pieces" of imported textiles.²⁷ On the Swahili coast cloth was also so valued because East African elites could create networks of dependence – amassing people as clients or bonded persons – through a body politic in which the ability to amass and distribute imported cloth effected one's ability to command others. Beautifully designed textiles were necessary to participate in complex rituals of gifting that cemented allegiances and one could only amass a large household and retinue if one could dress them.²⁸ Cloth was also used to trade for ivory and enslaved Africans along the caravan routes of East and Central Africa.

By the mid-nineteenth century this system reached new heights because both imported cloth and enslaved people became increasingly affordable. The luxuriously dressed body of a household enslaved person became an ever more significant sign of leisured luxury in Zanzibar City during this period.²⁹ They functioned as *things* of conspicuous consumption; their use-value was not set in motion as labor on a plantation, but rather their bodies were recast as an aesthetic armature for their owner's

performance of wealth. Enslaved and concubine women, especially, were the most important component of a patrician or landowner's collection of worldliness and wealth. Once such a woman entered an urban household and her body was remade, it functioned as an aesthetic tableau of luxury. Photographs from this period document entire retinues of luxuriously dressed women that one might mistake for patrician ladies due to the wealth of their ornamentation – yet their heads and feet are bare. Sumptuously dressed in the most imported expensive silks and cottons, they would accompany patricians at various public festivals and processions. As they danced or marched through the narrow streets of the city the mass of their bedecked and bejeweled bodies literally transformed the material character of the city.

Throughout the nineteenth century, sumptuary laws meant to distinguish between the old elite families and new immigrants and enslaved persons weakened. The Swahili patrician elite had lost their prestige as the founders of Swahili culture already by the 1860s and, by the 1890s, with the establishment of the British Protectorate, the Arab sultan of Zanzibar had little real power. The global market and colonization also acted as a catalyst for the urban underclass to remake themselves by consuming forms of dress that were previously not available to them.³⁰ By the turn of the twentieth century recently manumitted peoples began to purchase things – commodities and arts of adornment – that were once the exclusive purview of freeborn merchants and landowners. As the work of Laura Fair has powerfully suggested, emancipation accelerated this process.

Within three years after the abolition of slavery [in 1897] the typical fashions seen in the isles had been radically transformed. As both men and women began to disassociate themselves from their heritage as slaves and claim new identities as free Swahili they appropriated new forms of clothing to give visible expression to their changing definitions of self.³¹

After the abolition of slavery the public display of one's body signaled a new social order. The formerly enslaved had the authority to dress and aestheticize their bodies. Europeans observed the importance of dress to the urban poor during the first decades of the twentieth century and they commented on how locals used their regular wages, however meager, to buy *kangas* and *kanzus*.³² Regular wage labor gave the urban underclass the means to simply buy the fashions they desired, instead of being dressed by their patrons or owners.

By the 1880s factory-produced cotton cloths called *kangas* and *lesos* became the most important commodity to urban women, both patrician and recently freed. They were sold in local markets by South Asian shopkeepers, but supplied by German, American, and British traders and exclusively produced in European factories for the East African market – but only after Zanzibari or Mombasan taste-makers were consulted.³³ In fact, many merchants, including Americans and Germans, bitterly complained that they were at the mercy of Swahili mercurial tastes, often arriving with an entire cargo of *kangas* only to discover that their styles had long been eclipsed by other designs. To counter this, one German merchant hired a famed fashionista living in Mombasa as his *kanga* consultant in the hopes of keeping up with women's changing tastes.³⁴

Yet what is rarely analyzed in the history of Swahili consumption is the fact that the *kanga* is a complex composite of both ancient and very recent ideas about the value

of body adornment and the constitutive relationship between manufactured goods and personhood. Clearly, the fact that fine imported cloth was once the exclusive purview of the freeborn patrician class made it desirable to newly emancipated urban residents. The *kanga* signaled Muslim propriety and becoming a Muslim was the first step in transforming oneself from an enslaved newcomer to an urbane sophisticate. The formal features of the *kanga* are inspired by Omani, Portuguese, or South Asian prototypes, but they were recast as a mass-produced form precisely because East African cultural and economic practices placed a premium on imported cloth. In fact, Sheryl McCurdy has recently suggested that inland Africans, such as Manyema women from present-day western Tanzania, shaped Zanzibari fashions and tastes as much as Arab or Indian Ocean cultures during the nineteenth century. These women, who had often experienced slavery and social dislocation, arrived in Zanzibar as concubines of wealthy merchants. They set about cultivating a reputation for being alluring, beautiful, and even dangerous. Strikingly, “good” Swahili and Arab women began to wear Manyema-style jewelry and a *kanga* designed to emulate the patterns of Manyema textiles became extremely popular all across the city.³⁵ Umbrellas and parasols imported from the USA were also coveted during the British Protectorate years. They were surely valued in part because Europeans promenaded about town with them, but they also offered an exciting new way to add another import to one’s performance of self. In a sense, new commodities, artifacts, fashions, visual vignettes – and even people – were always needed for the construction of Swahili personhood.

Portrait Photographs as Objects

Portrait photography was firmly established as a fundamental form of African creative practice by the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ As stated previously, portrait photographs entered Swahili visual culture by the 1860s, when South Asians from Goa first established permanent studios in Zanzibar and later also in Mombasa. Their studios were family businesses that initially produced images for postcards and portraits for European visitors, the colonial administration, and the court of the sultan. Initially only Europeans and the Sultanate elite commissioned portraits, but after the abolition of slavery a more diverse clientele began to ask and pay for studio portraits of themselves or members of their family.

Members of the elite, including Sultanate ruling classes, actively collected mounted carte de visite photographs of famous peoples and monuments throughout the Sultanate years.³⁷ Photography circulated through Swahili society along with other mass-produced image technologies, such as lithography. These mimetic and perspectival representational modes had few local precursors, although mirrors had been popular on the Swahili coast since the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, they became instantly popular in all port cities along the coast. The very profusion of photographic images gave East Africans a new medium through which to capture various performances of self. When local women began to commission photos of themselves and through the photographic encounter expressed their own logics of selfhood, they also began to participate in the globally circulating iconography of portraiture and codes of modern self-representation. The photo’s perspectival depths, its ability to act as a memento and artifact of vision, allowed locals to *see* other ways of self-representation. For example, portraits of female members of the sultan’s household (who were often

from East or Central Africa), now housed in the Zanzibar National Archives, clearly indicate that local women were comfortable posing for the camera. They easily performed European codes of feminine virtue and comportment, gesturing and posing like European women did in their portraits. Images show women wearing European high-necked lace dresses, whose silk bows, tied around their midriff, emphasized the contours of their body underneath. Their bodies are recast as a Victorian hourglass silhouette, a form completely different from Swahili fashions of the time, which emphasized the expansive volume and surface of the textiles themselves. The images also show the women perfectly inhabiting Victorian-era portraiture conventions. One such image shows a young woman demurely turning her body sideways, away from the camera's lens, as she contemplatively gazes to the left. The fingers of her left hand are elegantly propped against her cheek, while her right hand, adorned by a wrist-watch, rests casually in her lap. However staged or temporary such ways of presenting the self were, seeing and reproducing the poses and surfaces of European women allowed local women to engage faraway cultures in new ways. These images speak of the interpenetration of different codes of performing the cultured body during this period of heightened trade and travel.

Yet photography was also appropriated to reassert and give new life to very local practices. What made photography so compelling to coastal East Africans during the second half of the nineteenth century is the ability of the photograph's surface to document another surface: the dressed and aestheticized body. My emphasis on the surface of portrait photography is indebted to Christopher Pinney's analysis of post-colonial photographs as "images that project a materiality of the surface." In his work, which draws on Olu Oguibe's work on Nigerian photography's "substance," he argues that the "surficism" of Indian and West African popular photographic practices "becomes a site of refusal of the depth that characterized colonial representational regimes."³⁸ I seek to extend and reformulate his insights about surficism by locating its historic precursor. While his analysis is first and foremost concerned with understanding how postcolonial practices of self-fashioning negate colonial photographic codes, I want to suggest that on the Swahili coast "surficism" must be understood as the reification of precolonial cultural practices and values. It made temporary acts of self-adornment and comportment into permanent things. As discussed in the previous section, the body played a central role in presenting Swahili ideas about the civilizational order of their world. The richly dressed and ornamented body functioned as a symbol and object of mercantile wealth and sophistication. It was a tableau for the presentation of exotic imports and whoever controlled and amassed such bodies commanded wealth and political authority. Furthermore, free members of society controlled their own bodies, using slightly different codes of self-display than those available to their bonded or enslaved dependents, to project their autonomy. Photography's mimetic doubling therefore became a tool with which to hold onto to the materiality of the body in the form of another object, the photograph. As such an object, which also reached the coast through international networks of circulation, it too could be deployed as a sign of global connectivity. It was a multilayered object, since its indexical depth also carried within it the surface of the body that was also sheathed in exotic commodities.

Like other imported goods, such as furniture, chinaware, glass bowls, and vases, a photograph could be collected and displayed. The interior of people's homes functioned as a kind of museum for the display of such collections (Figure 5.1). Layered



FIGURE 5.1 Unknown photographer. Interior view of a stone mansion in Zanzibar, circa 1880s. Collection of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt, Cologne; 21.262.

assemblages of prestige objects played an important role in the town culture. Nineteenth-century photographs of merchant houses illustrate how Swahili patricians decorated their interiors. In these images the interiors are literally bristling with hundreds of imported objects, often the same object-type being repeated over and over in rows across shelves or hanging on walls. The photograph in Figure 5.1 features a domestic room in a stone mansion in Zanzibar. It was taken by Souza and Paul, one of many photography studios operating in Zanzibar and it documents the typical style of the Sultanate years, which I describe as “mercantile modern.” During the reign of Sultan Barghash (r. 1870–1888), when this image was taken, Swahili coast material culture was ever more influenced by the visual culture of the British Raj. Barghash was exiled to Bombay before the British allowed him to ascend to the throne and after he came to power he wanted to reproduce the splendor of Bombay on Zanzibar Island. As can be seen, Zanzibaris juxtaposed the latest technological innovations, such as European clockworks and electric lighting, with fashionable Anglo-Indian furniture designs from Goa. A version of this photograph was also published in a British newspaper, where the caption noted that “The conflict between Oriental and Western civilization is clearly discernible in the decorations of the chamber.” In fact, the conflict was felt by Western residents not locals. Europeans constantly derided what they understood as the *misuse* of “their” material culture. Travelogues and journals of this period are littered with anxieties about East Africans “simulating” Western ways. The photograph might have been staged and first and

foremost created for Western consumption, but it clearly documents the cultural codes and visual culture of its age. This young man, whether part of the Sultan's inner circle or not, certainly is exhibiting a sense of comfort with the cultural politics unfolding in Zanzibar. He is dressed in official Omani ceremonial garb, which included a multicolored turban and a long, black overcoat with gold embroidery. His body language is relaxed as he leans against the curve of the chair's back, extending his legs slightly before him. He causally holds a walking stick between his legs and gazes with calm certainty across his right shoulder. His posture and presence declares his confidence and authority. He is also surrounded by his collections of expensive furnishings, porcelain chinoiserie, and most importantly, photographs. This photograph therefore documents how portrait photographs were inserted into local spaces. Three large mounted portraits of men in Omani dress are displayed on the ornate cabinet on the left. A framed photograph also rests on the nightstand. Most likely the sitters in these photographs were family members or local rulers. As decorative objects these photographs sit at the edge of multiple logics of display. They are part of the historic Swahili coast desire for objects from "the elsewhere," yet they also display the body as a spectacle of the "real," and emplace a realist form of representation. After all, the ability of photography to inhabit the Swahili culture of things meant Swahili coast residents saw beyond the surface, so to speak, into the indexical depth of the photograph. It meant they understood the truth-telling conventions of photographic realism, since they were interested in having such image-objects because they represent people as things and in turn simulate things.

Modernity on the Edge

If we juxtapose those photographs meant for the colonial gaze discussed in the beginning of this chapter with images meant for local consumption, we can begin to complicate the way we think about photography as a space and object of selfhood in circulation. As a globally circulating sign, the portrait photo was an intelligible image readable by the diverse communities. "Local" and "colonial" image worlds clearly interpenetrated each other once urban residents began commissioning image-objects of themselves.

Photography was certainly a "global" or "Western" technology, but I would argue that it was not hybridized or localized on the Swahili coast, in the conventional sense of how localization is framed in studies of the cultural dimensions of globalization. As it is used by Africanists who privilege space over time, globalism overextrapolates the modernist map of world culture that is predicated on seeing a stable link between people, culture and place. But residents of port cities such as Zanzibar cultivated a cultural tactic that emphasized a sense of the deterritorial and nondiscrete and a desire for "the elsewhere." The complex reciprocities shaping Swahili praxis cannot be flattened into a study of a local/global dialectic because place-based authenticity is not seen as the "natural" state of things on the Swahili coast. Ultimately I want to suggest that Swahili aesthetic practice is not a question of localization, but a carefully crafted tactic of translation, where technologies of the self, such as photography, are appropriated to sustain in-betweenness and distance.

In turn, the photograph's attachment to North Atlantic modes of transacting autonomous personhood was also played with. Clearly, Zanzibaris did not want to be reduced

to a nameless object within colonizing representational regimes. The “distance” that marks colonial alterity was refused by cultivating the photograph’s thingness and playing with entirely different notions of distance, where photography’s origins in the distant imperial metropole make it interesting locally. The ability of the photograph to be deployed as an object of the self was also a site of tension and disavowal. Clearly, Swahilis recognized that the power of the photo rested somewhere at the interstices of its surface and its indexical depths. The portrait photograph allowed residents of the port to merge Swahili ideals of the cultured body, colonial codes of the body, and newly forming ideas about the individual subjectivity. None of these ideas about personhood can be demarcated as either wholly African, wholly colonial or foreign. Their overlapping interaction resists allowing us to apply the normative label of “alternative” modernity to Swahili coast portrait photography, since such a label suggests that a parallel and self-contained space was produced. Rather, in coastal East Africa photography functioned as a new and old performative space of the in-between.

Notes

- 1 Fabian (1983, 17–18).
- 2 The royal arts of Ife and Benin in Nigeria are studied in relationship to dynastic chronologies and stylistic change since they include objects created and used in the distant historical past.
- 3 The literature on African modernist art is expansive. Some of the key texts include Harney (2004); Deliss (1995); Oguibe and Enwezor (1999); Ogbechie (2008).
- 4 Hassan (1995); Okeke (1995).
- 5 Appadurai (1996); Gaonkar (2001); Gilroy (1993).
- 6 Harney (2004, 12).
- 7 For example, Okwui Enwezor argues that African modernism “is not founded on an ideology of the universal” because it is “internal” to Africa (2001, 12).
- 8 Pratt (1992).
- 9 Chakrabarty (2000).
- 10 Gaonkar (2001, 21).
- 11 Gaonkar (2001, 21).
- 12 Mignolo (2002, 57).
- 13 Trouillot (2002, 222).
- 14 Trouillot (2002, 221).
- 15 These large commercial plantations were established by the Omani elite. Although various forms of bondage have existed in East Africa for centuries, the unprecedented cruelty of modern plantation slavery forever changed the social-cultural landscape of the Swahili coast. To this day the violence of this history has left deep scars, and questions of who was ultimately responsible for the rise of slavery in the nineteenth century still impact contemporary relationships between various groups living in East Africa.
- 16 The annexation of Zanzibar by the Busaidi dynasty of Oman, a kingdom of the Persian Gulf, was supported by the British, who also choreographed the separation between Oman and Zanzibar in the 1850s. Another branch of the Busaidi family ruled Muscat and its Arab peninsula dominions and the sultan of Zanzibar paid an annual subsidy to the sultan of Oman. A clear independence of the two empires was not recognized until the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1890.

- 17 For analyses of the relationship between postcard photography, colonial desire, and the making of the exotic “Other” during the age of empire see Alloula (1986); Geary and Webb (1998).
- 18 Brielmaier (2003, ch. 1).
- 19 Ryan (1997); Edwards (1992); Geary and Pluskota (2003); Pinney (2011).
- 20 On the role of photography as an apparatus of state power and surveillance see Sekula (1986); Tagg (1988).
- 21 “Swahili” as an ethnic construct is largely the invention of the nineteenth-century colonial system. Swahili identities have been studied by countless scholars. For an analysis of the issue see Willis (1993); Glassman (2011).
- 22 Jeremy Prestholdt’s book *Domesticating the World* powerfully challenges the accepted idea that Africa played a passive and peripheral role in the global economy. Prestholdt (2008) considers how Swahili consumer desire shaped the making of a new global world order in the nineteenth century.
- 23 The Tumbatu and Hadimu, like the “autochthonous” residents of other Swahili port cities, claim to have ancient connections to Shiraz, a port town in present-day Iran. Initially they were classified as “Shirazi Swahilis” by the colonial administration because they refused to be called either Arab or “native.”
- 24 Bennett (1978, 106).
- 25 Wealthy Zanzibari landowners with access to British Raj banks emulated the slave plantation system of several French-owned islands in the Indian Ocean.
- 26 Prestholdt (2008, 93).
- 27 Miller (1988).
- 28 For an analysis of Swahili practices of gifting and feasting see Glassman (1995).
- 29 Prestholdt (2008, 118–121).
- 30 Prestholdt (2008, 100).
- 31 Fair (2004, 20).
- 32 Huebner and Sieberg (1998, 95).
- 33 Schmidt (1888, 83).
- 34 Huebner and Sieberg (1998, 95).
- 35 McCurdy (2006, 466–469).
- 36 Haney (2010, 57).
- 37 Prestholdt (2008, 95).
- 38 Pinney (2003, 202).

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African Reimaginings Presence, Absence, and New Way Architecture

Ikem Stanley Okoye

A dominant and (thankfully) easy to disregard assumption about modern architecture in Africa ascribes modernity's presence and origin to Europeans (and to Europe itself).¹ The modern architecture proposed or produced as Africa's modern architecture by Europeans from the 1950s onward, however, can hardly claim any authority.² A second, though still emergent, narrative looks to Brazil for modernity in Africa. This proposition may be more credible, but in reality it is no less problematic. Post-Abolition black Brazilians who returned to the continent produced noteworthy architecture (known variously as "Brazilian," Afro-Brazilian, or Brazilian-African) in coastal West Africa;³ its dramatic qualities and history lend it greater legitimacy as *African* modernity. Nevertheless, this chapter suggests that the qualities of this African architecture derive not only, or even primarily, from Brazil, but from the historical architecture(s) of West and Central Africa.⁴ As is true for all modern architecture, "Brazilian" architecture in Africa frames tradition in order to act as foil from which to differ or depart. Contrary to previous writers' paradigms, which hold that this architecture's main characteristic is an imported sensibility, I assert that it is African – and that like all modern architecture it maintains an equivocal relationship with prior histories. In other words, it is possible to argue that the "Brazilian" architecture of Africa is this region's founding modern architecture, but this requires that we first cease to understand it as Brazilian.

There is now no question that, by the nineteenth century at the very latest, many African cultures (especially those on and near the coast) were involved in a search for the new, or for what we have come to describe as the modern. These African cultures were no less concerned with innovation than were other contemporary coastal and near coastal cultures in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. As in European modernism, dreams and definitions of the modern in Africa appropriated existing arts of others. Thus, Africans significantly reimaged the new and did so in part thanks to things European and Asian.⁵ New imagination was brought to both the "traditional,"⁶ and

to architectural practice that was decidedly new.⁷ My brief exploration of the African new – what I will loosely label *new way* architecture – challenges our familiar understandings of modernity, if not even the idea of “modernity” itself.

Although Europe offered certain possibilities for this new imagination, for one category of *new way* architecture Brazil offered an even richer source. Brazil as significant inspirational field was available earlier than things European and present during more crucial moments. It especially took hold in the coastal worlds west of the Bight of Biafra. Its influence was partially due to the fact that black and mixed race Brazilians, who claimed the status of “returnees,” were to insert themselves into existing African communities in ways unavailable to most Europeans. They joined local communities, including those consisting of expatriates from Sierra Leone and Jamaica. Europeans, for fear of “going native,” were far less inclined to pursue such modes of incorporation.⁸ We shall come to understand why this returnee impact proved productive for (not to mention attractive to) local African cultures where it found fertile ground.

In many African cities on the West African and Central African coasts and interior, one occasionally encounters “Brazilian style architecture” that survived a past in which such buildings were more plentiful. Buildings include houses, mansions, business premises, and religious edifices, both mosques and churches. Nevertheless, this architecture does a very different kind of work in Africa than its supposed equivalent in Brazil. The “Brazilian” architectural presence in Badagry (now in Nigeria) or Whydah (now in the Republic of Benin) is a random dispersal of isolated and often idiosyncratic buildings compared to the dense, deep, insistent, street-enclosing wall of facades Brazilian architecture creates in small towns of provincial Bahia, Alagoas, or Pernambuco. The urban space-forming character of surviving Brazilian Baroque architecture is systemically unlike the spatially dispersed architecture we call “Brazilian” in Africa. For in Brazil this architecture is and was plentiful. It was the context itself, the ground against which the modern was posed. In Africa this architecture, albeit transformed, exploits an existing ground in order to emerge as modern. Like the occasional festival in the calendar, the broadly carnivalesque character of Africa’s “Brazilian” architecture is, in other words, about the singular display of flamboyance in a context of ordinary buildings. This is the most obvious difference between African “Brazilian” and Brazilian architecture. The joyous rediscovery of the “Brazilian” survivals in African cities has not led to scrutiny of this difference in the post-1980s scholarship. This lack of scrutiny has implications for the deployment of Brazil in constructing the history of modern architecture in Africa, and these are the subjects of this investigation.

The Scenario for a New History of the Modern

A couple of issues should be noted. First, as a phenomenon, architecture possesses an internal history that might seem to go against the grain of its larger political context. We cannot assume that cultures produce their great architecture at the same time that they excel in other arenas, or that cross-cultural influences in architecture are unidirectional. Influence in architecture does not necessarily move from affluent or “advanced” societies to societies “below” them. Indeed, the recognition of an internal history with its own logic is precisely why the history of architecture exists as a

discipline and why what they do is very different from what historians specializing in other fields (e.g., political or social history) may do when they too have told their stories using buildings.

Compared with the ways in which “Brazilian style architecture” molds and visually defines urban space in Brazil itself, its African presence seems sparse and dispersed, but decidedly insistent. For African builders and their patrons it is precisely the tantalizing aura of “Brazilian” architecture’s singularity in the African landscape that would pique the interest of a culture *already* seeking an avenue into something new. Its function as a catalyst may be the true value of the presence of things Brazilian to the history of architecture in Africa. We suspect that this architecture initially seemed strange, yet simultaneously familiar, and that it was in this tension that a new architecture arose. To complicate the matter, the new African architecture that emerged as a result, may be mistaken for the close replicas of Brazilian buildings that *were* erected in the same contexts, because the differences between the two types of architecture – that is between Brazilian architecture in Africa and “Brazilian” architecture in the same places, have yet to be fully considered and elaborated. That said, my account will focus on locating the basis for defining early modern architecture in Africa in the distinction and synergies between Brazilian and African tradition; it thus rejects narratives that present Africa’s modernity as response to Europe’s imposition and presence. The reason this early history has been overlooked, I think, is that the new architecture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West and Central Africa was ultimately overcome by a different modern architecture, one that now fills the field’s small crop of historical papers and history books.⁹

All modernities involve an assertive rebellion against tradition, although, in hindsight, such an upheaval can be recognized as being itself indebted to the tradition it tries to overcome. Typically, artists in their various localities, already seeking new ideas, founded modernity on the often crass incorporation of forms and ideas from distant cultures and historical periods. In this sense we have misidentified the phenomenon of the modern in the architecture of Africa. Even the most critical, engaged or thoughtful of those we regard as modern architects, say Kenneth Scott in Ghana, or Maxwell Fry (or later Alan Vaughan-Richards) in Nigeria, were in fact late arrivals on the local modern scene. In effect, their modern architecture and urbanism, framed within the dynamics of colonial power, was inserted by Europeans into African nations on the eve of independence.¹⁰ It encountered – and struggled to suppress – Africa’s already unfolding cultures of new architecture, including the outcome of the dynamic juxtaposition of traditional Brazilian and traditional African architectures.

This anticipated a face-off with several possible outcomes: views of modernity as a result of juxtaposition of Brazil and “Guinea” (as that part of Africa is known in the New World), or modernity as a consequence of relations between Europe and Guinea; the first grounded in claims to proto-nationalism and nostalgia,¹¹ the second born in the false altruism of colonialism.¹² The encounter pitted things Brazilian, already beholden in their origins to “impurity,” against things European.¹³ Europeans, claiming the sole right to define modernity, thus challenged what Africans, in their contact with Brazil and with Brazilian émigrés, had already produced for themselves as a viable possibility for the future of architecture *here*.

Put another way, I suggest that a process that had commenced in the 1860s or earlier had reached its end point by the 1930s. Architecture I label *new way*,¹⁴ Africa’s historically unrecognized first “modern” architecture – motivated by a hunger for the

unfamiliar – lost out to an imperial idea that declared itself the only possibility for “futurity,” that is for proclaiming the very idea of architecture’s stylistic future. Bearing the title “modern,” this later European-derived architecture was in this context rarely an architecture of experiment, hybridity, or revolutionary ideals, but was instead accompanied by the uncompromising, wholesale, “take it or leave it” attitude of colonial and early postcolonial culture in general.

Africa’s *new way* architecture was ultimately overcome by the neocolonial modernism of *African* nationalists, which means that Africans assisted in the victory of architecture that was modern in European terms (particularly International Style Modernism). This irony should not be lost on us. Those who fought for and secured independence in essence extended ideas partly put in place by the imperium. Indeed *that* particular architecture was nothing if not the architecture of national identity produced on the backs of borrowed monetary credit.¹⁵ The “modern architecture of Africa” (created by foreign architects or first generation professional African architects) was not a dialogical outcome of global modernism (I have demonstrated this in a case study in relation to Nigeria),¹⁶ but rather of tactics that warned of the failure of the postcolonial state before its self-identity was secured.

The issues I want to tackle here are further complicated by the fact that the buildings erected in the late nineteenth century by immigrant Black Brazilians before their progressive assimilation into the larger body politic differ from the *new way* architecture that emerged subsequently. To extend an African, not Brazilian, identity to the first phase of Africa’s architectural modernity, we need therefore to separate the first *new way* architecture from both the architecture of Brazil, and the architecture of the first Brazilian “returnees.” Interestingly, while the residential and commercial architecture of the “returnees” resembles that of Brazil’s elites of a slightly earlier period, this is not true of religious architecture, the form of building that defines the Brazilian Baroque par excellence. African “Brazilian” churches and mosques do not, in other words, resemble their counterparts in Brazil. Put even more directly, unlike houses and business premises, the churches and mosques of Lagos or Porto Novo or Cotonou look like they “do” their Brazilian, that is to say perform their Brazilianness like icing on a cake, the cake itself being either completely original, or borrowed from sources that seem only indirectly to be of Brazil. The question, then, is why?

The Palace and the Mosque

Two buildings (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2) can serve as our anchors. They were erected in the large conurbation of Lagos, Nigeria; only one of them remains extant. The surviving building is the residence of a minor prince in the Yoruba firmament of principalities. The other, destroyed in the late 1980s, was a mosque.

My account of modernity will focus on three of their architectural elements, often conjoined: the post (or column), the wall, and the courtyard. These architectural elements lie at the heart of traditional southern Nigerian architecture, but are equally essential to traditional architecture from Sierra Leone to the Congo. I argue that it is their radical transformation that produced architectural modernity in these regions. This chapter then is not on the sociological or historical context that produced certain kinds of formal innovation, important though such contexts are for a different kind of narrative; rather, it is on the architecture itself. Understanding these two buildings,



FIGURE 6.1 Jinadu Elegbede. Interior “courtyard” at the Ijora Palace, Lagos, Nigeria, 1922. Undated photograph, copyright J. D. Ojeikere.



FIGURE 6.2 Joas Baptista da Costa. Shitta Bey Mosque, front façade, Lagos, Nigeria, 1892. Undated photograph by Alan Vaughan-Richards, copyright Vaughan-Richards Estate, Lagos, Nigeria.

their fates, and the outcomes for these particular architectural elements, is to understand something about this other story of modernity.

The formal differences that we find in Africa that distinguish the secular architecture of royal residences, elite mansions, and houses, commercial buildings and shops, from the sacred architecture of churches and mosques¹⁷ are not sustained to anywhere near the same degree (if at all) in the architecture of Brazil, a sure sign of a significant transformation that dispels the notion that the earliest modern architecture in Africa is merely “Brazilian.”

The Palace of the Oloja of Ijora

Set within a dense urban world constituted by impoverished descendants of the indigenous populations of Lagos,¹⁸ the Afin Ijora,¹⁹ the palace of the oloja of Ijora (the king of the Ijora section of Lagos), confronts the viewer. It is a (1922) creation of a local builder, Jinadu Elegbede, whose name suggests he was Yoruba and Muslim.²⁰ The palace’s deceptive sense of modesty and simultaneous sense of the spectacular is a characteristic of traditional Yoruba royal architecture in general. The building is modest, because, like the traditional palace, Ijora’s is not a multistory building; yet it is spectacular, because it projects a sense of liveliness, movement, joyful color, and newness. Its verandah and defining portals mark the entrances to a single major courtyard within. It thus pays tribute to the traditional, though vaster palaces of ancient Yoruba kingdoms,²¹ which possessed a far larger number of courtyards.²² The entrances of the nineteenth-century palaces of the emir of Ilorin,²³ or of other Yoruba kings from Ketu to Ile-Ife, offered what to modern eyes appears as unkempt shabbiness. This feature was intentional. It was “designed” to induce a sense of anxiety: those approaching the palace were to read such apparent “dejection” as a sign of awesome power within.

In contrast, the palace at Ijora seems sedate rather than *dreadful*, inviting rather than evoking fear or trepidation. It retains the verandah and portal, but its verandas are now articulated by a colonnade of semicircular arches. Their elaborate supporting piers, like the detailing of the façade at the portals, speak of an architectural world radically different from the densely packed urban accumulation of nondescript plastered cement-block houses surrounding the palace. When first erected in its present form, the palace would have been understood as forward looking and futuristic.

Its colonnades are supported by plastered brick piers. Unlike the wooden pillars of the traditional Yoruba palace, they have none of the signification of traditional sculptural schemas with their haunting, jesting, contrasting volumes of light and dark; these schemas entailed characters from historic hunters to mythological figures that communicated formal messages about the moral order, culture, history, and politics.²⁴ The Ijora piers also depart from the tradition of Benin, where posts that were square or rectangular in profile, sometimes plain and sometimes densely covered in low relief, were common.²⁵ At Ijora, pillars are clean, luxuriant, brilliant, and almost scintillating, topped by acanthuses. Certainly, the piers at the Ijora palace are not beholden to the established orders of European classical architecture stabilized centuries earlier. Rather, Jinadu Elegbede, who may not have known the genealogy of European classicism, was playful in his approach to the classical vocabulary. We might regard his design as a riff on the idea of nature, perhaps seeing the column as a tree trunk sprouting leaves.

The overriding layout of the palace centers on two- and three-room deep spaces that surround a large internal courtyard open to the skies. Corrugated metal roofs shelter its galleries on all four sides; they have long since replaced an original thatch (or possibly shingle) roof. The inward slopes of the roof frame a lightwell smaller than the space of the courtyard itself. Courtyards like this one are also present within the spaces of the Idungunran Palace, the residence of the Oba of Eko (Lagos proper), a political superior to the Oloja. These types of Lagosian courtyard are closer, stylistically, to the impluvium courtyards of the historical architecture of the kingdom of Benin than to the royal architecture of other parts of Yorubaland, a sign that both Eko and Ijora were once under Benin's suzerainty.²⁶

Less visible than this impluvium is another courtyard set in the interior of the house proper (Figure 6.1), one that is *not open to the skies*. This section of the house appears to be an addition, or the transformation of a small section of a traditional design that was undertaken well after the palace's completion, and thus marks a further and more significant shift towards new ideas. It is certainly interesting that like countless examples of innovation in Europe or America, here too crucial experimentation occurs first in the small scale arena of an addition or renovation.

This internal addition to a space within the Ijora palace does more than abandon the openness to the sky that distinguished the Benin idea of the impluvium. The columns are especially noteworthy. Surrounding the "courtyard," as already mentioned, they are quite unlike what one would have encountered in Benin or in the Yoruba worlds for many centuries prior to 1910.²⁷ But the pillars in this internal courtyard depart as well from comparable European traditions. Their rather fat forms display their difference. Bursting over the restraining surface of the columns is a profusion of beautiful tendrils and foliage that may also be seen in other examples of this modern architecture. This feature particularly evokes aspects of the "Nigerian" courtyard at Afin Ikere – a palace usually seen as a modern interpretation of traditional palace sculpture and architecture. At Ijora, moreover, the courtyard's columns sit almost precariously at the edge of the highest step. This placement, closer to a traditional African one than to either the European or Brazilian preference, encapsulates what earlier I had described as modernism's birth in the tension between Europe and Brazil. Their bulbous, flower bud-like bases also contradict the very idea of them being an anchor for stability. This addition to an already existing building is an impressive and original work that begs several questions.

How are we to understand this palace building from 1922? In what sense exactly must we understand it as modern? And, why has next to nothing been written about it, or the many other buildings that are even more striking in appearance or presence, when the story of architecture in the African twentieth century is told?

The Shitta Bey Mosque

The Shitta Bey Mosque (Figure 6.2), built in 1892, is older by some 30 odd years than the twentieth-century incarnation of the Afin Ijora.²⁸ Unlike the palace, built by a Yoruba builder for a Yoruba ruler who was nevertheless operating in a European colonial world, the mosque was built by Brazilian émigré, Joas Baptista da Costa, and funded by a single patron, Mohammed Shitta Bey, a Creole immigrant to Lagos from Sierra Leone. The idea of a mosque would have been new in Lagos in 1892, and this was its first representative. Here da Costa confronted a problem not faced by Muslim

architects²⁹ in places further north (from the Yoruba city of Ilorin to the ancient Muslim centers of Kano and Katsina beyond the Yoruba world): How could he mark the mosque as different from the church – that is, how could he make it recognizable as a religious building while still identifying it as a place of prayer for Muslims visiting from elsewhere (including from northern Nigeria)? The building he constructed, which eventually came to embody the idea of a mosque for the inhabitants of Lagos, is not unlike the many pitch-roofed shed-like church buildings *sans* bell tower which, though now absent from the city itself,³⁰ continued as the typical church building across southern Nigeria for several more decades. That single-ridged, gable-ended form itself may have derived from the form of a commercial warehouse.³¹

Da Costa overcomes contextual limitations by taking the shed he had been handed, and in effect furnishing it with what could be read as 14 minarets. Four of these, the more familiar number, are located at corners, and separated from the building by a single arched bay that lets them be considered the real minarets. The 10 others have been placed atop the building's front and rear pediments. Together with the swirling moldings that line and define the building's upper edges, they individualize a modest building, turning it into something we cannot easily ignore. From the constraints of this predominantly Christian and colonial environment dominated by a few towering belfries, da Costa invented a new form of the mosque for West Africa, one that, while successfully distilling key signs of the mosque as a type, also inserts an original design into this emergent coastal cityscape.

Lacuna and History

Art historians' discomfort with what Africans produced as art in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, their uneasiness with locating innovation within art history's global narratives,³² extends to writing the history of African architecture in the same era. I will suggest that in this "architectural history,"³³ to the extent that it exists, we can note this discomfort by a particular absence in writing about "the modern." What is the nature of this absence? Can the terrain of its gap be reconfigured in order to better represent the twentieth-century landscape?

This absence is significant particularly since the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century structures are gems of a new sensibility. They are conceptually original architecture emerging in contexts that are uncontestedly modern. Their omission from modernity's account is probably due to nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European attitudes towards writing. Europeans then assigned written texts *a reality*. In this early colonial context, once a written account was inserted in the histories, it could only be displaced with difficulty, and the earliest accounts of buildings in Africa did not see them as architecture. Europeans did not recognize qualities that signaled intellectual culture, were unaware of local architectural debates, and failed to perceive the memories these buildings encapsulated.

Their accounts instead describe needs-based, utilitarian, and habitual structures produced from the simplest of materials.³⁴ Constructed against the backdrop of the ideologies of slavery and colonialism, and their intentional stripping of humanity from Africans, such accounts were often written by extremely young and therefore (in the circumstances) quite arrogant European men. Once committed to text, these notions achieved a kind of silent authority that saw them creep inadvertently into the

intellectual perspectives of subsequent and far more sophisticated and ambitious writing.³⁵ That, however, must be the subject of a different essay. Nevertheless, I must note here that, well into the 1980s, Africa (including its architecture) was defined as a place or phenomenon that was more or less unchanging, that valued permanence and immutability, and that actively resisted transformation. Europeans surmised that Africa had no history, had value neither *for* history nor for its production.³⁶ Furthermore, bearing in mind that early observers had described Africa's buildings merely in terms of utilitarian shelter-making, it made sense to many later authors that Africans had no architecture.³⁷ One would despair, unless, as mentioned at the outset, we remind ourselves that all history is about whose accounts have survived, and their narratives should not be confused with what "actually happened."

Much of the "what actually happened" in Africa, architecturally speaking, is lost for the very reason that structures were generally not created from permanent materials – and sometimes, we know, this transience appears to have been intentional on the part of Africans.³⁸ The current narrative of the history of architecture is also, in other words, not a narrative of what actually happened within any intellectual cultural context, but of what architecture survived.³⁹

Removals and Reinstallations

The Shitta Bey Mosque and the Ijora Palace renovation enact two phases of the production of the earliest modern architecture in Africa. I have indicated that neither are Brazilian as such, and I have suggested what is different about them in relation to architecture in Brazil. Although Jinadu is clearly Nigerian, not Brazilian, we are less certain of the details of da Costa's life, despite my description of him as a Brazilian émigré. It is not yet known whether he was Brazilian born, or was instead originally from Africa and was taken to Brazil, after which he then returned to what was to him an unfamiliar land. Even if da Costa was a Brazilian born of African parentage (in other words, even if his ancestors had been Africans traded to Brazil), we cannot but understand "returns" such as his as *performing a modernity*. Modernism in this exchange has to be understood as something that traveled both ways, in the sense that Africans in the African and the American locations transformed radically those things that they brought each other. Thus, Baroque-style architecture in Brazil was itself already a hybrid before its journey to Africa (it incorporated African elements to begin with), and the *new way* architecture was, in other words, truly birthed in Africa, a notion that will get full play below.

Insight into both the Africanness and the modernity of buildings like Shitta Bey and Afin Ijora commences with a recognition of the performance of modernity which had involved the historically understated but crucial "return" of Brazilians in droves to Africa. In the Americas, brotherhoods known as *cabildos* were organized around reestablished or reinvented claims to Yoruba, Fon, or Igbo ancestry; inventions that were, at a secondary level, again radically modern.⁴⁰ A third level marking the modernity of this architecture is the fact that these returns were enacted in European colonial places, and in Lagos these spaces had been colonized for barely 40 years. Why did the Brazilians, including builders like da Costa, come to Africa and how did they (and he) survive?

Although the successful entrepreneurs who set up shop as intermediaries between Africa and Brazil are better known, the majority of immigrants from Brazil typically

found work as skilled laborers, including as the builders of the new imperium.⁴¹ Brazilian immigrants who were employed on projects such as the one commissioned for the Supreme Court buildings area in Lagos⁴² were partially responsible both for the construction of colonial architecture and for the fact that their Brazilian architecture would also inspire *new way* architecture. One needs to understand that, in any African colonial landscape, the *new way* architecture produced by its turn of the nineteenth-century Luso-African communities⁴³ features elements, such as abacus-topped columns on bases, that were also found on government buildings such as courthouses, albeit that in the latter context the presentation of these elements was in a more stripped down, austere manner. Unlike the buildings on which they labored for the British, and for other European interlopers, buildings that the rapidly assimilated African Brazilians erected for themselves were unrestrained and exuberant – often highly colorful next to the bland monochrome of European colonial architecture.

Earnings from work in a colonial context, often for the administration but also for private enterprise, made it fiscally possible for the immigrants to eventually erect private residences, business establishments, and religious structures. The buildings had heavily pitched roofs and were also often built in brickwork and frequently plastered. Though these were often small scale in the early period (the late nineteenth century), immigrants were soon in a position to commission buildings of significance. In addition to residences and business premises, these included places of worship and socialization such as buildings for social clubs and churches. Emigrés also built mosques, for among the returned Brazilians were a significant number of Muslims, who perhaps worshipped with Muslim Hausa soldiers of the colonial West African Frontier Force garrisoned in Lagos.⁴⁴ The Shitta Bey Mosque is one such structure, and the earliest. Other mosques followed of which a few are no less interesting architecturally (even though they have also been destroyed).⁴⁵

British, French, Belgian, and German colonial architecture lacks the marvelous, highly ornamented joie de vivre of this new African architecture. The slowly emerging scholarship on this period makes their differences crisp. Like colonial architecture, the buildings commissioned and built by new African urban communities⁴⁶ (such as the Ijora palace), often had balustraded verandahs and balconies that were elevated in some manner, or attached to the second level of the structure. These were hallmarks of a kind of new civility. Osasona has indicated how *new way* balconies, to stick with this elemental example, were not the minimalist enclosures of imperial architecture, but incredible opportunities for the display of formally exuberant objects, each baluster achieving a presence comparable to the individually carved posts of Yoruba palaces.⁴⁷ Balconies thus display a virtuosity that extended to other architectural elements, such as the arches framing them.

The *new way* architecture possessed windows that were just as likely to be framed by some kind of a molding. Often striking in the *new way* architecture was its attitude towards the enclosing “skin” of its elements. Their surfaces seem to communicate their status as massive containers that are intent on the rhetoric of structure as plastic containment for thick fluids. This elemental language departs from both the worlds of earlier African forms and their European equivalents. Even the way these buildings encountered the public sphere, that is how their entrances and exits operated in relation to the streets surrounding their colonial plots of land, spoke of an urban tradition in many ways removed from both these worlds. The architecture of coastal West

Africa can still be recognized for its connection to historic architecture in Brazil and Cuba, while also representing the idea of “modernity.”

Text plays an unusual role in the new emergent architecture. Inscriptions, written in both a local language and in the colonial lingua franca, typically announce owners and dates of completion with an accompanying adage or two. On the two buildings featured here, the text is in Yoruba and English. This may derive, interestingly, from the Islamic penchant for writing on buildings. Occasionally, as in the small towns around Port Harcourt and Yenogoa in Nigeria, the surfaces of buildings were completely covered over with ornamentation, as if this was in itself a marker of identity.

New way architecture was a colorful hybrid language, historically comparable to that which generated the language spoken by its makers. Given the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese global trading networks, Portuguese creoles and patois incorporate everything from Indian words to African syntaxes. These languages were a pretty mixed up affair next to the Portuguese “mother tongue.” What we are describing as the modern architecture of Africa resembled the language of Portuguese trade, going back to one of the places from which its constituents had originated in order to be reinstalled. The process of reinstallation had its surprises, the architecture becoming, like language, transformed all over again into something that Brazilians in turn would only vaguely understand. In this new African home, moreover, this language, this architecture, also comes to be seen, at least initially, as completely unconnected to one of its mother tongues – Africa’s own indigenous architecture, such as that of the kingdom of Benin or of the many Yoruba kingdoms.

Some of the earliest Brazilian-style buildings located in Africa are almost fully rendered reproductions of the once common buildings of Rio de Janeiro and San Salvador, Bahia. This is especially the case where the comparison is to secular buildings – that is private residences, shops, and other commercial enterprises. Interestingly, however, this is not as true for the sacred buildings, especially so for those erected later by the originators of the *new way* architecture. The period churches and mosques of Lagos and Badagry are, in other words, not like the churches and mosques of Brazil. It is an interesting question, this bifurcation, giving entry to other histories. Nevertheless, for the residences and commercial houses whose formal language can be traced to Brazil, and for the sacred architecture whose formal language generally cannot, many of their architectural details may still originate in the Baroque architecture of Portugal (and, to some degree, Spain and Italy as well).⁴⁸

The story of this hybrid architecture, with its repeated departures and returns elsewhere, repeatedly leaving one location and emerging in another quite changed, is in essence the story of this modern African architecture. Early examples of houses and mosques include the two with which this chapter started. As one develops a sense of their chronology, it is striking to realize that they are more in dialogue one with the other here on the African coast, than they are with their Brazilian sources of initial inspiration. This should not be surprising. As time passes more and more of their builders and patrons were born locally. Even those not born in Africa (a group decreasing exponentially with time), would have been encountering traditional architectures of the worlds they had come to inhabit – among others Fante, Evhe, Fon, Yoruba, Edo, Izhon, Douala, Fang, and Kongo. The architectural languages of these worlds came to be absorbed into the new style and practices of architecture. At several levels the *new way* and the colonial architectures are comparable, yet it was only the *new way* that devolved into a distinctive set of practices.

Invisibility and Difference

Curiously, as noted above, this architecture was not included in the first surveys of modern architecture in Africa, whether it was built or commissioned by native non-Lusophone Africans, Brazilians, Cubans, Sierra Leoneans, or their immediate Africa-born descendants. This is doubly surprising given that these buildings were visible, and in some contexts dominated the landscape. Given their flamboyance, they were difficult to miss. They were, however, clearly not *seen* by scholars, just as they are not represented in the few surveys of African architecture.⁴⁹ Such narration, as commentary, description, and history, includes only occasionally the architecture of colonial governments and the churches and schools erected in their territories. Nor for that matter, do they include the new, nontraditional buildings produced in the same era by and for Africans.

This observation leads to a couple of questions. First: Why was this sophisticated architecture invisible to architectural historians? For example, why do histories of foundational modernity in architecture (1890s up to 1930 or so) not include examples by Africans? The second question: Why does the residential architecture of the “returnees” resemble that of Brazil’s elites of a slightly earlier period but the same symmetry does not occur with religious architecture, which defines the Brazilian Baroque par excellence? Put even more directly, why do the churches and mosques of Lagos, Whydah, or Cotonou look like they “do Brazilian” like icing on a cake (while the cake itself seems either completely original, or borrowed from sources that seem only indirectly to be of Brazil)? I will address these questions, beginning with the latter. In so doing, I present here a concept of the modern that rejects the narratives that see African architectural modernity as instigated by Europe’s imposition and presence, and as emerging as a reaction or outcome to both. I want to suggest, in other words, that it is possible to remove the history of modernity in Africa from the European tendency to claim it.

Doing Brazilian

Let me first explore *new way* buildings beyond the public face they present, for it is a too rapid reading of the facade that maintains their Brazilian identity. There are ways in which this focus on facades and appearances mask a different and more profound reality. In a building that otherwise looks purely Brazilian, what is crucial is the typology of spaces, as well as how such a layout anticipates how a structure was intended to be used.

The architectural masking that has sustained Brazilian identities indicates, in fact, only that its owners wanted to communicate that their buildings were distinctive (and modern) within the colonial landscape. The migrants and their immediate descendants were asserting an identity connected to Brazil. Masking a house as Brazilian was especially evident in the next generation still claiming this difference. Nevertheless, on the basis of the layout of their houses, all *lived* as members of an Afro-Brazilian community who were becoming Africans, and their lives progressively became indistinguishable from those of the new crop of urban Africans who had never left the continent.

Quite a number of the buildings that have been labeled Brazilian incorporate the idea of the internal courtyard, an element I have already indicated as central to the

architecture of the Yoruba, and the Edo of Benin, well before the homecoming of the Brazilians. So, for instance, the courtyard of the palace at Ijora, built for a member of a traditional elite by a Yoruba builder who likely had Brazilian connections, is a radical overturning of the impluvium-type courtyard of the kingdom of Benin. The architectural intervention at Ijora brings the courtyard indoors as a room, and disconnects its formalism from the symbolisms of the sculpted columns and posts of both Bini and Yoruba architecture. It strips them of religious import, but maintains their dialogue with structure that was formerly present. As such, the courtyard at Ijora sports a new architectural vocabulary.⁵⁰ It is an invention that communicates modernity in the traditional sphere (apart from European colonialism); here it operates for an elite whose own culture, too, was adjusting to new ways of being African.

This interpretation also explains the different attitudes to sacred architecture. The Brazilians returned to Africa in order, at some level, to live the kinds of African lives they could not have in Brazil. Some were indeed descendants of those expelled to West Africa after the Muslim-led slave uprising in Bahia during 1835.⁵¹ However, because the Brazilian immigrants were, unlike most coastal African populations in this era, either Christians or Muslims, the Brazilians were also intent on moving their African brethren away from local religious practices. Of course, their own affiliation with these world religions was sustained in the name of modernity and progress.⁵²

So, one should read neither the façades of churches and mosques nor their overall form, as communicating Brazilianness. Rather, especially for the mosques, their exuberance outdoes even that of their closest peers in Brazil. This to a lesser extent is true for churches, and for reasons we can understand.⁵³ Their inventiveness recalls a key quality of much religious building in the traditional African world (attitudinally rather than in terms of stylistic resemblance)⁵⁴; they were conceived as places for communal meeting. In other words, they were spaces of sociability, and in this sense provided focus and cohesion for communities that were immersed in larger worlds perceived as threatening their unique identities. Yet their structures remained recognizable as church or mosque. The buildings successfully ensured that the mosque not be mistaken for a church and vice versa, and that this message reached its incredibly diverse and complex audience. Even the structure that comes closest to risking this confusion, the Great Mosque at Porto Novo (c.1912), would make a very strange church indeed; it has no entrances at the key locations of egress, while the main entrance is in the wall enclosing the covered single level courtyard.⁵⁵

Overwriting the Vernacular Script

We must return to the question about why these buildings are absent from the history of modern architecture broadly speaking, and why they do not even represent an “early modern” in surveys of the history of African architecture. How could scholars have not included these buildings in their first accounts of the early colonial city? What magic wand made them disappear for so many years (when they were so clearly visible), and then made them appear again as historical monuments (after many of them had been demolished)? An answer lies in the very processes and traces of European *representation*, specifically in how, and through what process, the architecture of Africa was archived.

When the earliest commentators wrote on the subject of architecture in Africa in broad terms, the buildings under discussion were literally invisible. They are simply

absent in such texts. When scholars produced, instead, interpretations and analyses of specific architectural forms in Africa, they chose to work on “traditional” architecture. Others, including those trained as modernists, interpreted colonial and postcolonial architecture, including buildings for the colonial governments, for Christian missions and (later) for the newly independent. The architectural modernity invented by Africans was not given a place in any of these narratives.

Traditional architecture and colonial architecture formed, of course, the general landscape of buildings into whose interstices *new way* architecture was inserted. Whereas Europeans had, for centuries, erected structures at coastal locations leased to them, one could argue that these settlements were often separate from the places in which African populations lived. When Brazilians came to the western coasts of Africa, they generally set themselves up in African communities. In the vicinity of Lagos and Badagry, which also extends to nearby Porto Novo and Cotonou, Africans who were *neither* émigrés from Brazil *nor* locals were usually housed in the architecture of the Yoruba speakers with whom they shared the civic space.⁵⁶ Before the era that brought in the Brazilians, houses would have been produced in high maintenance materials including wattle or clay. Typically their roofs would have been thatched. The nature of building materials hardly determines the complexity or sophistication of a structure, and should not determine architectural merit or historical importance. Although anthropologists seem to have understood this, architectural historians fell mainly silent on the matter. To the extent they paid African architecture any attention, they did so for reasons including its use in regard to theories of architectural development such as Gottfried Semper’s, proposing the idea of “the primitive hut.”⁵⁷ Semper’s notion was connected to the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, but was applied to Africa.

As for the new buildings appearing among traditional structures in early colonial Nigeria, that is from the 1860s (Lagos) onward, no commentary appears until the 1960s. And for decades before, this architecture had continued to evolve, now patronized by the immediate descendants of the Brazilians who were largely the offspring of “mixed marriages” with local women. They were by now even more visible, their numbers having grown, and yet they remain invisible to those surveying the landscapes of African architecture. Of course a disinterested discipline could have evaluated them for their “aesthetics,” for their unique beauty, for the serenity some possess, for their fitness for their place and function, for their relationships with authority and power, to their understanding of mechanics and structure (in the engineering sense), to culture, to history, and even to a society’s intellectual or political history. The history of architecture failed to do so.⁵⁸ Why?

In hindsight, it was critical that the moment producing the first commentaries on African architecture (the first attempts even to imagine the landscapes of buildings in Africa as identifiably *architectural*) coincided with the invention of the idea of the vernacular and its several variants as a category of architectural cognition. It is not usually understood that what we have come to know as vernacular was an outcome of nineteenth-century colonialism, first rehearsed in the internal colonialisms of Britain, as Irish and Welsh and even rural English communities were becoming absorbed by Britain’s new metropolitan modernity.⁵⁹ The vernacular was born in a kind of archiving of the disappearance of these distinctive cultures.⁶⁰ In the true colonies abroad, this archiving was replicated in relation to culture,⁶¹ including architecture. Here the vernacular was born as cultures were being documented *in* the colonial archive. In the drawings, photographs, and written records it preserved of Africa’s architectural

scenes,⁶² the archive and its producers invented the idea of “vernacular,” and African architectural practices came to be located within its space. The archive also thus segregated African architecture and its practices from those of other worlds that were regarded as having been already transformed by the industrial age.

With such an ahistorical view of African architecture in place, the buildings produced by the émigrés from Brazil could not enter the discourse on architecture in Africa. For scholars of the vernacular, Brazilians, or their Luso-African descendants, were not truly Africans. Their buildings, therefore, could not enter the narrative of a purist imagination of Africa because they were not timeless and traditional. Their buildings forcefully bring their historicity into the picture so that *in this location and at this time* they could not be admitted into the vernacular – and, for most of the twentieth century, all architecture that was “of Africa” had to be “vernacular.” Similarly, indigenous urban Africans patronizing a new architecture were regarded as inauthentic given Africa’s positioning as bastion of “primitivist” authenticity and fantasy.⁶³

This, incidentally, is in rather striking contrast to the uncontested place of Italian, Portuguese or Spanish Baroque architecture, which could become American, or Peruvian, or even Brazilian without losing the original “purity” of its identity or its status. What the European and Euro-American invention of vernacular architecture did, in short, was to also produce a resistance to *seeing* the architecture of these new Africans *as* architecture.

Last Word: The Lines of a Future Argument

In the space of this chapter, I cannot do more than this brief indication of the dynamics of what I will call “vernacularism.” I am even less able to demonstrate that what we have called “Brazilian” architecture in Africa owes as much to the practices and structures of West Africa, as it does to those of Brazil. I can state, however, that Brazilians who arrived in Lagos in the nineteenth century soon joined Sierra Leoneans in their conscious invention of Pan-Africanism (which is why one might refer to them as first Africans).

It may seem puzzling to then claim that the architecture they produced in Africa had its sources in any particular ethnic group. Yet this is exactly what I believe can be demonstrated, sustained by a slower historical understanding. Here, and in summary, I can at least hint at the kinds of moves that would be involved in such a narration. One is a quality first noticed in a treatment of the surfaces of buildings. The new architecture of Africa, unlike what one commonly encounters in Brazil, treats its surfaces very much as if it were a skin to be ornamented in order to communicate certain ideas about its embodiment. In this regard, the new architecture of Africa evokes Yoruba, Edo, Igbo, and Asante architecture (to name a few) in which architectural ornamentation on the surfaces of buildings is in clear dialogue with ornamentation of actual bodies through cicatrization and body painting. What is, however, modern in the architecture we are looking at, is how (coinciding with the abandonment of significant ways of marking the body), architectural ornamentation replaces their once highly meaningful forms with the contextually disconnected but aesthetically supercharged, “Baroque” ornamentation.

I also suggest, again summarizing, that the difference between the secular and the sacred to which I pointed earlier, a difference *not* noted in Brazil’s own architectural

conversion to the Baroque style, is also an outcome of the boundaries of secularity and sacredness in Yoruba and other West African cultures. One could simplify the matter by saying that the idea of a secular place – separate from a sacred sphere – was not how Africans organized their worlds.

One final point remains. I have suggested that actual, implied, or subsequently constructed courtyards seem to be a standard part of the *new way* architecture of Lagos (see Figure 6.1). I reiterate that this is substantially true for all such locations along the West and Central African coasts, the large majority still not recovered, let alone published. As one moves into any of their buildings, its spatial organization is usually connected in some demonstrable way either to the indigenous architecture of the zones where the buildings are found, or to ideas brought from Brazil's connection to European traditions of the courtyard. Whichever of these two sources predominates in the palace of Ijora its inventive layout was produced as a transformation if not a rejection of local forms. Alas, as is the fate of all modernizing revolutions, it was also a historical validation and legitimization, in this case of the precolonial era architecture of Edo Eko (Lagos under the suzerainty of Benin).

Notes

- 1 Fleming (1937); Kultermann (1969); Berman (1982); Culot and Thiveaud (1992) (and several of the authors Culot and Thiveaud assemble). These are only a few examples from a sizable bibliography in which the European and, less often, the American architect is given center stage in the story of twentieth-century architecture in Africa. The subtexts of its assumptions, often subtle and diffuse, originate in the arena of economic development studies and in modernization discourse more broadly. In the latter, the relationships between Europe and Africa are grasped in terms of modernity's "impact" and "repercussions" and their synonyms. In this framing, the discourse assumes modernity as something already formed somewhere else, and then introduced to (or imposed on) Africa's people. Africans can then only react to modernity's presence. Little is available on the manner of modernity's nonreflexive or nonreactive African production.
- 2 Fry and Drew (1956, 1976); Le Roux (2004); Liscombe (2006); Immerwahr (2007).
- 3 Marafatto (1983); da Cunha (1985).
- 4 I will use Brazil when speaking about architecture in Latin America, and "Brazil" when addressing the hybrid Brazilian-influenced architecture of Africa.
- 5 Drewal (1988); Cole (1982); also see Drewal, chapter 2 this volume.
- 6 I replay the challenges to the notion of "tradition" already raised by scholars in other arenas (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992), in resisting the assertion of an essence to African architecture (see the reconsiderations in Phillips and Schochet 2004, one of whose contributors, Chris Steiner, engages buildings like the ones that are central to this chapter). Despite other recent contestations (for instance, in related Asian sub-fields: Hosagrahar 2005; Kusno 2000), the term "tradition," in exactly the essentializing meaning Hobsbawm and Ranger contested, remains stubbornly present, and even widely accepted. I use the term tradition here as a temporary device that, like its twin "modern," I hope we can overcome in the future.
- 7 Appadurai's critique of modernity, including the place it gives to imagination, is unpersuasive. His statement, "Ordinary people have [in the postelectronic world]

begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday life” (Apparudai 1996, 5, emphasis is mine) leaves me perplexed. What I plot out here is a world already well into the process of modernist imagination (not just beginning), yet one that could hardly be defined as “postelectronic.”

- 8 The example of Stewart Young in 1920s Onitsha, Nigeria, indicates that even during the colonial era there have been Europeans who were willing to integrate themselves into African life (Akosa 1987; Newell 2004).
- 9 I mean that kind of modern architectural history first written by Udo Kultermann (1969).
- 10 One can point to a few European architects such as John Godwin or Alan Vaughan-Richards who do not fit this description, but their exceptionality proves the point.
- 11 Nationalism proper was produced, initially, from a resistance to the very colony to which they had migrated, once made aware through experience that the colony demanded their subservience to whiteness, regardless of one’s ethnicity or professional status (Echeruo 1977).
- 12 I refer to the *mission to civilize* in relation to its underside, the notion of the “primitive” (Torgovnick 1990).
- 13 Brazil was the dominant though not the only reference. The influence of local inventions not tied to the Brazilians can also be noted. Other trajectories of creative hybridity in roughly the same period extend from the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, medieval Scotland, and even Chinese temples (the idea of the pagoda).
- 14 This is a translation of a term used in two local languages to describe buildings of the types explored in this chapter. This term was also used in contexts when in English we would use the term modern.
- 15 Vale (1992); Okoye (1993, 2008); Elleh (2001); Hess (2006).
- 16 See Okoye (1993 and 2008). An extensive elaboration of the argument must wait. This chapter might therefore be understood as preparing the groundwork for such a project.
- 17 I acknowledge that, for the Yoruba world of Lagos, the idea of the palace as a secular, rather than religious, structure, flies in the face of the traditional roles played by the palace in the political life of Yoruba kingdoms and their social worlds. However, the period of which I write is precisely one in which it might be argued that the palace at Lagos was transformed in all kinds of ways into the arena of something progressively *secular*. Historians and philosophers, focusing on the shift from traditional religions to evangelical Christianity, are yet to recognize such moments in Africa (for instance, see Taylor 2007, 512, 734).
- 18 Smith (1979, 4); Immerwahr (2007, 179).
- 19 *Afin* is the Yoruba word for palace.
- 20 Mann (2007, 242). This is my opinion, although Kristin Mann makes a similar assumption about the same name.
- 21 I refer to the historical kingdoms of Ife, Owo, Ketu, Oyo, and Ibadan among others. Even within Lagos itself, royal authority is centered on the Idungunran Palace in which resides the Oba of Eko (king of Lagos).
- 22 Ojo (1967).
- 23 Ilorin is the capital of a Yoruba-speaking Islamic emirate that before the nineteenth-century Fula jihad had been a traditional ally of the non-Islamic Yoruba empire of Oyo.
- 24 Walker (1994). Note that traditions vary significantly from one region to another.

- 25 Like Eko, as Lagos was once known, Ijora too had been under Benin's suzerainty in the precolonial period.
- 26 This courtyard form supports Ijora's continued acknowledgment of its connection to Benin.
- 27 After this date several schemes for courtyard sculpture can be recognized as radically new. They nevertheless (and unlike at Ijora) operated within a traditional idea of palatial sculpture. At the palace at Ikere, mentioned subsequently in the text, the sculptural schema is recognizably figural and Yoruba, but its intense angularity and dramatic color pushes such traditional ideas to new extremes. At Ijora, figural sculpture is jettisoned completely.
- 28 The present palace buildings are not the ones that would have existed before the establishment of the British colony of Lagos in the nineteenth century.
- 29 I use this term to cover those who were expert builders and designers, only some of whom would have deployed drawings. In any case, drawings or not, the architect was yet nonprofessionalized in this period, though colonial government ordinances would shortly change that situation.
- 30 This was thanks to their church congregations having outgrown their original buildings.
- 31 Indeed, it is likely either that it was initially not built as a mosque, or that in the interest of keeping its costs manageable it was based on a creative adaptation of a type of building that was already common locally.
- 32 Okoye (2005).
- 33 By the history of architecture, I am speaking of the established canonical narratives that aim at being worldwide in scope, and in which basic accounts or catalogues are offered to the wider public and for undergraduate teaching. Recent examples are *A World History of Architecture* (Mazio, Moffett, and Wodehouse 2008), or its rival *A Global History of Architecture* (Ching, Jarzombek, and Prakash 2011).
- 34 I have rehearsed this history elsewhere, and here will merely mention authors such as Archibald Dalzel writing on Dahomey or Hugh Clapperton writing on Nigeria.
- 35 Eminent authors have included, in a rough historical order, Leo Frobenius, Percy Amaury Talbot, Banister Fletcher, Paul Oliver, and Amos Rappaport – the last three concerned with far more than the architecture of Africa alone.
- 36 V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (1988) remains the most extensive exploration of these phenomena in Western intellectual history.
- 37 So far reaching is this notion that when, over two decades ago, I approached the cultural section of the Nigerian embassy in London seeking funding for a project on architecture in Nigeria before the modernist era, the cultural attaché looked upon me with incredulity, and declared (as if he needed to teach this naive-looking young person) that "we had no architecture before the Europeans."
- 38 Cole (1982); Malaquais (2002); Strother (2004). Also bear in mind that the African continent as a whole has not been explored for archaeological evidence of architectural forms to the degree we might wish for.
- 39 Even in our own era, when we might imagine we have at least the skeletons of world history more or less accurately constructed, new discoveries of the last 10 years suggest the story of African architecture has yet to emerge. For instance, we are beginning to understand that the stone architecture of Great Zimbabwe and its region may not be as unique as was earlier assumed.
- 40 Karasch (2002). See also Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992).

- 41 Although historians have tended to construct the return in a somewhat romanticized manner, involving notions of freedom in Africa, as well as loyalty to “tribe” based on the assertion of nostalgia for an imagined home, I have never found this persuasive. Many “returnees” were coming to Africa several generations after the slave trade had ended. It seems to me that their immigration was rather spurred by the very fact that the African spaces were now colonial spaces, and that immigrants from Brazil had reason to believe that such spaces offered the opportunity for a steady income while Brazil was in economic decline.
- 42 Similar elements may be seen on its equivalent in Accra, the colonial capital of the Gold Coast (now Ghana).
- 43 Only initially Portuguese speaking, this community was quite different in character from the earlier sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Portuguese-speaking one studied by Peter Mark (2002). The new and large influx from Brazil would have encountered the small, diminishing, earlier and well-established “Portuguese” communities (descendants of Portuguese fathers and African mothers), but unlike that subculture the new community saw itself as Brazilian not Portuguese, and rapidly abandoned the Portuguese language altogether in favor of local creoles, as well as for English and French. Whereas the earlier Luso-African was at least initially a product of racial mixture in an indigenous setting, the new migrants from Brazil were overwhelmingly not mixed race.
- 44 Hausa speaking troops had been garrisoned in Lagos ever since their participation in the 1875 British invasion of the Asante kingdom in what is now Ghana.
- 45 Another well-known *new way* mosque was the Lagos Central Mosque, which was replaced during the oil boom years in Nigeria by a huge postmodern structure. These builders became influential not just in Nigeria, but just as visible in Bénin (at the time Dahomey), Togo, Ghana, and Cameroon. Note that architecture with comparable history is occasionally encountered westward as far as Gambia, Senegal, and Cape Verde, and as far south and east as Angola, Mozambique, and Madagascar.
- 46 These people were increasingly African born, as were the immediate descendants of immigrant Luso-Africans.
- 47 Osasona (2005).
- 48 Like icing on a cake, the multiple layers of ornamentation and spatial fluidity of the surfaces of both categories of the new nineteenth-century Brazil-influenced architecture is, in part at least, rightly considered a cousin of Baroque architecture many times removed.
- 49 See note 35 above.
- 50 In the space of this chapter I can only indicate where such an argument would go, rather than being able to make the argument in detail.
- 51 Nzibo (1986).
- 52 This moment surely was infused with a progressive tension between new urbanites of diverse origins, immigrants from Brazil, and Sierra Leone, and indigenous (and increasingly literate) Africans. In addition to Islam and Roman Catholicism, the immigrants may have practiced Central and South American forms of African religions. Aguda and Saro are local names for the Afro-Brazilians as separate from Sierra Leoneans, indicating that within indigenous culture there was recognition of their difference, based perhaps on the degree to which they projected mastery of Englishness.
- 53 This was not yet the era of the independent African churches, so that church buildings were still answerable to some other (usually European or American) authority. Mosques, on the other hand, were answerable to the local community alone.

- 54 Here one need only think of the religious structures documented over time by twentieth-century scholars for Congolese, Cameroonian, Gabonese, Angolan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian worlds at the turn of the nineteenth century by, among others, Labelle Prussin, Simon Ottenberg, Herbert Cole, Chike Aniakor, Michael Swithenbank, Robert Milligan, and Jacques Binet.
- 55 Interestingly, the architecture of the Great Mosque of Porto Novo is modeled on a well-known church building in Brazil. Although yet to be subjected to historical study, there is enough evidence in the photographic history of the building, and what it reveals about its formal organization and structure (despite the orientation of the main structure in relation to Mecca), to suggest the building was indeed a Christian church (or commenced with that intention) before its conversion to a mosque.
- 56 In Nigeria, precolonial coastal cities attracted immigrants who were primarily from neighboring regions. Lagos and Calabar were typical of this. However, other West African ports (such as Dakar, Accra, and São Tomé) attracted sailors, and traders from far distant places in Africa. (It is also important to note that African elites in several coastal cities constructed inventive architectural forms in the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries that clearly proclaimed their cosmopolitan status, and were meant to reflect their ties to European ancestors and associates. Notable examples include multistoried structures in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.)
- 57 Semper (1989).
- 58 Much of this history is still very much in its infancy as scholarship.
- 59 Duffy (2007).
- 60 Okoye (1989).
- 61 Achebe (2000).
- 62 Talbot (1926, 880–909).
- 63 I mean this both in the sense that Roger Fry would have understood the idea of the “primitive,” as well as in the casual comments of Sylvia Leith-Ross (1937) about her rented house at Onitsha, and its owner, Ibezé.

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Part IV



Modernities and Cross-Cultural Encounters in Arts of the Early Twentieth Century

“One of the Best Tools for Learning”

Rethinking the Role of ‘Abduh’s Fatwa in Egyptian Art History

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Introduction

In late 1903, Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), Egypt’s grand mufti (foremost interpreter of Islamic law) from 1899 to 1905, embarked on an extended trip to Europe at the end of which he spent time in Sicily.¹ Throughout his travels ‘Abduh visited monuments, museums, churches, cemeteries, botanical gardens, archives, and libraries. The imam wrote a series of lengthy articles, anonymous letters about his adventures, which appeared in *al-Manar* (*The Lighthouse*), the journal edited by ‘Abduh’s close friend and associate Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935).² In his letters ‘Abduh conveyed a great admiration for what he saw, and was particularly impressed by the libraries and museums he visited.³

By far the most quoted of ‘Abduh’s writings from this trip – which was by no means his first to Europe – is an entry titled “al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil wa-Fawa’iduha wa-Hukmuha” (“Images and Statues, Their Benefits and Legality”) which has generally been considered his fatwa (legal judgment) in support of representational art. In it he addressed the question of image-making and idolatry rather directly, assuring readers that if they were to approach an imam with questions regarding the issue, specifically

the *hadith*⁴ “those people who will be the most tortured on judgment day are the painters” and the like of which is said in the *sahih*,⁵ he will probably say to you that this *hadith* came during the days of paganism. Images were taken up during this time for two reasons: the first was distraction and the second was to seek blessing from the image of whichever of the righteous ones is depicted; the first [reason] religion detests and the second Islam came to wipe out. The painter is in both cases a distraction from God and a facilitator of polytheism. If these two obstacles are removed and the benefit pursued then the depiction of people is the same as the depiction of plants and trees or objects.⁶

Just over a century later, in April 2006, Egypt's current grand mufti 'Ali Gom'a issued a fatwa that "declared as un-Islamic the exhibition of statues in homes," basing the decision on the very same *hadith* cited by 'Abduh in the above quote.⁷ Outrage ensued, and 'Abduh's fatwa was immediately recalled and referenced in response. Novelist and former editor of Egypt's leading literary magazine *Akhbar al-Adab*, Gamal al-Ghitani, reflected the view of many within cultural circles that 'Abduh's fatwa had "closed the issue, as it ruled that statues and pictures are not *haram* (forbidden under Islam) except idols used for worship."⁸ This most recent example points to the enduring importance of 'Abduh's fatwa within the narrative of Egyptian (and to a great extent Arab⁹) art history; the fatwa continues to be cited as marking an important shift, "clos[ing] the issue," at least on the level of institutional orthodoxy, with a prominent figure like 'Abduh reinterpreting Islam's long-standing position on representational and figurative art once and for all.

However, despite being particularly emphasized in the historiography of modern Egyptian art as a turning point, 'Abduh's fatwa remains a text remarkably understudied by art historians. While the literature on modern Egyptian art is in resounding agreement as to the importance of 'Abduh's intervention – Egyptian art historian Samir Gharib, for example, has "no doubt that this *fatwa* played an important role in supporting the fine arts and artists and encouraging research in the arts and writing about it"¹⁰ – the details of this intervention are skirted over with extreme brevity, and what limited discussions exist are disappointingly similar in their simplicity. Ultimately what we are offered is a series of wholesale celebrations of 'Abduh as "one of the most enlightened men of the Muslim religion"¹¹ and "a connoisseur of the arts, a lover of artistic creativity."¹² This chapter is an attempt to readdress the dearth in critical engagement with a text as formative as 'Abduh's. Rather than dismiss the dominant narrative as merely limited, I offer a reading that strives to incorporate and utilize the existent sources and their presumptions as a point of departure for understanding the full extent and implications of 'Abduh's intervention. Since much of the writing that currently exists on the fatwa focuses on 'Abduh as "a connoisseur of the arts," I suggest we take his assigned role as connoisseur seriously and consider the nature and framing that inform his admiration, while examining some of its underlying assumptions.

This chapter begins by outlining the ways in which 'Abduh's fatwa has been presented in the existent histories as a means of understanding its role and importance throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Previous scholarship has largely neglected or underplayed the fatwa's specific connections not only to 'Abduh's larger revisionist (*tajdid*) program, but also to the particular set of travel writings of which it is a part. I suggest that considering the fatwa alongside other texts from the Sicily trip allows us to better recognize reasons for the timing of (and inspiration for) 'Abduh's intervention.

The first exhibition of Orientalist painters in Egypt took place at the Cairo Opera House in 1891 and was sponsored by Khedive Isma'il (r. 1863–1879), 15 years prior to the publication of 'Abduh's fatwa.¹³ The exhibition included works by Théodore Jacques Ralli, Rasengy, and Bogdanoff and was attended by a number of dignitaries who, along with the khedive, purchased several works.¹⁴ Thus, figurative and representational art had increasingly become part of Egypt's visual landscape by the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly given the almost ubiquitous erection of commemorative statues in Cairo, Alexandria, and other major cities that began as part of Khedive Isma'il's modernization and urban planning projects. However, most of these commissions had been primarily undertaken by foreign artists; it was not until

the establishment of the Fine Arts School by Prince Yusuf Kamal in 1908 that Egyptians themselves were producing such works on a wide scale, perhaps making it now necessary that such practices be addressed and legislated. Scholars have suggested that ‘Abduh had the future of the Fine Arts School in mind when issuing his fatwa and that this was his response to “popular and religious factions [who] considered an art school to be antithetical to the principles of Islam.” This is quite likely as discussions surrounding the importance of the school predated its establishment; “the idea of an art school was contemplated alongside that of a university.”¹⁵ However, ‘Abduh never directly mentions the school and therefore considering the fatwa as immediately related to it is a hypothetical assumption at best. On the other hand, we do know that he chose to address the matter while traveling in Sicily. The significance of this point is substantive to the formulation of the argument within the fatwa.

The larger part of this chapter is devoted to a return to the text of the fatwa, a text that is riddled with tensions and reveals a more complex narrative than has been previously acknowledged. By taking a closer look at the fissures within ‘Abduh’s argument, it becomes evident that a moment which has been exclusively presented in the literature of the field as one of expansions in the understanding of artistic production and its role in Egyptian – and (as ‘Abduh himself states several times) Muslim – society is actually far more restrictive in nature than has previously been considered. That is to say, rather than merely celebrating ‘Abduh’s fatwa as a gesture toward the acceptance and inclusion of representational art, “a historic stand in defense of Islam and arts [*al-funun*] and beauty [*al-jamal*],”¹⁶ it is more productive to pay closer attention to exactly how this “defense” was articulated. Upon closer examination it becomes evident that ‘Abduh’s acknowledgement of the merits of pictorial representation is inseparable from, one could say limited to, their “benefits”; throughout this chapter I refer to the “images and statues” of the fatwa collectively as “pictorial representation” rather than “representational art” or “fine arts” – as is the case in existent scholarship – to stress the very specific nature of ‘Abduh’s engagement with the subject matter. The acceptance of pictorial representation cannot be read separately from ‘Abduh’s larger understandings of *ijtihad*, his project to “reform Islam by regulating its doctrines and ridding it of all that was seen as superstition and myth (“innovation”) in favor of its “reasonable and rational message.”¹⁷ The issuing of this fatwa is more nuanced than simply the freeing of art and artists from the shackles of tradition; instead the fatwa legislates a new and different set of restrictions, ones that approach pictorial representation first and foremost as “one of the best tools for learning.”¹⁸ In fact, it is possible to recognize the ways in which the fatwa has been both simplified and misappropriated and made to say something about representational art that it in fact never said. Understanding ‘Abduh’s intervention as multilayered is a crucial step in a reassessment of the early moments of the foundational narrative of modern Egyptian art, and a move away from the teleological discourses of progress and liberation in which the narrative has been grounded.

Art, Islam, and the Imam

It is difficult, if not impossible, to tackle the subject of ‘Abduh’s fatwa without recognizing that one is walking into a minefield of Orientalist fascination; Islam’s position vis-à-vis the graven image¹⁹ is a subject that has long captured the Western imagination, and indeed

continues to do so. This chapter does not seek to engage in debates on Islam's assumed historic incompatibility with representational art, or the persistence of such hostility in the contemporary moment. Nor does it attempt to attend to the validity of 'Abduh's arguments regarding artistic production from the standpoint of Islamic law. Instead my concern here is with 'Abduh's formulation of his argument, the rhetorical maneuvers he employs to make his case, and how these may serve as indicators of his broader interest in the subject. Even though most of the literature presents 'Abduh's intervention as merely a loosening of Islam's restrictiveness, such a reading is very much in line with an Orientalist discourse. By privileging representational art over other forms of visual art, and by valuing its acceptance as a step forward in an historical progression, previous literature fails to see that this intervention could be restrictive or limiting in its own right.

The *Nahda* narrative regarding the fine arts in Egypt and the larger Arab world certainly falls victim to such assumptions, as Nada Shabout in *Modern Arab Art* explains:

While the Arab renaissance (*al-Nahda*) represented a period of revival in literature and poetry, it was basically a total Westernization process in the case of the plastic arts. To add to the pressure on Arab artists, the intellectuals of *al-Nahda* insisted that one of the main reasons for their cultural deterioration was that their arts did not advance along lines similar to those in Europe. They thus affirmed the superiority of European art.²⁰

Advancement along European lines was largely reduced to the prevalence of representational art forms. Arab art is distinguished from its Western counterpart first and foremost through its lack and limitations. Attending to these prior limitations becomes just one of the many ways in which Muslim theologians and intellectuals sought to "reform Islam" to make it better suited to the ways of modern life. Islamic art historian Stephen Vernoit neatly summarizes this narrative of progress and development:

with the exception of the fundamental issues of idolatry and the lawfulness of images, discussions about the visual arts did not really preoccupy Muslim scholars, jurists or theologians; inquiry into the nature of art was in this respect a manifestation of the more secular preoccupations of Europe. Nevertheless, there were some significant developments during this period that provoked a reassessment of the traditional position. They included the introduction of new forms of mechanical reproduction, i.e. typographic printing, lithography, and photography; the introduction of new practices in education and science; and the new notion of the evolutionary history of civilization.²¹

According to this reading, the "significant developments" of the nineteenth century push Muslim scholars to reconsider images, a subject neglected for centuries as largely one of the "secular preoccupations of Europe."

Similarly in his 1991 *al-Islam wa-l-Funun al-Jamila* (*Islam and the Fine Arts*), Egyptian scholar Muhammad 'Imara echoes this assessment of the long silence on questions pertaining to the visual arts; while much of 'Imara's text attends to Islam's position vis-à-vis music, on which there seems to be a great deal more debate, the book ends with a final chapter on drawing, painting, and sculpture. This section begins with the Qur'an and *al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya* (the Prophet's practices), and references some early theological debates. It then suddenly transitions from the elev-

enth to the nineteenth century and onto ‘Abduh’s intervention. In a section entitled “In the Modern Era,” ‘Imara opens with the following introduction:

When the school of religious renewal and revival began removing from Islamic thought the dust of periods of stagnation and civilizational regression – the Ottoman dynasty – we find the most prominent engineer of this renewal, the sheikh imam Muhammad ‘Abduh, knocking on that door through his *ijtihad* and renewal. He announces Islam’s sanctioning of the fine arts [*al-funun al-jamila*] calling attention to the role of the visual arts [*funun al-tashkil*] – drawing, sculpture, painting – their beneficial and indispensable role in recording the traces of life and preserving them and refining tastes and senses and bringing mankind closer to the attributes of perfection.²²

It is worth noting that nowhere in his fatwa does ‘Abduh use either the term *al-funun al-jamila* (the fine arts) or *funun al-tashkil* (the visual arts). Both ‘Abduh’s omission of these terms and ‘Imara’s subsequent inclusion of them is extremely telling. ‘Imara is certainly not alone in this embellishment, which demonstrates the consistent misappropriation of the fatwa within the narrative of modern Egyptian (and Arab) art. Similarly, in one of the most recent surveys of modern art in Egypt, painter and critic Mustafa al-Razzaz identifies ‘Abduh as part of a group of “enlightened religious men” who played a crucial role “in establishing an awareness of the importance of an interest in the arts (*al-fann*) and teaching the fine arts (*al-funun al-jamila*), considering it one of the main entry points to civilization and progress.”²³

In examining these recurring references to ‘Abduh’s intervention, we are able to identify a number of motifs. Firstly, the descriptions of ‘Abduh reiterate that as this new kind of religious man, he was able to seamlessly combine both an enlightened world view and a commitment to religious belief. Consequently not only does he not oppose the fine arts, but in fact “the imam converses about art (*al-fann*) as someone who understands and appreciates.”²⁴ Juxtaposed against this “prominent engineer of [this] renewal” is “the dust of periods of stagnation and civilizational regression,” namely the Ottoman rule, a period of “religious staidness and constraint.” Time and again ‘Abduh is described as having bravely conquered this stagnant past by “knocking on [the] door” of revival and renewal and finally ending the “troubled thoughts” regarding painting, drawing and sculpture. Finally, several authors rightly point to some of the main concerns expressed by ‘Abduh in the fatwa: ‘Imara for example identifies the imam’s interest in pictorial representation as “beneficial and indispensable” tools of preservation, improvement and progress, al-Razzaz specifically mentions his focus on the importance of museums, while Vernoit calls the fatwa “a plea for the preservation of artifacts for their historical value.”²⁵ However, even while identifying these central concerns, these narratives elide crucial questions. What are the repercussions of conflating discourses of education and preservation with ideas about artistic production and what does this tell us about the broader significance of the fatwa?

An Insightful Traveler’s Observations

‘Abduh’s travel writings first appeared in the December 20, 1903 issue of *al-Manar* under the title of “Balerm Siqilliya: Mulahazat Sa’h Basir” (“Palermo, Sicily: Insightful Traveler’s Observations”). These entries were lengthy expositions that often extended

over 10 pages of the journal and took the form of a travelogue in which the imam commented in varying detail on things of note throughout his trip.²⁶ Each of ‘Abduh’s pieces was peppered with a combination of historical commentary and a sort of cultural anthropology. This was a writing style that had become increasingly popular amongst Arab writers throughout the nineteenth century and that ‘Abduh knew from the writings of the Egyptian *Nahda* thinker Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873).²⁷ These “observations” come with a tone of informality, relaxed yet informative. The combined casualness of the *mulahazat* (observations) with the acute awareness of the *sa’ib basir* (insightful traveler) reflects the particular note that the author is trying to strike. There is no doubt that entries are thoughtful and thought out; with a specific message in mind, ‘Abduh’s relaxed delivery (the way in which he weaves historical commentary with his advice for fellow travelers²⁸ as well as the banal details of travel and accommodations) intentionally subdues a heavy didactic quality. The anonymity of the traveler (although it is likely that readers recognized the author as the imam) further ensures this tone is maintained. In other words, ‘Abduh presents himself as a fellow tourist but one more informed than most. This may be his first exposure to these particular destinations; however, he is a seasoned traveler with a discerning eye. This perhaps makes him the most fitting guide; he balances the authority that is often so crucial to travel writing, as the reader is lead through a new geography by a knowledgeable escort, with a tone that allows the reader to feel like they could be making this journey. This becomes particularly apparent in the fatwa itself.

This specific set of writings was born of a rerouting; ‘Abduh has to return to Egypt through Italy rather than the usual Marseille route. It is as a result of this changed itinerary that ‘Abduh begins to write his travelogue. We know the imam was no stranger to European travel; Albert Hourani comments that “he went to Europe whenever he could, to renew himself as he said, and because it revived his hopes that the Muslim world would recover from its present state” of colonial occupation.²⁹ However, there is clearly something noteworthy about this particular trip that he wishes to share with his readership. In his first letter to *al-Manar* ‘Abduh is presented with two routes through Italy and his subsequent explanation for his chosen travel route demonstrates the connections between the Muslim world and Europe that are always at play for him and that reveal something of his underlying interests during his trips. ‘Abduh explains that the first itinerary would have taken him to Palermo followed by Naples, where he would have stayed for four days before moving on to Messina, his final stop before heading back to Alexandria. The second, however, would have taken him to Palermo where he would spend five days before going directly to Messina. Initially, ‘Abduh states his preference for the first option, explaining that it would have allowed him “to see many cities and great monuments that would have expanded my knowledge a great deal, of which I do not know to this day.” However, he ultimately opts for the second route, explaining that he had been informed by a friend that “Palermo was the capital of Sicily, and it has Arab monuments that would be important for an Arab to see and two libraries neither of which lack in old Arabic books . . . ”³⁰ Here ‘Abduh’s European travels take on another dimension, for he is not only in search of personal revival and inspiration in the European cities he visits, but is also consciously experiencing his travels as an “Arab,” looking to make connections between the places he is visiting and an Arab past.³¹ Throughout his travels in Sicily ‘Abduh highlights to his readers the Arab influence and presence in Europe, while mourning the current state of the Arabs.

“And They Do Not Spare Any Effort in Preserving These Things”

In the March 18, 1904 issue of *al-Manar*, immediately preceding the fatwa, ‘Abduh’s entry is entitled “Dar al-Athar wa Basatin al-Nabat” (“Museums and Botanical Gardens”) in which he presents in great detail the sheer variety of the contents of the museums and gardens he has visited. He begins by crediting the Sicilians for having learnt an important lesson (one he thinks they learnt from “their brothers, the people of northern Italy and the rest of Europe”) “the preservation of relics, old and new,” usually in museums.³² ‘Abduh further elaborates on the make up of these collections:

The people preserve in their museums all that was found of artifacts from their ancestors, objects, trees, stones. And they do not spare any effort in preserving these things. So if you find the name of something in a history book for example, or you are presented with a term in one of the sciences that had a meaning in a previous era, you are able to find out the meaning by examining and inspecting and ascertaining the validity of the explanation and definition. For whatever the ancients used by way of instruments, tools, kinds of clothes, varieties of boats, and the like, you will find some of them in one of the museums or palaces or churches . . .³³

His fascination with the processes of collecting, archiving, and cataloging cannot go unnoticed. In this passage, he is struck by the scope of these preservation projects, the expanse of what they come to include and what is considered worth keeping from the natural to the man-made, from the historic, to the scientific, to the domestic. Of course what ‘Abduh is noting is a very particular relationship to a narration of the past, or what Vernoit earlier referred to as “the new notion of the evolutionary history of civilization” and an array of spaces – museums, churches, and palaces – and a set of apparatuses through which such narratives come about. This is of course at a time when such structures are being established in Egypt and he likely has the future of these institutions in mind during his travels.³⁴

Similarly, he identifies an empirical approach that extends to the fields of both “history” and “science,” one structured around processes of analysis based on observation and examination, of “assessing the validity of the explanation” and finally reaching a conclusion. Research in both fields depends on a particular rigor and accuracy as well as a volume of evidence; ‘Abduh repeatedly impresses upon his readers the scope and comprehensiveness involved in these processes of preservation. Here the imam’s attachment to a Comte-inspired positivism, which insists on observation as the only legitimate approach to investigation and knowledge production, is evident.³⁵ However, it is important to remember that this positivism was never entirely dominant but instead was coupled with a seemingly dichotomous romanticism that focused on “the search for (national) origins, the overvaluation of the experience of nature, and [even] the notion of the social reformer as creative catalyst of social change . . . ”³⁶ ‘Abduh’s interest in the museological practices he encounters is an apt example of the influence of both approaches; while he constantly insists on the importance of observational practices, his very interest in embarking on a trip to Sicily is embedded in the discourses of “the search for (national) origin.”

Al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil: A Fatwa without Fine Arts

A serious examination of the fatwa's title provides us with a key to understanding its function and the role it was expected to play. It is from the title "al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil wa Fawa'iduhu wa-Hukmuha" ("Images and Statues, their Benefits and Legality") that we are able to glean invaluable clues as how to best approach the fatwa as well as what aspects might have been overlooked in previous readings. With just four words 'Abduh is able to neatly frame the parameters of the discussion. However, despite the title's brevity, it is also quite complex, as we can see by the multiple ways in which it can be broken down. To begin with the title can be divided into two main parts. The first half designates the subject of discussion, while the second points us to the particular aspects on which the fatwa focuses. There is something balanced, almost symmetrical, about these two parts. However, once separated into its components, the title begins to betray some of the tensions present in the text at large. What the divided title demonstrates is the coexistence of both an opening up and a closing off of meanings, an attempt at being simultaneously expansive and restrictive. This seemingly unsustainable contradiction is central to the nature and mission of the fatwa and how it functions.

In order to make such tensions more evident, we should start by unpacking each of the coupled terms, beginning with the subject of the fatwa. In the first phrase, "*al-suwar wa-l-tamathil*," "*al-suwar*" draws on a whole range of meanings in Arabic, allowing it to be a somewhat flexible and all-encompassing designation. Translations can include any of the following: pictorial representations, illustrations, images, pictures, likenesses, figures, statues, replicas, copies, or duplicates.³⁷ It is a fairly broad term with a range of subtle differences in its meanings, a term that is not medium specific but rather emphasizes the element of visual representation, a copying of an original that exists in the real world, or, more specifically, of one of God's creations. The material nature of the image is not stipulated. However, there is an assumption of a relationship between two elements: an original and its representation. Because of its range of meanings, it is possible to understand and translate *al-suwar* differently at different moments in the fatwa (and elsewhere in 'Abduh's writings), depending on the varying degree of specificity that can be inferred from the text at that moment. This is in fact what makes the term effective within the title; 'Abduh is always very broad in the description of his subject matter.

Al-tamathil (sculptured images or statues) neatly complements *al-suwar*; by referencing three-dimensional objects it adds an element of specificity while also allowing for an expansion in the range of representations 'Abduh is talking about.

The strength of this part of the title seems to be its capability of being inclusive and, indeed, within the body of the fatwa 'Abduh draws on a wide range of examples. However, similarly worth noting is that by electing to use such general and broad terms 'Abduh is simultaneously choosing *not* to use particular words. For example, he uses *al-tamathil* rather than *al-asnam* (idols) which has historically had connotations of idolatry. More striking is the complete absence of the word *fann* (art) or *funun* (arts). These words are also missing entirely from the body of the text; instead 'Abduh uses a number of other terms such *al-suwar*, *al-taswir* (painting), *al-rasm* (drawing), and *al-nuqush* (engravings) when talking about pictorial representation. Given the overlapping and multiple meanings of these terms, it is often difficult to infer or "visualize" exactly the form of pictorial representation that 'Abduh is talking about.

This lack of specificity is indicative of the nature of ‘Abduh’s engagement with the forms of pictorial representation he is discussing; his interest in them is based first and foremost on their representational quality and its presumed accuracy. Further details, ones perhaps concerning the particular nature or medium of the representation, details that might approach them as “art” forms, are entirely absent. Therefore while ‘Abduh’s use of *al-suwar* and *al-tamathil* seems to strive for broadness and inclusiveness, it in fact restricts the possibility of referring to *fann* or *funun jamila* (fine arts). From the title, the intentions of the fatwa become immediately clear; to address pictorial representation on a technical level, in both its two- and three-dimensional forms, without addressing it as expressions of artistic production.

Between the Educational and the Legal

The second part of the title (*fawa’iduha wa-hukmuha*) equips us with the paradigms through which to approach the objects of the fatwa; the title moves us to greater specificity as we are directed to focus on their benefits (*fawa’iduha*) and legality (*hukmuha*). Again, the range of meanings that ‘Abduh is drawing on here is important. *Fawa’id* (benefits) has connotations of utility, a sense that some sort of moral or useful lesson can be gained. Implied here is an element of educational merit or worth. The second term is a consequence of the first; in other words the judgment regarding the images and statues depends on their benefits as will soon become apparent. The term *hukm* draws on a range of meanings – judgment, decision, verdict, legal provision – that are all connected to legal concepts. Also, there is an element of “regulation” or “rule” to the word *hukm* that is noteworthy, as there is a concern with monitoring or controlling these forms of representation.

The combination of *fawa’id* and *hukm* here, with all the meanings they connote, is particularly significant when used by ‘Abduh; the concepts related to legality on the one hand and useful lessons (or utility) on the other bring together two important aspects of ‘Abduh’s career and concerns: the law and education. Both areas were undergoing tremendous change in Egypt, change that ‘Abduh himself was instigating, as both an educator and a judge.

‘Abduh began his professional life as an educator. Hourani emphasizes that ‘Abduh always saw himself as a teacher and a scholar:

In 1877 he finished his studies with the degree in ‘*alim*, and started the career which was always to be the most congenial to him, that of teacher. He taught at the Azhar, but also held informal classes at his own house. Soon afterwards he began to teach at Dar al-‘Ulum, a new college established to provide a modern education for students of the Azhar who wished to become judges and teachers in government schools.³⁸

‘Abduh’s commitment to education, particularly Egyptian national education, goes back to his articles in the early 1880s in *Waqa’i’ al-Misriyya*.³⁹ Education, in its numerous forms, remained a central concern for ‘Abduh and even after his appointment as mufti he continued to be involved in both the establishment of private schools and teaching at the Azhar University.⁴⁰

His legal career came later. ‘Abduh was “made a judge in the ‘native tribunals’ set up in 1883 to dispense the new codes of positive law, and this was the beginning of a

new public career which lasted until his death in 1905.” In his position as grand mufti, ‘Abduh’s “fatwas on questions of public concern helped to reinterpret the religious law in accordance with the needs of the age.”⁴¹

The use of these terms in this part of the title (*fawa’id* and *hukm*) brings together the dual prisms through which ‘Abduh was approaching the question of pictorial representation and they are very much embedded in the prevalent discourses of the time. The use of the word *fawa’ida* immediately brings to mind a related term, *naf’* (useful) which had considerable currency during this period. In 1868, Jam‘iyat al-Ma‘arif li-Nashr al-Kutub al-Nafi‘a (Society of Knowledge for the Publication of Useful Books) was established by Muhammad ‘Arif Pasha, a graduate of the Egyptian school in Paris.⁴² Mitchell situates this society as part of a larger network – “the school, the political assembly and the press” – through which a new understanding of education or *tarbiya* was being developed.⁴³ ‘Abduh’s own definition of *tarbiya* focused on “the necessary political role of the intellectual, who would use as his particular ‘school’ the new organs of the press.”⁴⁴ This certainly makes sense when we see how ‘Abduh uses the pages of *al-Manar* as a tool of education at a time when the nature of fatwas themselves were changing; “they were now printed and had an international rather than a local audience,”⁴⁵ not to mention the ways in which *tarbiya* was a central concern of the journal from its very first issue. From the title of the fatwa, readers would not only be able to recognize ‘Abduh’s interests, but also have a sense of how the argument will unfold.

The Fatwa’s Five Parts

At this point I would like to give an overview of the fatwa, thinking about how the text works as a whole and about the relationship between its different parts. The fatwa can be roughly divided into five sections, and the progression of ideas and central logic are clearly indicative of ‘Abduh’s main concerns. Briefly stated, before looking at each part in greater detail, the sections of the fatwa can be summarized as follows: (1) museum collections and their acquisition, (2) poetry and drawing as a means of historical preservation, (3) Islam’s position on images, (4) the benefits of preservation, and, finally, (5) the lack of interest in preservation in the Arab world. Looking at this breakdown it is obvious that the third section on Islam and images, what is considered to be the *hukm* (judgment) element, sits at the center, making up about a third of the entire text, and that appears to be the climax of the fatwa. However, it is also noteworthy that it is sandwiched between two sections on preservation and this could be the most telling clue as to the real focus of the fatwa. Keeping the title of the fatwa in mind, it seems as though the *fawa’id* (benefits), a word that appears in one form or another throughout, feature most prominently in the text, but particularly in the latter sections, while the *hukm* (judgment) is largely confined to a specific section. And through the discussions of the *fawa’id* (benefits) it is here, in the second half of the fatwa, that ‘Abduh elaborates on preservation as a primary concern, echoing the interest he expressed in his previous writings from this trip. In isolation the structure of the fatwa might seem quite surprising. However, when read as part of ‘Abduh’s Sicilian travelogue, the emphasis on preservation in the fatwa provides a comfortable companion to the pieces that preceded it, and in it he merely continues and elaborates on this previous conversation about the benefits of preservation with readers. It is

difficult to deny that ‘Abduh’s immediate reflections, colored by his experiences in Sicily, played a significant role in the fatwa’s final shape.

‘Abduh’s tone in the fatwa is also very much in line with his other travel pieces, that is to say there is a similar casual, conversational style to the writing, an imagined back and forth as he addresses the reader directly throughout, sometimes preempting concerns the reader may have: “Maybe you were confronted with a question while reading these words,”⁴⁶ or by posing a question he then goes on to answer: “Have you heard that we have preserved anything, even other than paintings and drawings, despite our severe need to preserve a lot of the things our ancestors had?”⁴⁷ Throughout the fatwa, as elsewhere in his travel writing, ‘Abduh continues to conceal his identity and goes as far as referring to himself in the third person several times, presenting a hypothetical response that could be offered by a mufti: “Either you understand the judgment yourself after the case became clear, or you raise a question to the mufti.”⁴⁸ This approach is not entirely unexpected; anonymity was a common feature of the printed fatwa as was the dialogical tone that addresses the practical concerns of the believer.

However, perhaps most noticeable and surprising about ‘Abduh’s tone is that it betrays an irritation or lack of patience at certain points that seem to increase as the fatwa progresses. He ends the section in which he is discussing the merits of drawing as a means of preservation with surprising bluntness: “If you understood anything from this, that was my hope. But if you did not I do not have the time to explain to you in greater length than this.”⁴⁹ This irritation seems to be brought on when he addresses the question of Islam and images. While ‘Abduh talks endlessly about the contents of collections and the possibilities of preservation, he seems short on patience, almost uninterested, when addressing the question of Islam and images. Thus he states abruptly, “Muslims do not inquire except about that for which the benefit (*fa’ida*) has become evident, so as to deprive themselves of it.”⁵⁰

‘Abduh opens the fatwa with a brief section, his reflections on how “these people,” by whom he means the Sicilians, “have a strange desire for the preservation of pictures (*suwar*) drawn on paper or woven fabric” and that their museums are full of such objects.⁵¹ This provides an almost seamless connection to his writing preceding the fatwa, “Museums and Botanical Gardens” in which he similarly marveled at the interest in preserving and cataloging. So great is the Sicilian desire to acquire such objects that a rivalry develops. As a result their prices increase dramatically so that “one piece of Raphael’s paintings (*rasm*) for example might be worth two hundred thousand in some museums” but collections are considered to be important and “the older the heritage the more valuable its worth and people desire it more.”⁵²

In the following section on poetry and drawing as a means of historical preservation, the imam asks his readers why it is that Sicilians are so invested in collecting objects from their pasts, especially ones that involve figurative representation. ‘Abduh assures readers that while the notion might seem foreign, this is not the case. The answer can be found by thinking in terms of a more familiar medium:

If you know the reason for your ancestors’ preservation of poetry, rendering it precisely in divans and going to great lengths to record it, especially pre-Islamic poetry, and what trouble the forefathers (may they rest in peace) went through collecting and organizing it, then you are able to recognize the reason for a people’s preservation of these objects such as pictures (*al-rusum*) and statues.⁵³

Here ‘Abduh develops his comparison further, suggesting that in fact poetry and drawing are one and the same thing: “Drawing is the kind of poetry that is seen but not heard and poetry is a kind of drawing that is heard and not seen.” Both have sought to capture and record what he calls “people’s conditions in different ranks and communities’ conditions in different places, what is worthy of being called ‘the divan of mankind’s societies and conditions.’”⁵⁴ He then focuses at length on benefits of drawing over poetry, for even though they both record human experience, drawing, or the image, is able to convey a “truth” that the written word is not capable of; whereas the exact difference between anxiety (*al-jazā’*), panic (*al-faza’*), fear (*al-khawf*), and apprehension (*al-khashiya*) might be difficult to immediately express in writing “if you look at drawing (*al-rasm*) – which is that silent poetry – you will find the truth marked for you, for you to enjoy, just as your senses would delight in looking at it.”⁵⁵ Pictorial representations possess an accuracy that exceeds that of the written word.

What is immediately striking in this comparison is that even while ‘Abduh is praising both forms of expression, he is flattening them into a means of documentation, emptied of any kind of aesthetic worth, measured in terms of accuracy and ability to capture “truth.” For ‘Abduh the attachment to such “art” forms can be simply summarized as follows: “The preservation of these monuments is in fact a preservation of knowledge and an acknowledgment of the craftsman for excelling in it.”⁵⁶ Preservation and knowledge here are the immediate concerns and while the skill of the craftsman is acknowledged, there is certainly no celebration of creativity or aesthetic pleasure. Reading passages such as these, it is difficult to recognize ‘Abduh the “connoisseur of the arts,” the “lover of artistic creativity” that ‘Imara so definitively praises.

This omission is all the more evident when looking at the final sections following his justification of the figurative. Despite the examples of different forms of preservation that he includes here, most of them do not involve any form of pictorial representation. Instead, he discusses extensively the merits of preserving currency and measuring units from our predecessors that “estimate the minimum amount of property liable to *zakah* tax” and “what must be given in *zakah* from the crop yield after the changing of measures.”

‘Abduh ends the fatwa with a section in which he laments and berates readers for their failure to fulfill the requirements of religion:

If you look what religion obligates us to take care of, you would find these things innumerable and we do not preserve any of them. We neglect them like those before us have neglected them.⁵⁷

Unlike the Europeans who not only collect and preserve things from their past, but also from other cultures and civilizations, “we do not take an interest in preserving anything so we can retain its benefits for those who have not yet come,” and on the off-chance that something is preserved, there is no gratitude shown by its recipient.⁵⁸ ‘Abduh summarizes his argument by ending with the notion that national characteristics and qualities too are inherited:

The gift of preservation is not a part of what we inherit, instead what is inherited are the gifts of malice and resentment, which are passed on from fathers to sons until they corrupt men and ruin countries.⁵⁹

In response to the questions of Islamic law's judgment on such forms of representation, namely ones “depicting human forms in their emotional reactions or physical postures,” ‘Abduh responds with the following: “I would say to you that the painter painted and the benefit is unquestionable, undisputed. The idea of worship or the exaltation of pictures or statues has been wiped from [people’s] minds.” He assures his readers that the judgment against representation “came during the days of paganism,” a time that has long passed.⁶⁰ Ultimately, ‘Abduh’s position can be summarized by the following extracts:

If these two obstacles [distraction from God and polytheism] are removed and the benefit pursued then depicting people is the same as the depiction of plants and trees or objects . . . In general, it seems to me that Islamic law is far from prohibiting one of the best tools for learning after it has been established that it is not a threat to religion either with respect to doctrine or practice . . . There is no doubt that they [Muslims] cannot couple this belief with the belief in the unity of God but they can combine monotheism and the drawing of images of people and animals for the fulfillment of scientific purposes and the depiction of mental images.⁶¹

‘Abduh’s formulation of his argument in the above passage is demonstrative of the centrality of the “benefits” of representation, of their importance as “tools of learning,” and in the “fulfillment of scientific purposes.” First and foremost, he calls on readers to recognize the advantages depictions and representations can offer, urging them not to forego these in the name of religion. The benefits he identifies clearly echo the positions taken by the founders of the museums, archives, and libraries.

Once again, the absences or silences betray ‘Abduh’s concerns: here as elsewhere in the fatwa there is very little engagement with these forms of representation beyond their accuracy and usefulness. There is no mention of them as artistic production, only as valuable pictorial representations, with their producers described in literal or technical terms, as makers of objects and images but never as “artists” as the term would have been understood in early twentieth-century Europe, and just a few years later in Egypt with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts. Questions of aesthetics are ignored entirely, and appreciation is confined to the realm of accuracy, preservation, and their benefits.

Conclusion

With such a reading of ‘Abduh’s fatwa in mind, one is left wondering what the nature of his intervention is, and if it is possible to continue to approach it as “a historic stand in defense of Islam and arts and beauty” when very little attention is given to either “arts” or “beauty.” Whatever his engagement with pictorial representation, the imam sees only its potential as a tool of preservation and conversation. So while it is easy to assume that ‘Abduh opens up a space for the practice of representational art to exist, closer examination of the fatwa, and its accompanying writings, demonstrates a much more prescriptive outcome, one which posits an understanding of these forms of pictorial representation only in terms of their benefits. There is little doubt that representational and figurative art in the Arab and Muslim world preexisted ‘Abduh’s fatwa. Rather than merely sanctioning their production and display, the fatwa lays out parameters which ultimately limit pictorial representation to

functioning as an educational tool. That such a prescription has never been questioned within the historiography of Egyptian art demonstrates a continued, unexamined understanding of art as a means of education.

Notes

- 1 The religious scholar and jurist Muhammad ‘Abduh is considered the leader of the late nineteenth-century Islamic modernist movement. As grand mufti of Egypt ‘Abduh was head of the whole system of Islamic law and effected a range of reforms, issuing around 1,000 fatwas on numerous subjects. The three articles quoted in this chapter were all published anonymously, but everyone was aware of who the author was.
- 2 Rida launched *al-Manar* in 1898 and continued to publish the journal regularly until his death. ‘Abduh’s influence on *al-Manar* can be seen in the extensive essay following his death titled “Islam Is Afflicted by the Death of the Honorable Imam,” which extended over two issues.
- 3 Social Darwinism informed ‘Abduh’s travels and writing. For a rigorous study of the influences of social Darwinism on Arab intellectuals since *al-Nahda*, see Massad (2007).
- 4 An act or a saying ascribed to the prophet Muhammad.
- 5 A collection of *hadiths* considered authentic and trustworthy.
- 6 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36). All translations are my own.
- 7 Agence France Press (2006).
- 8 Agence France Press (2006). However, it is not entirely true that the issue was “closed”: Muhammad Rashid Rida argued in his work on the caliphate that statues were forbidden, partly because they involved wasting the people’s money on useless things and partly, as he says in one of his *fatwas*, because they belonged to European culture which was not to be imitated. He fought against the erection of a statue for Mustafa Kamil Pasha, the leader of the nationalist movement, who had died in 1908. According to Rashid Rida, statues belonged to pagan ceremonies and were therefore forbidden. Kreiser (1997, 114).
- 9 Narratives of modern Arab art history often take Egypt as their departure point. An example is Shabout (2007). Studies that frame their subject as modern “Islamic art” often start with Turkey, for example, ‘Ali (1997).
- 10 Frequently referenced histories of modern Egyptian art include Iskandar and al-Malakh (1991). For a source in English that relies on much the same material see Karnouk (2005).
- 11 Gharib (1998, 68).
- 12 ‘Imara (1991, 136).
- 13 ‘Ali (1997, 23).
- 14 ‘Ali (1997). ‘Ali suggests that these dignitaries bought works to please the khedive rather than out of “pure appreciation.”
- 15 ‘Ali (1997, 23). Cairo University (called the Egyptian University at the time of its founding) was opened the same year as the School of Fine Arts and, while the histories of the two institutions repeatedly intersect, studies of education in Egypt have largely ignored the latter.
- 16 Gharib (1998, 68).

- 17 Massad (2007, 12).
- 18 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 37).
- 19 An idol carved in wood or stone, prohibited by all three monotheistic religions.
- 20 Shabout (2007, 16).
- 21 Vernoit (2005, 20).
- 22 ‘Imara (1991, 136).
- 23 al-Razzaz (2007, 4).
- 24 Gharib (1998, 69).
- 25 Vernoit (2005, 32).
- 26 ‘Abduh’s pieces were not the only travel pieces included in *al-Manar*; this genre was quite popular and involved writers reporting back on travels in countries with a significant Muslim population or historic presence. This suggests an understanding of the traveler as a sort of diplomat, spreading *al-Manar*’s message and reporting back on the situation of Muslims worldwide.
- 27 Rifa’a al-Tahtawi was a writer, teacher, and translator who was among the first group of Egyptian students to be sent to Paris as part of Muhammad ‘Ali’s educational missions. al-Tahtawi recorded impressions of Paris in a famous work entitled *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*, translated as *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric* (1826–1831), a sort of *Description de l’Egypte* in reverse (al-Tahtawi 2004).
- 28 For example, in his January 19, 1904 entry he includes a subsection entitled “The Tourist’s Need to Have Knowledge of Languages, and Which of Them is Most Useful,” in which he expresses a frustration at his limited abilities to communicate without a translator.
- 29 Hourani (1995, 135), quoting Rashid Rida.
- 30 [‘Abduh] (1903, 737). An interest in a historic Muslim influence that extends beyond the Arab world is a recurring focus in *al-Manar*. For an article on Muslims in India see “The Renaissance of Muslim Indians” (1898, 20).
- 31 ‘Abduh repeatedly refers to the Muslim conquest and rule of Sicily starting in the ninth century as “Arab.” Similarly the “we” of the community he is addressing is never clearly defined; it could be Egyptian, Arab, or even Muslim.
- 32 [‘Abduh] (1904b, 34).
- 33 [‘Abduh] (1904b, 34).
- 34 These included the national archives which were first established in the Citadel in 1828, the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities in 1835, the National Library in 1870, and the Giza Zoo with an onsite taxidermist’s building, housing many endangered species and a selection of endemic fauna in 1891.
- 35 For a more detailed explanation of Auguste Comte’s influence on ‘Abduh see Hourani (1995, 139–140).
- 36 El Shakry (2007, 11).
- 37 When referring to the title, *al-suwar* is translated as “images” to best capture the broadness of the term.
- 38 Hourani (1995, 132).
- 39 Hourani (1995, 133).
- 40 Hourani (1995, 134–135).
- 41 Hourani (1995, 134).
- 42 Mitchell suggests that “it was perhaps modeled on the Lord Brougham’s Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, the organization set up to teach the values of self-discipline and industriousness to the working class of England” (1991, 90).

- 43 Mitchell (1991, 90).
- 44 Mitchell (1991, 90).
- 45 Vernoit (2005, 31). The “Transvaal fatwa” issued in 1903 addresses questions related to the situation of Muslims in the Transvaal (South Africa), and is perhaps ‘Abduh’s most famous fatwa.
- 46 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 47 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38).
- 48 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 49 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 50 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 37).
- 51 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
- 52 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35). This is the only moment in the fatwa when ‘Abduh makes a specific reference to an artist, or an artwork (although he does not describe it as such) and the choice of Raphael, celebrated for his draftsmanship, is a telling choice, particularly as ‘Abduh develops his understanding of drawing and painting.
- 53 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
- 54 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
- 55 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 56 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 57 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38).
- 58 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38–39).
- 59 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 39).
- 60 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
- 61 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36–37).

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Congolese and Belgian Appropriations of the Colonial Era

The Commissioned Work of Tshelantende (Djilatendo) and Its Reception

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(*Translated from German by Gitti Salami*)

Overview

While Europeans regarded three-dimensional works as synonymous with African art for a very long time, painting of African provenance, in comparison, received initial attention (and finally acceptance) as an artistic genre only much later. For one thing, as body painting and mural painting are essentially bound to a person or place and ephemeral, they could not be viewed outside of their original context. At best, they were documented in sketches or photographs.¹ Further, these genres were often attributed to women, and therefore were not included in the male-dominated colonial discourse.² In this context, watercolors from the late 1920s and 1930s by Congolese artists such as Lubaki and Tshelantende (Djilatendo) appear all the more remarkable.³ To this day, these works are housed in European museums and collections, particularly in Belgium, where they are largely accessible.⁴

The history of these commissioned paintings falls into several geographically and – with some minor overlap – also temporally distinct chapters of African art history. First, the paintings are of their time and place of origin, that is, they reflect the tension between local “tradition” and European influence that arose under conditions of colonialism at the time of their genesis. Watercolors from the Congo, supplemented by documentation provided by the Belgian colonial officer Georges Thiry (whose literary pseudonym was Guy Dulonje), serve as primary sources for the reconstruction of historical conditions during this period.⁵

Their subsequent history revolves around Europe’s reception of the watercolors in the years just before and after World War II. It demonstrates once again that Africans in the Congo were not only subjected to direct Belgian influence and oppression, but

were also, even in the realm of art, confronted with the colony's adherence to European values and criteria. Of extraordinary significance for this period is Gaston-Denis Périer, who addresses himself in his autobiography with an ironic implication as "*employé du Ministère*,"⁶ and who took responsibility for the care and the display of the Congolese watercolors in Brussels. As curator and spokesperson he made their reception a priority.

The discourse surrounding the documentation, protection and promotion of Congolese art continued after World War II. Eventually, from 1979 onwards, the watercolors from the Belgian Congo were presented to the public in a series of museum exhibitions that were conceptualized within the framework of reappraising Belgian colonial history. Newly awakened interest in contemporary artistic development in Africa after Congolese independence led to reevaluation of the watercolors, which, among other things, were then read as documentation of colonization. The watercolors, although barely noticed by European art connoisseurs of the 1920s and 1930s, were reconceptualized in hindsight as "precursors of modernity" or as early modernism within Congolese art history. This inaugurated a perspective that still prevails in discussions about contemporary art today.

The "discovery" of the watercolors (and to some degree, their "invention") was credited to the Belgian colonial officer Georges Thiry in the first versions of this history. Photographic documentation, however, suggests that the works had predecessors in earlier murals painted in the Congo region, which already reflected the societal upheaval and transformation of the late nineteenth century brought about by colonization and globalization.⁷ The boundaries between tradition and innovation here are blurred; one appears in the other and thereby gains contour.

Methodology of the Study

This chapter is based on the research for my publication "*Repeat When Necessary*" – *zum Verhältnis von Tradition und Moderne im malerischen Werk Tshelantendes (Djilatendo), Belgisch-Kongo*,⁸ which concentrates on the iconological analysis of watercolor paintings of Tshelantende in the collections of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I in Brussels, Belgium, the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren, Belgium, and the Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth, Germany⁹ and the history of their reception in Europe. References in this text (indicated by a combination of letter and number, e.g., J6) point to illustrations in the above publication. I have focused upon one artist and his oeuvre – and collected available biographical and historical data about the context of the production and reception of the paintings – in order to counter the notion of anonymous African artists and ahistorical categories in the analysis of African art. The paintings themselves were at the center of investigation and served as sources for insights into the aesthetic preferences of colonial times as well as evidence for the merging of local and global influences in the Belgian Congo.

Of all the early watercolor paintings from the Congo that reached Europe during the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Tshelantende's paintings especially represent the merging of local visual traditions with colonial topics. Tshelantende, of Bena Lulua descent, worked close to Chokwe and Kuba populations and their striking visual cultures as well as in the vicinity of American mission stations and significant trade centers; African and European influences thus existed side by side. In addition to his repertoire of figurative representation, which portrays everyday

colonial life, Tshelantende created a series of abstracts that were commissioned to document Congolese designs. They transmit insight into specific local dynamics and aesthetic preferences. The history of their reception in Belgium and Europe, documented in letters and articles, illuminates our understanding of how the discourse on African art developed over the course of the twentieth century.

Tshelantende's Personal History

The catalog accompanying the exhibition *Horizonte 79*, organized for the first festival of world cultures in Berlin, provides merely the artist's name, listing "No bibliographic details."¹⁰ In fact, neither Tshelantende's date of birth nor the day of his death are known. Thiry only recorded that Tshelantende lived in Luluabourg, today known as Kananga, an important Bena Lulua town on the banks of the Lulua River in the Kasai region of Congo,¹¹ until he moved downriver in the late 1920s¹² and resided with his wife and family in a compound in Ibaanshe, a village along the road between the administrative post at Mweka and the mission center of Luebo, home to American Presbyterians since 1891.

Georges Thiry writes in 1930 that he met an "already 40-year old black man in Ibaanshe."¹³ He further describes him as "a long, lean Black, the face decorated with the goatee and pointed mustache of a Lulua head of household."¹⁴ A black and white photograph from this time shows the artist, a tall man wearing a suit and a hat, as he presents the photographer with one of his large-scale artworks against a backdrop of Kuba ornaments.¹⁵

The name "Tshelantende" identifies the artist as a hunter.¹⁶ According to Bontinck, Tshelantende is a derivative of the verb *kuela*, to shoot, to fire a gun, and *ntende* (pl. *lutende*), projectile, bullet; accordingly *tshila ntende* means the person who shoots a gun. Thiry and Périer use the spelling Djilatendo, but Cornet decided on Tshyela Ntendu.¹⁷ The signatures on watercolors vary; they read: Thelatendu, tshelatendu, tshe latendu, Tshela tendu, Thelatedu, tshielatendu, thielatedo, and Tshalo Ntende. The artist was also known to work as a tailor who fabricated small patchwork aprons for sale¹⁸ and was further recognized as the author of a mural "showing a brass band of the *Force Publique* playing bugles."¹⁹ This painting provoked Thiry's attention. He commissioned the muralist to transfer its motifs onto cardboard. In his memoirs, Thiry described Tshelantende at work:

Sometimes he draws in the interior of his hut, whose door, in lieu of a doorknob, has a rope affixed to it; he works in a concentrated manner while chicks run around underneath his table, doves coo in a huge dovecote, and a rat naps under a bed with a raffia mattress . . . But most of the time, Tshelantende works outdoors at a coarsely fashioned table in front of his hut . . .²⁰

Like the murals, Tshelantende's works on paper were executed in view of the public. For his motifs, he leaned on local mural traditions, which, in the Kasai, where Kananga (Luluabourg) and Ibaanshe are located, date to the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century when people in the region took up plastering walls with mud. Such murals were executed by "amateurs,"²¹ self-trained – mainly male – artists in the vicinity of European settlements who developed their ability on the job and who were

not bound to the rules of other forms of art production. They established a figurative canon of forms and topics which included numerous depictions of colonial officers and the accessories of their European homes, such as chairs, vases, and flowerpots.²²

His Oeuvre

At first glance, given its recurring themes and style elements, Tshelantende's work appears uniform and cohesive. The watercolors, painted on cardboard of varying sizes (18.5×22.5 cm up to 150×65 cm), are often signed, and front and back are inscribed with clarifying labels written in French, presumably by his patron, Thiry. Figurative scenes about colonial life and the hunt are rendered in transparent watercolors, often framed or divided with ornamental bands, or both. Tshelantende filled the surface with decorative motifs even where a composition involves only a single figure (Figure 8.1).

In his painterly translation of anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic representations, Tshelantende relied on recurring strategies. Thus, he always formed the human body, which faces the viewer frontally, out of a basic geometric shape, the rectangle. It is topped by the head, shown in profile. Arms and legs extend from the four corners of the quadrilateral shape.

Only in a second working phase did the artist supply figures with a shirt, a dress, or a cassock, superimposing items of clothing on the figure in the manner of a paper doll. The geometric outline of the body thereby often remained visible through a coat of color.²³ Tshelantende added painted grids and lines to shirts and dresses as a decoration reminiscent of Kuba wooden engravings (Figure 8.2). The use of hatch-

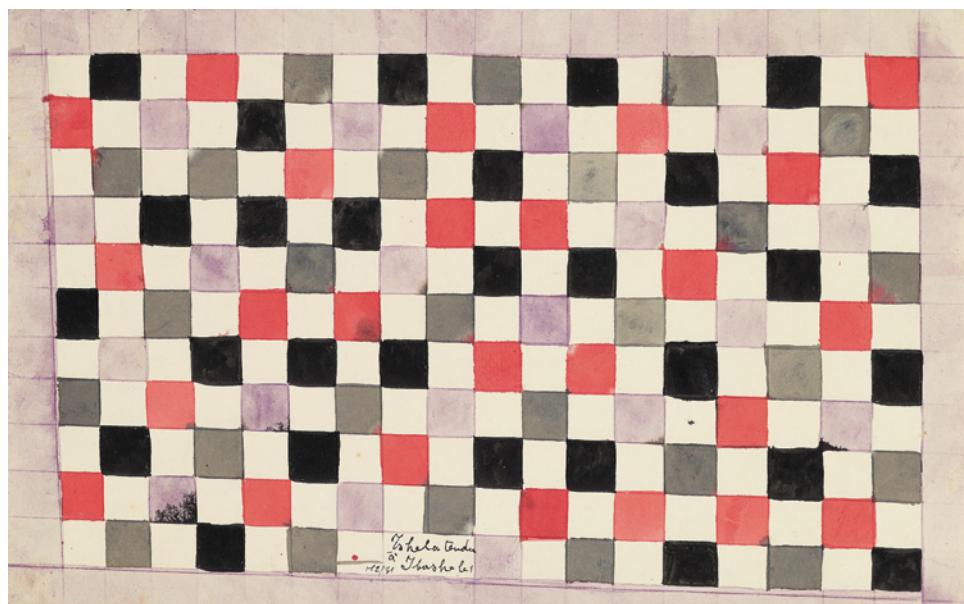


FIGURE 8.1 Tshela tendu of Ibashe (signature). Untitled, 1931. Watercolor on off-white paper, 32×50.3 cm. Collection of Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, G 00190 ZK, photograph courtesy Iwalewa-Haus.



FIGURE 8.2 Tshelantende (signature). Untitled (*Docteur, le rat d'... , Infermi*). Watercolor on paper, mended with needle and thread, 72.5 × 102 cm. Collection of Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, G 00204 ZK, photograph courtesy Iwalewa-Haus.

ing in his painting relates directly to the gourds made by his Chokwe neighbors, which were engraved with figures (both human and animal) that are similarly constructed from basic geometric forms. The latter's edges are dissolved through tightly spaced engraved grids and cross-hatches.²⁴

Tshelantende extended the use of basic schema to the physiognomy of all of his characters, for Africans as well as Europeans are shown with pointed noses. They all wear shoes – even during the hunt or while marching in the Force Publique,²⁵ and ladies wear fashionable skirts that end just above the knee. Schematization of animals in Tshelantende's work goes so far as to bestow monkeys, chameleons, and elephants with a similar head shape.²⁶ Humans and animals are differentiated only through clearly identifiable attributes and revealing habits. Thus, Europeans are supplied with a cassock, pipe, hat, dog, typewriter, horse, walking stick, or umbrella; a European man and his wife walk hand in hand and lead a dog by a leash as if they were hanging it from a noose. This characterization is strongly reminiscent of the invention of nicknames for Europeans. As Thiry noted, “Every white person receives a nickname. A businessman who eats a lot is called: ‘He, who is always hungry like a dog’; others are christened, ‘Mr. Shotgun,’ ‘Mr. Champagne,’ ‘Mr. Lightening,’ ‘Mr. Caution’...”²⁷ Such attributions derive from a distanced glance, an outsider’s perception. Isolated and out of context, they run the risk of perpetrating stereotypes.²⁸ Translated into images, observations made by “outsiders” are often misinterpreted as satirical and

misunderstood by the depicted “insiders.” For example, Lips’ 1937 study presents African representations of Europeans as caricatures.²⁹

Africans shown during the hunt and as serving in the Force Publique are furnished with bow and arrow, machete, spear, or shotgun. They carry gourds and large bags, pole a boat across the river, kill wild animals, and fight. They accompany and serve European women, and repair ships and airplanes. In Tshelantende’s accounts, Africans are unambiguously “agents,” while Europeans, men and women alike, remain static and motionless on chairs, behind typewriters, in cars and airplanes.

Tshelantende’s scenes involving historical and mystical figures are often supplemented with French names. For example, in a hunting scene, two armed men are labeled “*le chasseur Beya*” (the hunter Beya) and “*le chasseur Ilunga*” (the hunter Ilunga). Tshinbinda Ilunga is the famous ancestor of the Chokwe, a legendary hunter and bringer of culture. Another watercolor shows two men by a fireplace; it is undersigned “*Le feu de foyer. Bena kapia.*” *Kapyà* is a term used for a fire in a Lulua hearth, which, along with the fire drill (and, later, shotguns), formed the leadership insignia of the Lulua king, or Mukenge, and allowed him to communicate with ancestors.³⁰ These labels were belatedly added to the scenes, presumably by Thiry, who (in contrast to Tshelantende) possessed a great interest in documentation. By inscribing these images with written text, Thiry provided his compatriots with cultural and historical data.

Parrots, chickens, snakes, elephants, toads, leopards, chameleons, dogs, spiders, antelopes, and horses that inhabit the painting are distinguished via tails, whiskers, tusks, and big ears. However, animals are primarily identified by their tracks, with which Tshelantende replaced their feet, hooves, or claws;³¹ the artist chose the distinctive imprint that identifies an animal for a hunter long before they come face to face.

The zoomorphic scenes are brought into conjunction with local stories. When Thiry arrived at his post in the Kasai, he felt that he had arrived in the land of fables.³² Establishing a clear link between the scenes and specific folktales is not possible. Perhaps this is simply because of our ignorance concerning the narratives in question, but one suspects that the artist left it to local viewers to free painted figures from their stasis and to insert them into well-known stories – as when those listening to (or viewing) a fable might take on the role of participant and add their own interpretations. Unlike a story that has been committed to paper, narratives in African oral traditions may shift according to the speaker and the context, and this conceptual preference for flexibility is discernible in the visual arts as well.³³

Figures, animals, and plants fill the picture plane evenly; they are neither pushed into a spatial perspective nor duplicated as shadows. Tshelantende stacked up numerous parallel ground lines, resulting in a side by side presentation of figures and actions. The lack of linear perspective, and the absence of overlapping bodies, again underscore Tshelantende’s adherence to local design principles, rules based upon repetition, clarity, and reproducibility of motifs.

In addition to his figurative paintings, Tshelantende’s oeuvre includes an extensive collection of paintings of ornamental motifs. Georges Thiry commissioned them in order to document the Kasai region’s wealth in patterns after he had received a letter from Périer, dated October 12, 1931:

I will offer them to the well established Galerie du Centaure that is near the museum and the Place Royale. The director appears to be ready to embrace a new exhibition of dark-complexioned paintings. He is particularly interested in geometrics . . .³⁴

The Kasai region's rich traditions of diverse designs in Chokwe, Lulua, and Kuba woodcarving and weaving were well known. In the 1920s, for example, Kuba decoration asserted an influence on New York fashion design.³⁵ Tshelantende transplanted triangles, fish scales, grids, rhombi and circles, hourglass and zigzag patterns from local objects onto these commissioned works.³⁶ Aided by a ruler, pencil, and stylus, he laid out vertically and horizontally oriented decorative bands, centrally located motifs that are mirrored along the painting ground's middle axis, and frames whose geometric patterns remained visible through the watercolors (see Figure 8.1). The central subjects, which are characterized by greater vitality and dynamism, were drawn free-hand and in some of the compositions dissolved the rigid patterns almost completely. Strong light–dark contrasts show that Tshelantende transposed into a painterly format an aesthetic derived from woodcarving techniques; the latter, being based on the interplay of depressed and raised surfaces, is particularly accentuated by harsh light. A strong light–dark contrast is also an aesthetic criterion in the fabrication of embroidered and tufted Kuba raffia fibre textiles, to which Tshelantende's abstract paintings refer as well.³⁷

A characteristic of design from the region is repetition, an indispensable component of a society's perpetuation of "tradition" in speech, music, rhythm, and dance as well. Thus Chernoff wrote, in describing drum music,

the power of the music is not only captured by repetition, it is magnified . . . the main concern of an African drummer is not so much to create new rhythms as to give form and organization to those already there . . . In short, a drummer uses repetition to reveal the depth of the musical structure.³⁸

Surface patterns function as a visual structuring device that establishes tradition through repetition and reproducibility of social values and messages. Realizing that rigid systems of codification are incapable of survival, sculptors constantly modify "traditional" patterns. Variation is multifarious and quite desirable; patterns in Kuba raffia embroideries are not duplicated in an exact manner. "The Kuba avoidance of repeat patterning in fact emerges as an aesthetic preference."³⁹ Deviation and disruption of patterns thus constitute part of the conceptual basis of artistic creation and thought processes,⁴⁰ and are not to be attributed to inadequacy regarding the execution of designs.

In some of his paintings of ornamental motifs, Tshelantende builds up a particular design principle only to disrupt it through color, rhythm, or his treatment of line. Often such variation is so restrained that its perception requires a second glance. Irritations serve as springboards for the eye, lead viewers on new paths, and prevent them from becoming entangled in rigid pattern combinations. But the interplay between rigid ground lines and painterly forms, and the color disruptions, omissions, or asymmetries do not threaten the balance of the composition. In his compositions Tshelantende never loses sight of the whole.

Reception History

The cultural, historical and personal backgrounds of viewers will determine which perspectives they choose when contemplating artworks. Reception history thus reveals as much about the recipient as it does about the observed artwork.

Central African artists such as Lubaki, Tshelantende, Massalai, and Ngoma created watercolor paintings during a relatively short time span, from the end of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s. However, the history of their reception, conservation, and publication in Europe, and the discourse surrounding them, covers a much longer period, disrupted by World War II. In Europe, especially in Belgium, the Congolese paintings were labeled in a generalizing manner as “African” and for some time this superficial classification rose above more specific commentaries.

Belgian explorers who traveled through Africa in the late nineteenth century did not differ from their colleagues from other European countries. Along with new insights into geography, flora, and fauna, they too brought home material evidence of their journeys. These objects constituted the first ethnographic collections in Belgium. Initially they were housed in the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Brussels.⁴¹ But, as early as 1884, plans for a separate museum were underway. King Leopold II ordered that additional artifacts from his territories in Africa were to be confiscated, both during punitive military operations and through administrative actions, and brought to Europe.⁴² His immediate objective was to present them to the public in order to garner his subjects’ support for his private undertakings in Central Africa.⁴³ This booty constituted the foundation for the later collections of the Musée Royale d’Afrique Centrale (RMCA) in Tervuren, whose construction began in 1901 and which opened in the presence of King Albert I in 1910.⁴⁴

Interest in Africa’s cultural heritage and efforts to preserve it (not only in European museums, but also in the colonies) grew as a result of the increasing appreciation for Africa’s achievements in craft and art by Belgians and other Europeans. In 1922, the Association des Amis de l’Art Congolais was founded. Gaston-Denis Périer wrote about its goals in the journal *Congo* in 1925, “Indigenous art must be guarded, must be preserved and, if this should be necessary, its ethnic alignment should be improved.”⁴⁵ He expressed a desire for the preservation of tradition within what he supposed to be ethnic boundaries, and for continuity in Central African art, without considering the economic and political impact of Belgian colonial rule. Generally, by this point in time, the makers of the treasured objects had not entered the field of European vision. However, Périer did write about his interest in African peoples:

The colonizing nations have long believed that their influences acted upon the passive masses. They willingly imagined that they would be modeling the primitive world in their own image. They did not notice that, unlike their own recent laws and rules, the system of thought and the souls of even illiterate peoples could offer a radiant and accessible beauty.⁴⁶

He went on to express, unequivocally, his belief that an appropriate way to handle art objects from the colonies should include contact with their producers.

Gaston-Denis Périer was a high-level official in the colonial administration who later on became the director responsible for the area of “library, documentation, press and propaganda” (as described in his autobiography),⁴⁷ while Georges Thiry was a colonial officer posted to the Congo. Their professional roles provide a backdrop for their engagement with Tshelantende’s work. Their support for African art also developed out of their interest in contemporary art in Belgium. It was therefore not surprising that they vigorously supported the reception and preservation of traditional as well as modern African artifacts as art, for the watercolors of artists from the colonies

stood, for them, in harmony with developments in contemporary European art. In fact, the African artworks distinguished themselves through a “simplicity,” which Périer juxtaposed with European avant-garde’s “false naïveté.”⁴⁸ Here Périer agrees with the assessment of his contemporary Carl Einstein,⁴⁹ who asserted that contemporary European artists could not imitate African art without being unoriginal.

Reception before 1945

Périer wrote in 1925 in the *Congo*, using the paternalistic language of his day, “Is it not touching to realize that illiterate Blacks from darkest Africa have so influenced the artists and amateurs of civilized nations for about 15 years?”⁵⁰ He placed Central African art on the same level as classical European art and appreciated its qualities and characteristics: “The art of Blacks is less anecdotal, more idealistic, to say it straight out. By neglecting details, it retains its power in its planes, in the treatment of lines and in the architecture of the whole.”⁵¹ Périer was interested in the practices and the sources of inspiration for the artists who created the artworks: “It seems after all as if the Black artist expects a sort of inspiration. Within the boundaries of tradition, he has the desire to create something different . . .” and “the art of Blacks does not copy the original slavishly.”⁵² Périer thereby contradicted prevalent European ideas concerning the immutability of “tradition” in African societies and cultures.

Thiry began his service as a colonial officer in 1926 in Bukama, Shaba province. He was instructed to focus his attention on local craft and art, among other things. Enthusiastic about the stories and paintings he encountered, he took watercolors by Albert Lubaki, an ivory carver and mural painter, from Elisabethville (today Lubumbashi) to Périer while on leave in Brussels in 1929. Together, the two men decided to exhibit the paintings the very same year.⁵³ Thus Lubaki’s watercolors were first shown in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels within the framework of an exhibition of “*art populaire*,” works by French and Belgian artists who were self-taught, or “folk artists.” However, of the 163 paintings, Périer was able to sell only two.⁵⁴ Other exhibitions in Paris, Rome, and Geneva followed the same year. Despite his lack of financial success in these ventures, Périer revealed himself as an effective advocate. In numerous publications, writers note that “Périer is there, one might say, every time that it might be possible to present a ‘paper’ concerning Congo or Congolese culture, until he repeats himself.”⁵⁵ He was, in addition, a connoisseur of the contemporary art and literature scene with a refined sense of the zeitgeist.⁵⁶

In Paris, Lubaki’s watercolors were mistakenly attributed to the French painter Carlo Rim and the name “Lubaki” was treated as the latter’s pseudonym.⁵⁷ This confusion proved Périer’s notion that certain characteristics of the “*art vivant*”⁵⁸ from the Congo matched European avant-garde art. He saw the connection between the continents not as a one-way street, but rather perceived the possibility of reciprocal exchange.

After the museum-going public received the exhibition with reservations, and curators rejected a possible exhibition of Lubaki’s work alongside classical African works, Périer requested in writing in September 1930 that Thiry, for the time being, refrain from sending further paintings. Disappointed by his countrymen’s preferences, Périer wrote, “After 50 years of colonization, Belgians discover classical Congolese art! It is enough to drive you out of your skin?”⁵⁹ Périer is even more explicit in a letter to Thiry dated November 12 of the same year, “Further, it is dishonest to praise traditional black art while simultaneously ignoring the Congolese art of our days, which

you discovered for us.”⁶⁰ To this day, the discourse of European art connoisseurs and collectors continues to perpetrate the notion that there is a division between so-called traditional and contemporary artistic production in Africa.⁶¹ Questions regarding the relationship between preserving and renewing ancestral art forms often entail the fear that African artists will thoughtlessly adopt foreign, that is, European aesthetic criteria, even though artistic influence in the opposite direction (i.e., European artists adopting African aesthetic forms) has been seen in a positive light as “inspiration.”

Thiry was transferred to Mweka/Kasai in 1930, where he soon established contact with Tshelantende. The latter’s murals had caught his attention while he was traveling through Ibaanshe on official business. Thiry supplied the artist “with paper, ink, and blocks of watercolor paint.”⁶² Despite the objections articulated in Périer’s letter, these watercolors by Tshelantende reached Brussels. They were first shown and reproduced by Périer as part of the illustrations for a volume on Congolese tales published in Brussels 1931, entitled *L’éléphant qui marche sur les œufs*. Périer, much to the chagrin of Thiry, attributed all of the tales to a single author, the mythical “Badibanga.”⁶³ As a result of the discussion about editorial rights, the relationship between Périer und Thiry soured. Thiry refused to loan Périer any works for further exhibition and claimed sole copyright for works in his collections. He fought for a position of authority: “I wish that my name occupy the proper place in this.”⁶⁴ Thiry returned to Belgium at the end of 1932, but he continued to correspond with Lubaki until 1939.⁶⁵ Lubaki and Tshelantende had to stop their work in 1936 due to lack of imported art materials.⁶⁶ The only further information about Tshelantende relates that he ran a small shop in Ibaanshe in 1953. There he sold fabric decorated with Kuba motifs.⁶⁷

Périer continued to engage with the art, culture, and craft of the colonies from his post in Brussels. When COPAMI, La Commission de Protection des Arts et Métiers Indigènes, was founded in 1939, Jules Destrée became the first president and Gaston-Denis Périer the general secretary.⁶⁸ The statutes of this new society acknowledged a Congolese art whose artistic expression adapted itself to transformed societal conditions. They argued that “the original conception, which the African possesses, of beauty as a spontaneous expression of a special sensibility” should be preserved throughout all transformative processes.⁶⁹ Protection and promotion of African arts were to be guaranteed under the aegis of European masters, teachers, and patrons:

The essential task of the European teacher emerges out of the need to comprehend the inspiration and techniques involved in indigenous traditional art, and the necessity to try to penetrate the black soul and to aim for its free unfolding.⁷⁰

Hence, European art history was to be transmitted in controlled doses: “Initially, introduce him [the African student] only to the purest and most select forms of foreign art.”⁷¹ Further, it was decided to especially promote “arts populaires” or “arts vivants” as these seemed appropriate for African societies. As early as 1929 Périer had written,

I understood that popular art was born in the lap of nature and that it is for this reason that it disappeared from civilized countries, whose inhabitants alienated themselves more and more from the magic of fields and forests; I grasped that this popular art still manifested itself in the Congo.⁷²

As an official organization, COPAMI never questioned colonialism, nor European hegemony. Its members' good intentions appeared to justify the standards they devised for African art on the basis of a paternalistic attitude far away from artworks' geographic origin and without input from the artists. Europeans continued to use Africa as a site onto which they could project their desires for untouched nature and human spontaneity, even though, in retrospect, they had set out to destroy the ostensibly idyllic African landscape. The treasures of African art that reached Europe and America contributed to cover up the plunder and destruction that took place on the African continent – and continue to do so to this day.

Reception after 1945

In 1946, Jean Leyder introduced the meeting of the Société Royale Belge de Géographie with the remark: "The Black African World – notably – has given its maximum effort during the war; . . . Let us now consider it with a redoubled human interest."⁷³ Among the participants was Gaston-Denis Périer, who used the opportunity to assess the status of Congolese painting in Belgium anew: "The modern [African art] sees itself neglected by scholar and by museum curators."⁷⁴ He recalled his own efforts (and those of Thiry, though without mentioning him by name) on behalf of Congolese artists of the 1930s and judged the watercolors, now from hindsight, as "a later, more evolved, more arbitrary, more individual art" than traditional art.⁷⁵ Individuality showed itself, among other things, in artists' signatures. Painting by Congolese artists now constituted for him a free art, because the artists had liberated it from its debt to applied arts and established the new genre of "pictures intended to be hung on a wall."⁷⁶ During this session it was suggested that the group renew contact with Lubaki and Tshelantende and ask them, or their compatriots ("ses frères de race"), about the meaning of forms, patterns, and fables in their paintings.⁷⁷ This plan was never implemented.

In 1959, following his innermost convictions, Périer donated the bulk of his Congolese watercolors to the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I in Brussels, and not to an ethnological collection. In an accompanying letter to Lebeer, the conservator of the library's Cabinet des Estampes (museum of prints), where the paintings are housed to this day, Périer wrote:

You were the first in Belgium to be interested in the 'free' painting of some Blacks in Belgian Congo . . . I would hope that these painted cartoons, which I offer you, would be displayed in the print museum in our capital in order to be conserved and studied, rather than in a provincial institution. Depending upon what you decide, they may be loaned out temporarily for their artistic rather than for their ethnographic qualities.⁷⁸

He clearly distanced himself from all ethnographic approaches. After the death of Périer's widow in 1971, another cache of more than 500 Congolese paintings and documents were found "under Périer's mattress."⁷⁹ Most of these ended up in Ivan Dierickx's private collection in Brussels where they have been largely inaccessible to researchers.⁸⁰ Some watercolors from this collection were first shown to the public in 1979, in the exhibition *Kunst aus Afrika*, part of *Horizonte – Festival der Weltkulturen*, in Berlin.⁸¹ In 1985, the Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth presented its collection of

12 paintings of Lubaki und Tshelantende, acquired from the Dierickx collection. In 1991, the watercolors were included in *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, curated by the Center for African Art in New York, where they constituted some of the few artworks dating to the period before World War II.

From a European perspective, the Congolese watercolors of the 1930s enjoyed a special position within Africa's modern art from the outset, for, as early examples of African paintings on paper, they began a new "tradition" of African paintings "for the wall."⁸² It is from this time forward that portable African paintings reached the European continent. Gaston-Denis Périer, an expert on the contemporary art and literature scene, received them in Brussels and introduced them as art of the Belgian colonial period, not as ethnographic material. Périer described the artists of the 1930s as "modern colorists" and their artworks as "contemporary Black art" and "modern African art."⁸³ He supported their presentation in galleries, that is to say, in sites of European art, so as to reach a Belgian audience: "The production of modern watercolor artists (or "colorists") is not yet widely respected. The exclusion of which they are the victims is another way to kill the artistic sense of a people."⁸⁴

Périer stood alone, in terms of both his engagement with, and his evaluation of, the Congolese art. Only after his death in 1971, after the rediscovery of the watercolors, did the discussion continue and, in hindsight, was Périer's assessment shared. In 1989, Beier wrote on the occasion of the exhibition at the Iwalewa-Haus,

Thus, in a sense one can describe these works as the first "modern" artworks from Africa – modern in the sense that they arose outside of any traditional context, that the artists signed their work, and that they regularly exhibited their work in European art galleries.⁸⁵

In the 1992 exhibition, *La naissance de la peinture contemporaine en Afrique centrale 1930–1970* in the Royal Tervuren Museum, Congolese watercolors from the museum's holdings and the collection of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I stood for the beginning of contemporary painting in the former colony.⁸⁶ The selection of the time period from 1930 to 1970 emphasized the unbroken continuity of Belgian initiatives.

The year 1930 and the documented and constructed "discovery" by Georges Thiry had served as the point of departure for classification. The signatures, the watercolors' distance from "tradition," and the fact that they were portable and had been shown in European galleries, functioned as criteria of artistic modernity. This assignment was external and the result of a narrow perspective.

Modernity was not a territorially limited condition at the end of the nineteenth century. As a result of European industrialization and Europe's strong and growing need for raw materials and consumer markets, Africa and Europe were economically intertwined. The Belgian colony was particularly dependent on developments in Belgium; the impact of the world wars and the world economic crisis affected it. Various missions introduced European and American school systems, and Christian values, partially transmitted through artworks, left their mark on the visual culture.⁸⁷ But cultural exchange – even under conditions of unequal power relations – was neither a European invention, nor was it limited to Europeans. As elsewhere, Africa's experience and "tradition" involved reciprocal cultural influences and radical breaks. Particularly the Kasai region had experienced significant upheaval prior to the

1930s – first, contact with the Portuguese and their African companions, their “*ambiguistas*,”⁸⁸ then as a Belgian colony. The infrastructure of the region was developed, and transport of agricultural produce, rubber, and other goods to Europe was facilitated by waterways, roads, and, as of 1928, a railroad that reached from Bukama to Port Franqui. People in the Congo dealt with these innovations involuntarily or voluntarily.

Despite entrenched colonial power relationships, appropriations were not a one-sided option. Jewsiewicki vehemently rejects the notion that self-determined appropriation is the exclusive privilege of Europe: “We have obscured the invention of a West in the African imagination. This invention has been at work in Central Africa for a century. Cultural intermediaries there have cannibalized the West without losing their identity . . . ”⁸⁹ Examples of this could be found in murals, in which scenes of everyday colonial life and its protagonists were presented in a realistic manner. Jewsiewicki assigns journalistic attributes to the murals and Haselberger locates social developments in their changing subjects, styles, and makers.⁹⁰ Visualization afforded colonial subjects the possibility to objectify and to distance themselves from the social changes in order to reflect upon them, and to insert themselves into a discourse on their own living conditions. Mural paintings were public affairs that involved on-site, oral commentary and embellishment by viewers, an aspect of their history that was not shared by the watercolors discussed above. Clearly, these murals were not directed at Europeans, nor were they made for European galleries and museums. Comparable to storytelling, they constructed a communal, albeit short-lived, memory. In this sense, the 1930s watercolors, which, aside from the hunt and decorative motifs primarily feature everyday colonial life, can be “deciphered as an intellectual and artistic form of reading the colonial West.”⁹¹ Interestingly, the continuation of the painting of the 1930s may be found in the so-called “*peinture populaire*” (or “sign painters”) of the last 40 years.⁹² This, too, is an art that arose for the street in that its immediacy of style, color, and theme was directed towards an urban audience.

In his paintings, Tshelantende entered a discourse, which forced upon him – as well as opened up to him – the choice between local and global themes. He employed African as well as European visual templates and differentiated between local and imported ones. As already described, recognizable stylistic influences are the engraved gourds of the Chokwe as well as the raffia embroideries of the Kuba. In figurative scenes that involve repetition, he utilized clear outlines and granted various forms an egalitarian coexistence, following the rules of ornamentation of these artistic traditions. Yet his style was further influenced by the realistic representations of photographs, postcards, and newspapers.⁹³ While photography freed artists from the obligations of realistic representation in Europe, in Africa it led to a new path – the presentation of visual reality.

In fact, with his visualization of colonial life, his elucidation of Europeans’ peculiarities, and sale of his work to the colonial officer, Tshelantende entered into an intellectual exchange with the European colonial Other. Vice versa, Tshelantende’s oeuvre offered Europeans an opportunity to contemplate the interaction between European and African cultures under conditions of colonialism, to initiate a dialog about participation in one and the same reality, and to consider the nature of contemporaneity. This opportunity, however, was not taken. Périer stood alone in his attempt to demolish a constructed temporal distance between African modernity and modern European artistic developments. Obviously, paintings from the Congo, given their medium and

their narrative themes, did not conform to the views of Périer's compatriots, whose conceptions of African art were limited to ritual and courtly sculptures by so-called anonymous artists.⁹⁴ They were not concerned with the Congolese artists' viewpoint and were even less interested in being led towards a new frame of mind. It was precisely the early works' modernity and contemporaneity that got in the way of their reception in Europe.

The commissioned works by Lubaki and Tshelantende⁹⁵ were not the earliest artistic responses to the conditions of modernity. To treat them as the beginning of African modernism therefore reduces them, defining them too strongly in terms of Europeans' reach. Their predecessors were the murals, which can be read as acts of emancipation. Paintings on paper produced for a European market may rather have primarily constituted an opportunity to make money.

Notes

- 1 For example, murals by a female painter, Misses Orok, Ossidinge/Cameroon, can be found in Mansfeld (1908, 146–148); photographs of 1930s murals by the Bidyogo are reproduced in Bernatzik (1944, figs. 123, 124).
- 2 Haselberger (1957, 217–221, 233).
- 3 Périer lists 1929 as the earliest date for the arrival of Lubaki's paintings in Europe (Périer 1948, 60). Works by Ngoma, from the Kasongo region, and Massalai, from the Kwilu district, arrived later. See Vellut (1992, 10).
- 4 Bibliothèque Royale Albert Premier, the Musée Royale d'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, and the collection of Dierickx, all in Brussels; and the Iwalewa-Haus in Bayreuth.
- 5 Thiry (1982).
- 6 Halen (1999–2000, 149). He refers to Périer (1957).
- 7 Wyss (2010).
- 8 Langenohl (2003).
- 9 The illustrations include 67 paintings of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert Premier collection, 7 paintings of the Tervuren, and 7 paintings of the Bayreuth collection. At the time of my research the Dierickx collection was not accessible.
- 10 *Moderne Kunst* (1979).
- 11 Libata (1987, 103).
- 12 Thiry (1982, 25–45, citation 31).
- 13 Thiry (1982, 34). Original reads: “*Ce nègre, âgé déjà de 40 ans*” (Cornet 1989, 27). Périer made Tshelantende five years older (1936, 8).
- 14 Thiry (1982, 34). Original reads: “*ce noir, maigre et long, au visage orné d'une barbiche et de moustaches effilées de chef de famille lulua . . .*”
- 15 The photograph of Tshelantende is reproduced in *Moderne Kunst* (1979) and in Bihalji-Merin (1989).
- 16 Bontinck (1992, 156).
- 17 Cornet (1989, 26–27).
- 18 Vansina (2010, 162). Vansina wrote, “His specialty was the manufacture of small aprons approved by the Catholic missionaries as decent wear for the otherwise scantily clad Lulua women.” Further evidence for Tshelantende’s profession as a tailor can be found in Figure 8.2: the tear in the painting was carefully mended with needle and thread!

- 19 Bontinck (1992, 156). Original reads: “*représentant une fanfare de la Force Publique jouant au clairon.*”
- 20 Thiry (1982, 34). Original reads: “*Parfois, il dessine à l'intérieur de la case dont la porte est munie d'une bobine en guise de clinche; il travaille patiemment tandis que des poussins passent sous sa table, que des pigeons roucoulent dans le pigeonnier géant et qu'un rat sommeille sous le lit au matelas de fibres . . . Mais le plus souvent Djilatendo œuvre, au grand air, sur une table grossière, devant sa hutte . . .*”
- 21 Redinha (1953, 9).
- 22 See Jewsiwicki (1991a, 317); Haselberger (1957, fig. 20).
- 23 Hilton-Simpson (1969, 52). This is particularly clearly discernible in fig. J6 in Langenohl (2003), where the lower seam of a shirt between a figure’s legs was accidentally left out.
- 24 See Fontinha and Videira (1963, figs. XXII, XXVI).
- 25 In photographs and in documentary films of the 1920s, however, Congolese in the colonial services usually appear barefooted. See Genval (1926).
- 26 See Langenohl (2003, fig. T6).
- 27 Thiry (1982, 26). Original reads: “*Chaque blanc est baptisé d'un nom ironique; un gérant de magasin, grand mangeur, est appelé 'Celui qui a toujours une faim de chien', en outre on rencontre Monsieur Fusil, Monsieur Champagne, Monsieur Foudre, Monsieur Attention . . .*”
- 28 Cf. Vansina (2010, 35–44).
- 29 See Kramer (1987, 8).
- 30 Kantshama and Luboya (1986, 120).
- 31 Cf. Frobenius (1907, 205). In the illustrations out of the sketchbooks of Frobenius’ attendants, the guinea fowl was identified through spotted plumage, the bat through its zigzag flight pattern, and the lion through its tracks. Two of the cited illustrations were made by Luba people, neighbors of the Luluwa.
- 32 Thiry was of course an outsider.
- 33 See Vansina (1966, 31).
- 34 See Bontinck (1992, 167). Original reads: “*Je vais les soumettre à l'ancienne galerie du Centaure . . . Le directeur semble disposé à tenter une nouvelle exposition de peintures mélaniennes. Il s'intéresse surtout aux géométries . . .*”
- 35 Soppelsa (2010).
- 36 Périer drew a connection between this ornamentation and engraved gourds of the far-flung region of the Lower Congo, that is, Yombe and Kongo decorative arts. His further search for cultural influences was oriented towards Egypt. In Beier (1989, 6).
- 37 Washburn (1990, 46–47).
- 38 Chernoff (1979, 112).
- 39 Mack (1980, 167).
- 40 Interpretation in the literature on interrupted symmetries and pattern irregularities often remains speculative. It ascribes to the latter “some sort of cultural codifying function” (Washburn and Crowe 1988, 262, 264).
- 41 Regarding King Leopold II’s collections, see Salmon (1992, 182–186).
- 42 Salmon (1992, 182–183).
- 43 After 1885, King Leopold II confiscated the État Indépendant du Congo as private property. See Hochschild (2000, 125).
- 44 King Leopold was forced to relinquish his territories to the Belgian state in 1906.

- 45 Salmon (1992, 190). “*Il (Périer) y rappelle d’abord que ‘l’art indigène’ doit être ‘protégé, conservé et, le cas échéant, perfectionné dans son orientation racique [sic.]’*”
- 46 In Halen (1999–2000, 150). The original (in *La Renaissance d’Occident*, no. 2, May 1927, 171–172) reads, “*Les nations colonisatrices ont cru longtemps que leur influence s’exerçait sur une masse passive. Elles s’imaginaient volontiers qu’elles allaient modeler le monde primitif selon leurs guises. Elles ne s’apercevaient pas que, débordant leurs lois et leurs règlements toujours tardifs, la pensée, l’âme des peuples même illettrés offraient des beautés rayonnantes et communicatives.*”
- 47 Périer (1957).
- 48 Halen (1999–2000, 143).
- 49 Einstein (1922, 5).
- 50 Périer 1925, in Salmon (1992, 192). Original reads: “*N’est-il pas émouvant de constater que les nègres illettrés de la plus ténébreuse Afrique ont ainsi influencé, depuis une quinzaine d’années, les artistes et les amateurs des nations les plus civilisées?*”
- 51 Périer 1925, in Salmon (1992, 191). Original reads: “*L’art des Noirs est moins anecdote, plus idéaliste, disons-le franchement. Négligeant les détails, sa force réside dans les plans, la ligne et l’architecture de l’ensemble.*”
- 52 Périer (1925), in Salmon (1992, 191). Original reads: “*Il semble donc que l’artiste nègre attende une sorte d’inspiration. Dans les limites de la tradition, il a le désir de créer autre chose . . .*” and “*. . . l’art des Noirs ne copie pas servilement le modèle . . .*”
- 53 Bontinck (1992, 155).
- 54 Salmon (1992, 194).
- 55 Original reads: “*Périer est là, dirait-on, chaque fois qu’il a moyen de placer un ‘papier’ à propos de la culture au Congo ou du Congo, quitte à se répéter*” (Halen 1999–2000, 140–141).
- 56 In 1925, Périer facilitated the publication of the French translation of Joseph Conrad’s *In the Heart of Darkness* (Stengers 1992, 29).
- 57 Odette Pannetier in *Candide*, Paris, November 21, 1929, cited in Beier (1989, 4).
- 58 “L’art vivant” in the sense of contemporary, avant-garde, simple, and popular. See Halen (1999–2000, 143).
- 59 “*Nach 50 Jahren Kolonisation entdecken die Belgier die klassische kongolesische Kunst! Es ist zum aus der Haut fahren!*” Périer in Beier (1989, 7). Translation from original into German by Beier.
- 60 “*Außerdem ist es verlogen, die traditionelle schwarze Kunst zu loben, während man gleichzeitig die kongolesische Kunst unserer Tage ignoriert, die Sie für uns entdeckt haben.*” Périer in Beier (1989, 7). Translation from original into German by Beier.
- 61 Hecht and Kawik (2010) gives an example of combining classical objects and contemporary art in one catalog.
- 62 Thiry (1982, 34). Original reads: “*et je me mets à le faire travailler en lui fournissant papier, encre et briques de couleur à l’aquarelle.*”
- 63 The authorship is discussed in Bontinck (1992).
- 64 Thiry in a letter to Périer, dated 1 March 1932, in Beier (1989, 9): “*aber ich möchte, dass mein Name dabei den gebührenden Platz einnimmt*” Translation from original into German by Beier.
- 65 Beier (1989, 9).
- 66 Périer (1950, 25).
- 67 Vansina (2010, 162).
- 68 Salmon (1992, 195).

- 69 Salmon (1992, 195). Original reads: “*la conception originale que le Noir possède du beau comme expression spontanée d'une sensibilité privilégiée.*” Compare this to K. C. Murray’s concept of art pedagogy in Nigeria in Ogbechie (2008, 43).
- 70 Salmon (1992, 196). Original reads: “*D'où nécessité primordiale, pour le maître occidental, de comprendre l'art indigène traditionnel dans son inspiration et ses techniques. Nécessité de chercher à pénétrer l'âme noire et de viser à la laisser s'épanouir librement.*”
- 71 Salmon (1992, 196). Original reads: “*Ne lui proposer d'abord que les formes d'art étranger les plus pures et les plus déponillées . . .*”
- 72 See Cornet (1989, 19). Original, in “Un peintre par mois. Le peintre nègre Lubaki,” *La Renaissance de l’Occident*, September 1929, 267–271, reads “*J'ai compris que l'art populaire né au sein de la nature et qui par cette raison même a disparu des pays civilisés où les habitants s'éloignent de plus en plus de la féerie des plaines et des bois, j'ai compris que cet art populaire se manifestait encore au Congo.*”
- 73 Leyder (1950, 9). Original reads: “*Le monde noir africain – notamment – a donné son effort maximum pendant la guerre, et l'on sait avec quel succès. Considérons-le donc avec un intérêt humain redoublé.*” The history of African soldiers during World War II has yet to be considered.
- 74 Périer (1950, 19). Original reads: “*Le moderne se voyait négligé par les savants et les conservateurs de musées.*”
- 75 Périer (1950, 19). Original reads: “*un art plus tardif, plus évolué, plus arbitraire, plus individuel . . .*”
- 76 Périer (1950, 19), discussing easel painting.
- 77 Périer (1950, 26).
- 78 Original reads: “*vous avez été le premier en Belgique à vous intéresser aux tentatives initiales de la peinture 'libre' de quelques Noirs du Congo Belge . . . je souhaite que les cartons peinturlurés, que je vous offre, soient rangés au Cabinet des Estampes de notre capitale pour y être conservés et étudiés, en dehors d'autres institutions provinciales. Selon votre décision . . . ils pourront être temporairement prêtés en dehors, pour leur caractère artistique et non pas ethnographique.*” Madame Walch, Cabinet des Estampes, kindly made available a copy of this letter, dated October 16, 1959.
- 79 Beier (1989, 1).
- 80 Vellut (1990, 635).
- 81 *Moderne Kunst* (1979).
- 82 However, in 1929 the Bernheim gallery in Paris had already displayed an oil painting by Kalifala Sidibe. Sidibe lived in what was then French West Africa (in what is now the country of Mali) (*Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (1929) Issue 50). I am indebted to Dr. H. Jockers for this reference.
- 83 Périer (1948, 60).
- 84 Périer (1948, 60). Original reads: “*Les productions des aquarellistes ou coloristes modernes ne sont pas encore aussi largement honorées. L'exclusion dont elles sont victimes est une autre manière de tuer le sens artistique d'un peuple.*”
- 85 Beier (1989, 1). Original reads: “*Somit kann man diese Arbeiten in gewissem Sinne als erste 'moderne' Kunstwerke aus Afrika bezeichnen – modern in dem Sinne, dass sie außerhalb jeglichen traditionellen Zusammenhangs entstanden sind, dass die Künstler ihre Werke signiert haben und dass sie in europäischen Kunstmuseen regelmäßig ausgestellt haben.*”
- 86 Lubaki’s watercolors were acquired by the museum in Tervuren, Belgium from Périer in 1930.

- 87 For the location of the Catholic and Presbyterian mission stations, see the map in Vansina (2010, 272).
- 88 “Ambaquistas – that is, Africans who spoke and were literate to some extent in Portuguese, who tended to be Catholic, who had partially adopted a colonial Portuguese style of living, and among whom many had mastered a European ‘craft’ . . .” They followed the Chokwe into Kasai around 1865 (Vansina 2010, 12).
- 89 Jewsiewicki (1991b, 139).
- 90 Haselberger (1957).
- 91 Jewsiewicki (1991b, 139, 151).
- 92 Among others, Chéri Samba, Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, Moke.
- 93 The first cinema in the Belgian colony opened in Elisabethville in 1911. See Ramirez and Rolot (1985, 20).
- 94 Although Périer fought for recognition of early Congolese painting to the end, he did not, as far as we know, speculate as to the reason for their rejection.
- 95 Later, Massalai and Ngoma.

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Warriors in Top Hats

Images of Modernity and Military Power on West African Coasts

Monica Blackmun Visonà

About 200 years ago, workshops and factories in Italy, France, England, and the USA began to produce a striking new type of hat. From the crisp circular brim of this distinctive headgear rose a perfect cylinder, a pristine geometric form that could extend a man's height by over a foot – perhaps half a meter. Called “top hats,” “toppers,” or “stovepipes” in English, and *chapeaux hauts-de-formes* (“high-shaped hats”) in French, the earliest versions incorporated the fur of North American beavers, and were extraordinarily durable and waterproof. Later versions were made of other felted materials or of silk, and were encircled by a ribbon.¹ In their countries of origin, these expensive items of dress were intended to be markers of wealth and social status. But when they circulated around the world as desirable trade goods, they were not simply foreign luxuries; they proclaimed a man's rupture with traditions of the past, and his membership in an elite, cosmopolitan society. In short, they became markers of modernity.

In Africa, as on other continents, top hats have figured prominently in creative displays that we would now characterize and critique as artistic “performance.”² In both Africa and Europe, top hats have also been depicted in sculpted and painted artworks, where they are often references to (or even reiterations of) these performances. Such artworks link modernity (glossed here as the lived experience of people caught up in new technologies) to artistic modernism (or the creative embrace of what is new, exotic, inventive, and progressive in visual expression). This paper will briefly touch upon the adoption of top hats in African settings by elites who have displayed them primarily as expressions of a modern identity. Its central focus, however, will be upon top hats in three regions along the western coasts of Africa or in neighboring territories – the Bissagos Islands of Guinea-Bissau, the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire, and the Niger Delta of Nigeria – where imports associated with global modernity were transformed into objects of military power associated with ancestral traditions. By examining how top hats functioned in these African regions during the late twentieth

century, when field research documented their use, we can evaluate how and why this inversion took place; how did a “modern” artform become “traditional”? In all three locations, performances involving top hats, and images referring to them, complicate our understanding of fashion and technology, modernity, and modernism, and raise questions about the uses of art in warfare.

Evidence for Top Hats and Global Trade in the 1860s–1890s

Unfortunately, no single book is dedicated to the history of the top hat; we have no equivalent to the fascinating monograph written about a competing form of headgear, *The Man in the Bowler Hat*.³ However, considerable information about the worldwide distribution of the top hat in the nineteenth century may be found in Richard Ross’s *Clothing: A Global History: Or, the Imperialists’ New Clothes*.⁴ It notes the prevalence of these hats on the streets of Melbourne and Sidney by the 1860s⁵ and in Rio de Janeiro by the 1890s.⁶ By 1912, Nationalist regulations decreed that top hats were required for male formal attire in the new, modern China.⁷ Similar impositions of modern dress were enforced in Turkey; by 1925, Kamal Atatürk appeared in public in a top hat, conforming to his own legislation ordering Turkish men to abandon the traditional fez and adopt a headcovering “with a brim.”⁸ Advertisements of this era clearly show that a topper was twice as expensive as a less imposing hat suitable for daily use, yet despite the high cost of this item of apparel – or perhaps because of it – it acquired an international presence.

Various foreign visitors published accounts of their travels that mention top hats worn on the African continent. An English trader familiar with Sierra Leone noted the “two-story hats” worn by male worshippers in Freetown churches in the 1860s and 1870s,⁹ while a 1913 publication claimed that “not long ago” there was a “passion for the top hat” in Brazzaville, in what was then French Congo.¹⁰ Many of these foreign visitors were amused by hybrid combinations of local and imported items, finding them incongruous. Others valued the conventions of their home countries, which assigned specific items of dress to members of precisely defined social groups, and were thus affronted when Africans “promiscuously” adopted imported formal wear. On the other hand, missionaries sometimes recorded the adoption of hats and other aspects of European clothing by their converts as gratifying indications that a Christian community had “evolved” into civilized beings. Furthermore, as African peoples were subjugated by European empires, colonial officials believed that their subjects had absorbed European values along with European attire, and that imported clothing was a sign of “Westernization” rather than modernization. Underlying almost all of these accounts is the belief that these hats were somehow not expressions of fashion (socially inflected responses to recently invented or imported attire), but “costumes” chosen by Africans who were “dressing up” to mimic Europeans. As Ross has pointed out, this was a highly problematic assumption.¹¹

Speculation in the literature about whether Africans have donned imported apparel in order to satirize Europeans or to mock their behavior often accompanies discussions of whether or not figures depict local people or exotic strangers in African art objects.¹² Research suggests that it is difficult to determine whether (and when) such figures were intended to be comic.¹³ The most memorable response to a perceived

subversive use of top hats was written in 1913 by a German missionary in Windhoek, Namibia. As recounted by Philipp Prein, the missionary had called a meeting of all of the elders of his Damara congregation to inform them that the wearing of top hats would no longer be allowed. Although he did not specify the reasons for the ban in his report to his superiors, he obviously saw the congregants' use of imported formal attire as a challenge to his authority. Therefore the missionary was outraged when he entered the church to perform a wedding, and saw that every male guest was wearing the forbidden headgear. The young men in attendance, in a clever bid to undermine the Damara gerontocracy, claimed that their elders had forced them to wear the imported hats. In the following uproar, a Damara elder and lay preacher, who had been baptized as "Franz," went to the German commandant and managed to obtain an order that allowed all male adults in the colony to wear top hats. The furious missionary excommunicated Franz, who promptly founded his own church, leaving only a remnant of the congregation with the mission. Eventually, of course, the mission managed to convince the German administration to send Franz into exile, but, in the meantime, the Damara had used their "appropriation" of European headgear to distress and destabilize the German colony. Prein concludes that "Africans with conflicting interests constantly reinterpreted the meaning of their social ties. They used European items and idioms as weapons in these contests."¹⁴

The adoption of top hats by African elites is visually documented in photographs taken by African and non-African photographers during the nineteenth century, and during the first two decades of the twentieth century. South African leaders dressed in European formal attire seem to have worn top hats in their photographic portraits so that English opponents would see them as worthy of respect; these included Paul Kruger, the leader who represented Dutch-speaking Afrikaners, as well as Moshoeshoe, the king of the Sotho, who was photographed in 1860.¹⁵ Perhaps similar claims of social and political parity inspired the use of top hats by settlers in Liberia who, after having been "repatriated" to the African continent from the USA, required their senators to wear toppers identical to those of politicians in Washington, DC;¹⁶ this expectation continued into the twentieth century.¹⁷

A recent study of Ewe uses for imported hats by Nii Quarcoopome reproduces a photograph of the early 1880s, in which a king, who reigned in what is now eastern Ghana, balances a brand new top hat on his knees. Evidently the king was given the hat as a gift by the German missionaries he had welcomed into his realm.¹⁸ Subsequent Ewe kings and other leaders wear a variety of imported headgear in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs, sometimes placing top hats over the sacred white headscarves that were signs of their religious authority.¹⁹ Quarcoopome notes that the "quasi-theocratic" Anlo Ewe kingship of Togbe Sri II began when the king wore a "tailcoat and top hat" to his public inauguration, in a "significant break with the past."²⁰

As photographs are prone to damage and decay in moist tropical climates, old prints such as these Ewe examples are quite rare, as are their original negatives. Yet photographic portraits of individuals and groups of men wearing top hats have sometimes survived because they were made into postcards. Some particularly splendid group portraits of men in top hats and bowlers, labeled as coming from Calabar, in Nigeria, date from the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹ These postcards document the importance of top hats among the coastal groups engaged in the international palm oil trade, groups who lived not only in and around Calabar, a commercial center at the



FIGURE 9.1 Unknown photographer. *Un grand féticheur* (war captain of an Akye age-set), 1910–1940. Postcard published by Lescuyer for [La Société des] Missions Africaines, Lyon. Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection, photograph courtesy Holly W. Ross.

mouth of the Cross River, but throughout the broad delta of the Niger River to their west. In fact, the peoples of the Niger Delta known as the Ijo (or Ijaw) are one of the three top hat-wearing populations featured in this chapter.²²

A postcard circulated by a missionary association is evidence for the use of top hats by one of the other three groups selected for discussion here, the Lagoon populations (or *lagunaires*) of the southeastern Côte d'Ivoire (Figure 9.1). The original photograph is difficult to date, as the postcard circulated through the 1920s and 1930s. It was probably taken in or near Memni, an Akye town in the Lagoon region (or *lagunes*), where a French priest named Père Paul Méraud lived from the 1890s to the 1940s.²³ The caption, of course, tells us nothing of this – it only relates the image to the Côte d'Ivoire and claims that the man in a top hat is a “great pagan” (*grand féticheur*). Identification of the image thus relies upon our knowledge that Père Méraud was a member of the missionary order who published the card, and upon the fact that the costume worn by the man in the top hat is still in use in the twenty-first century. As we shall see, both of the men in the photograph are officials in an age-set, and are dressed for one of the ceremonies known locally today as a *fête de génération*.

An even earlier image of a Lagoon warrior is provided by a unique object, a photograph on a glass plate.²⁴ Although the photograph was collected in Senegal around 1910, several items would identify the man in this portrait as a war captain of a community in the Lagoon region of Côte d'Ivoire. As we shall see, they include his elaborate belt, his top hat, and (possibly) the rifle he carries over his shoulder. Recent research has shown that early twentieth-century African photographers had close professional contacts with

colleagues throughout Africa.²⁵ It is thus perfectly plausible that a photograph taken by a photographer such as F. Arkhurst,²⁶ whose studio was located near the Lagoons in the multiethnic center of Grand Bassam, might have ended up in Dakar.

Just as photographs provide visual evidence for the use of top hats in African cultures, artworks document performances involving these toppers. To place such art objects in a global context, it is useful to parenthetically cast our gaze upon art from Europe and the USA that documents the use of top hats and *chapeaux hauts-de-formes* as expressions of a modern identity on those continents. For example, Francisco Goya y Lucientes produced one of the first self-portraits made by a top hat-wearing artist in 1798, printing this etched image as a frontispiece to his famous images of superstition and provincialism, *Los Caprichos*. The modernity of this self-portrait obviously serves as a foil to the premodernity (or nonmodernity) pictured in the rest of the etchings. The top hat also serves as a marker of modernity in a painting by the American artist George Catlin. His widely reproduced portrait of a Native American leader, “Pigeon’s Egg Head” (or “The Light”), painted in the 1830s, is divided into two panels. One side of the painting portrays the leader on his way to Washington DC to negotiate a treaty, arrayed in hand-painted leather clothing and a feather headdress. The other side represents him returning from the conference, dressed from head to toe in the latest urban fashion and wearing a top hat with a silver band.²⁷ In this case, the exaggerated stance and gestures of the figure clearly suggest that the painting is a caricature; Catlin proposes that the Native American’s choice to shift from “traditional” to “modern” clothing is spurious, and somehow ridiculous.

Most European works that depict top hats come from France, where Honoré Daumier produced lithographs mocking pretentious gentlemen in *chapeaux hauts-de-formes* during the middle of the nineteenth century. The next generation of French painters used straightforward portrayals of men wearing this headgear in the streets (Gustave Caillebotte), in public parks (Georges Seurat), in commercial firms (Edgar Degas), and in nightclubs (Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) to firmly situate their subjects in a modern metropolis. By placing top-hatted gentlemen in their Parisian scenes, the artists were embedding their painting practice in the contemporary life of their city, laying claim to an artist’s ability to participate in the very formulation of modern visual culture. Edouard Manet, if a sketch by one of his friends may be believed, even painted pictures on the easel wearing a top hat, as if to merge his modernist identity with the act of painting itself.²⁸

In a similar manner, we can look at how African artists embedded images of their patrons in modernity by depicting men in top hats. These may be found in several coastal cultures of western and Central Africa; notable examples include large iron altars, or *asen*, attributed to Akati Akpene Kendo,²⁹ who worked in Whydah, a coastal city frequently under the control of the kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now the Republic of Benin. Akati, who was a contemporary of the Parisian artists cited above, created small figures of cast iron for the circular platform of his *asen* in the 1870s and 1880s. He seems to have given top hats to the central figures (which were generalized references to the deceased elder honored by the altar) for reasons that would have resonated with the French painters – his patrons considered top hats to be a sign of modernity, distinction, and prosperity.³⁰ However, the art works selected for this study are not merely connected with elite status, but entangled with warlike acts.

The Bissagos Islands

The first images of warriors in top hats to be discussed here are carved heads from Guinea-Bissau. Sculpture from the diverse peoples known as the Bidjogo was mentioned in the accounts of the Portuguese, British, and French mariners who fought and traded with these islands from the fifteenth through the twentieth century – the Bissagos were called the “Islands of Idols” on a 1698 map.³¹ Having mastered the skills necessary to navigate their heavy canoes through the strong currents of the deep channels separating the islands from the landmass, the Bidjogo raided cattle from the related populations of the mainland and fought off European intruders. The slave trade encouraged them to attack their neighbors for captives as well as material goods, but in the nineteenth century conflicts between the Bidjogo and colonial vessels intensified. Bissagos sculpture thus is rooted in centuries of warfare. By the 1880s, their statues were shown wearing *chapeaux hauts-de forme* that were the emblem of royal power.³² A photograph from the early 1930s, taken by Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, shows a Bidjogo shrine with a seated figure whose long attached hair is surmounted by a top hat studded with tacks.³³ In the 1970s, sculptural depictions of top hats were said to commemorate a specific individual who died in the 1940s, a king on the island of Bubaque who could “use one of these hats” in the early twentieth century.³⁴

According to Danielle Gallois Duquette, who conducted extensive research on the art and artists of these island populations during the 1970s,³⁵ shrines asking God’s blessing for the entire community contained a variety of powerful objects known in the local “creole” lingua franca as *iran*, and as *orebok* on the island of Bubaque. Carved wooden heads atop bulbous bases, or heads inserted into a cylindrical sacred container, the *orebok ocoto*, gathered divine forces into the home or forest shelter where the materials were housed. These heads, such as the one on the *orebok ocoto* illustrated here (Figure 9.2), were represented as wearing prominent cylindrical hats, sometimes (as in this case) encircled with grooves to hold strips of cloth, ribbon, or hair, and topped with a tuft of animal hair (all of which are now missing on this example). The most important protective shrines were overseen by a local king, even if their daily upkeep was in the hands of a woman appointed to the task. The sculpted heads, full figures, and the composite *orebok ocoto* all commemorated the deceased kings who had once administered such shrines. While the shrines were dedicated to unnamed protective spiritual forces, and their ensembles of carved images were not identified as an ancestral altar, these references to ancestral leaders underscored the ongoing associations linking the king, the community, and divine power.

Gallois Duquette believed that the materials attached on or under the carved hats – red or black ribbons, and the wisps of hair from the tail of a cow or a horse – may be references to the trophies once collected by Bidjogo warriors. In the seventeenth century, a European observer who fought these islanders wrote that victorious warriors took portions of the scalps of their prisoners. Another wrote that they decapitated their war captives and fastened bits of scalp from the heads to the front walls of their houses. If Gallois Duquette’s plausible hypothesis is correct, the heads atop Bidjogo shrine objects combined images of elegant silk “toppers” with metaphoric references to human flesh.³⁶



FIGURE 9.2 Attributed to a Bidjogo artist. *Orebok (iran)*, object from a shrine. Bissagos Islands, late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Fowler Museum at UCLA, x87-607. Photograph by Dan Cole, courtesy of the Fowler Museum.

Gallois Duquette documented Bidjogo art from 1972 to 1978, but, when she returned to the Bissagos, she found that traders in African art objects had swept through the region; almost all of the *orebok* objects with human heads had been stolen. In the absence of detailed descriptions that might help us reconstruct the appearance of early twentieth-century war parties and victory celebrations, top-hatted heads from an *orebok ocoto*, or *orebok* heads, form our only link to the manipulation of these hats in Bidjogo performances. The audacious precolonial cattle raids of Bidjogo youth, connected to the initiations of male age-sets, may once have featured top hats, even though imported headgear is now missing from the dramatic masquerades still performed by an age-set of young men advancing to full adult status.³⁷ But it is certain that the kings of Bubaque were proclaiming their warlike abilities and their military might by “using” their top hats in the face of Portuguese attempts to administer the region during the first half of the twentieth century. Sadly, after these art objects were taken from Guinea-Bissau, the top hat on a Bidjogo sculpture is no longer a repository of cultural knowledge, and a celebration of ancestral heroism and military leadership; today the hat is simply a curious feature of an artifact owned by strangers who have no knowledge of its personal history.

The Niger Delta

Just as Bidjogo sculptures link *chapeaux hauts-de-formes* to bold acts of piracy, artworks join these imported hats to the warlike exploits of the Ijo peoples and their neighbors in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The populations on or near the Niger Delta, like those of the Bissagos Islands, have traded (directly or indirectly) with the Portuguese, Dutch, and English since the fifteenth century. By the eighteenth century, commercial centers in the Delta funneled thousands of enslaved human beings to European boats offshore. The pervasive ethos of the region was one of warlike aggression, as individuals and communities fought for fortune, glory, and profits from the slave trade. When the export of slaves was banned by the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century, local populations began to export oil crushed from the fruit of certain types of palm trees, gradually becoming wealthy from a trade that was to extend into the colonial period. British trading partners worked with powerful locals who continued to struggle for economic and political mastery over their neighbors.

During this time of free market competition, aggressive acts, and precolonial prosperity, new categories of artworks celebrated the achievements of Ijo individuals. The first type was created by an Ijo population called the Kalabari, who live in the eastern Delta.³⁸ Known as *nduen fobara*, these imposing rectangular screens are somewhat parallel to the iron *asen* for respected ancestors from Wydah, or painted portraits of seated British aristocrats that are similar in size and shape; in both cases the person being commemorated is surrounded by attendants and objects that indicate high social status. But, in the Ijo examples, the central figure is in high relief, as are the attendants, servants, and slaves who surround him, and (in some cases) the decapitated heads of the rivals he has outmaneuvered and overpowered.³⁹ The triumphant man in the center of the screen is the deceased head of a "trading house" (a clan-based and community-based enterprise), who would need military prowess and personal ambition to triumph over rivals. His position was analogous to that of a Bidjogo king, for both leaders were accomplished warriors as well as political figures. All of the heroic ancestors on a *nduen fobara* wear elaborate headgear, frequently headdresses for water spirit masquerades. Yet many of these headdresses, upon close examination, have the circular brim and cylindrical crown of the top hat.

Corresponding to the screens dedicated to Ijo ancestors were the fierce figures carved for living leaders by the Ijo and their neighbors to the north, inland peoples known as the Itsekiri, Isoko, and Urhobo. Called *ivri*, *ifiri*, or *ephiri* depending upon the language of the local population, these composite images may still be used to control and augment a man's aggressive strength. Many place an abstracted human figure, representing a spirit, atop the open jaws of mysterious quadruped; the spirit is shown metaphorically as a powerful leader,⁴⁰ and, once again, these bellicose beings wear top hats.

The most useful and comprehensive survey of the arts of Niger Delta peoples is an exhibition catalogue edited by Martha Anderson and Philip Peek, which draws upon their own fieldwork (from the 1960s to present) and upon that of colleagues. In her description of these Ijo altars to aggression, Anderson suggests that the supernatural beings they invoke are wearing top hats to remind the viewers of past prosperity, "the era when trade flourished in the region."⁴¹ Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the twentieth-century sculpture is continuing an association between prosperity

and victory (in both physical and psychological skirmishes) that was established in the nineteenth century as the palm oil trade began to enrich these groups. A statue commissioned by a Urhobo man to influence his destiny (an *urhievbe*), which also portrays a fearsome spiritual being with a large top hat, was purchased by a German explorer in 1879, when this commercial activity had become widespread in the Niger Delta.⁴²

In fact, as the fieldwork of Perkins Foss has shown, the Urhobo produced an exceptionally rich corpus of sculpture between about 1850 and 1920. Carved columns, incorporating animal forms as well as an idealized image of a family's ancestor, presided over meeting houses. Imposing figures were placed in shrines dedicated to specific spirits that had become involved with the lives of a family or community. As in the Bissagos Islands, such figures allowed worshippers to serve the invisible supernatural beings that had inspired and empowered specific ancestors. Male images represented heroes who had founded communities and fought enemies from the surrounding wetlands, and these statues were "simultaneously fearsome and beautiful."⁴³ A song of praise recorded for Owedjebo, a "bulletproof" warrior who was one of these founding fathers, opens with "When we wage war, Owedjebo stands up," and concludes with "To wage war and win, that is all."⁴⁴ We should not be surprised to find that almost all of the male figures from community or lineage shrines wore prominent top hats. Unfortunately, Foss reports that some of the most impressive Urhobo sculpture representing heroic ancestors disappeared during the 1970s as traders purchased or stole the region's artworks – about the same time that *orebok* images were removed from the Bissagos Islands. Yet war dances, sometimes performed by men wearing protective amulets and various insignia of rank, still honor these ancestral spirits and the supernatural beings they once served.⁴⁵

Smaller figures of spirits have guarded the entrances to Ijo communities from pirates, raiders, and other enemies, and top hats are among the powerful items they wear. When Ijo age-sets perform, men who impersonate these warlike spirits also wear top hats, medicine pots, war belts, and other charms as well as carrying weapons, as may be seen in a photograph of one of these performers taken by Martha Anderson. She notes that the men who make spirits manifest in performance are attired as if they were carved images.⁴⁶ While Foss does not mention the use of imported hats in the war dances of the Urhobo, he did publish a photograph of a community spokesman who wears a top hat over a band of red beads. Hanging from this headband are curved white blades, warthog tusks imported from savannah regions to the north.⁴⁷ Similar sharp objects seem to be worn under the top hats represented on several male figures in shrines, but in most cases it is difficult to distinguish between such pendants and the thick vertical scars on the foreheads of statues of both male and female ancestral spirits.⁴⁸

Foss's exposition of the Urhobo figures that channel spiritual forces does not mention the top hats they wear. He does point to other features: the beads worn by titleholders, the war belt stuffed with magical substances and hung with bells, and the weapons grasped in each hand. When Martha Anderson describes the same figures, she sees a clear dichotomy between the objects depicted here:

top hat, and thick ivory cuffs emphasize this spirit's position as a titled leader, rather than suggesting military power and aggression. In contrast, the medicine gourd worn prominently on the chest demonstrates the figure's possession of powerful, herbal medicines that guarantee his invincibility in battle.⁴⁹

I would argue that the division between objects signifying social standing and those signifying military prowess might be much less distinct than one might think. When heads of families must defend their retainers from ambushes and eliminate their rivals in hand-to-hand combat, their elite status is directly tied to their abilities to conduct military operations.

As their images on postcards have shown, the merchant kings of the Niger Delta wore elegant formal dress around 1900 that included top hats and bowlers. In the Cross River region to the northeast of the Niger Delta, Gitti Salami has documented the use of both bowlers and toppers by warriors displaying their abilities to deflect bullets and protect their communities.⁵⁰ She demonstrates that for some populations of this region, the rounded bowler hat, or derby, makes a fine substitute for the crania of decapitated enemies once strapped to the heads of victorious fighters. In such cases, bowlers are not worn simply for personal adornment, but only in order to claim military prowess during installations of leaders and celebrations of victory.

Ijo leaders still wear imported toppers, bowlers, and other expensive hats that are alternatives for glittering concoctions of headgear made of cloth, mirrors, feathers, ribbons, gilt, and tinsel.⁵¹ Today hats of all types assign status to their Ijo wearers, as well as revealing the material blessings that individuals have received from God, and from supernatural beings such as water spirits. Yet the use of hats as prestige objects for Christian funerals today in the Niger Delta does not negate their association with the occult powers and supernatural forces that brought victory in warfare to the ancestors in the not-so-distant past.

The Lagoons

In both the Bissagos Islands and the Niger Delta, top hats have been worn by men whose military and political exploits were guided and undergirded by supernatural forces. They thus provide a rich body of comparative material for their use by war captains, or *chefs guerriers* of the Akye and Gwa peoples of the Lagoon region of Côte d'Ivoire,⁵² where I have conducted my own fieldwork.⁵³ Unlike many other Akan speaking populations (such as the Asante and the Fante), the diverse and fragmented peoples of the Lagoon region formed no centralized states, and each community was led by a town council composed of members of a single age-set. Before the imposition of the colonial state in the second decade of the twentieth century, rivalries between neighboring towns required younger age-sets to train as warriors. According to reports in colonial archives, Lagoon champions were shot and killed when they led attacks on the French expeditions that were invading their territory. It is crucial to remember that both Bidjogo kings and *lagunaire* age-set *chefs guerriers* adopted top hats during a period when they were confronting invading armies led by European officers. As imported, modern items, the hats allowed these African fighters to use foreign technology in their attempts to deflect foreign military power.

As is the case in the other two regions of West Africa described in this paper, Lagoon artworks display male figures in top hats. However, few sculptures depict hats of this type, and even those examples are tied to expressions of economic status rather than warfare per se. They include nineteenth-century houseposts that were sketched by a French explorer around 1850, but have not survived. The sketch shows bearded figures in top hats and loincloths at the base of both columns (although on one

column the supporting figures appear to wear a cylindrical hat and nothing else).⁵⁴ Images on one or two ivory pommels for staffs, possibly also from the nineteenth century, are even less clearly tied to performances by warriors; they may depict either Lagoon dignitaries or foreign visitors, just as the hats the figures are wearing may be locally woven “boaters” rather than imported toppers of silk.⁵⁵ In this region, it is the contemporary use of top hats by champions of Lagoon age-set – the *chefs guerriers* – that seems to parallel most closely their use in the Bissagos Islands and the Niger Delta.

Documentation of an age-set captain in a top hat, as noted above, comes from the postcard distributed by a French missionary order from the 1920s to the 1940s. It depicts a war captain, the champion of the age-set, a man described in French as the *chef guerrier*. He wears a full cloak of blackened fibers, a powerful garment known to the Akye people as an *awowo*. Its bulk appears to transform him into a porcupine, the animal whose name (*kotoko*) is the war cry of this Lagoon population. The barbed quills of the porcupine are a metaphor for size and aggression of fighting forces for many Akan peoples, and Akye elders see their identification with the porcupine as a sign of their membership in this larger ethnic grouping. The *awowo* is only worn by the champion whose age-set is attempting to acquire adult status (or whose age-set has already done so), and I observed one of these senior *chef guerriers* dancing in this attire at the 1981 funeral of a member of the adult generation.⁵⁶ He carried a specially treated sword, identical to the one in the early twentieth-century photograph, and wore a red cloth wrapped around his head. As in the postcard, a leather-covered amulet hung at each side of his face, and the headcloth was surmounted by a top hat. This war captain did not wear carved wooden objects around his neck. However, similar pendants were displayed by an attendant of a junior *chef guerrier* who was just beginning his training period in a neighboring town in 1981. In the postcard, the carvings were of human hands and the head of a forest creature, while the pendants I saw included a human head. In the late twentieth century, these were said to be references to the trophies (heads and hands) brought back in triumph by victorious warriors in the past (though dissenting opinions held that they simply referred to the hands and heads of the powerful members of the generation themselves). Officials in the junior age-set also held plugs of braided plant fibers between their teeth (said to control their violence and unpredictability) just as the *chef guerrier* does in the early twentieth-century postcard – and just as Urhobo warriors did in performances photographed by Foss in the 1970s.

More recent documentation of Lagoon age-set ceremonies consists of a string of YouTube videos made in 2007, which follow a Gwa age-set through its final *fête de génération*. Each segment records the slow progress of the separate companies as they chant, dance, and symbolically fight their way down the main street of their town. Upon their successful completion of this ritual battle, the age-set attained adult status, and become the political leaders of their town, replacing members of the older generation. Several *chefs guerriers*, one for each participating company, are visible in the video. All wear a fiber cloak, and one wears a top hat.⁵⁷

During Lagoon age-set ceremonies I attended in the 1980s, champions led the forces of a junior age-set in a spiritual struggle against the generation of men who were their seniors; the mature men challenged their juniors to show that they could march forward in the face of invisible opposition. At the very end of the procession, the leading men and female supporters of the generation walked silently, dressed in the expensive robes and gold jewelry of those who are designated as “rich people.”

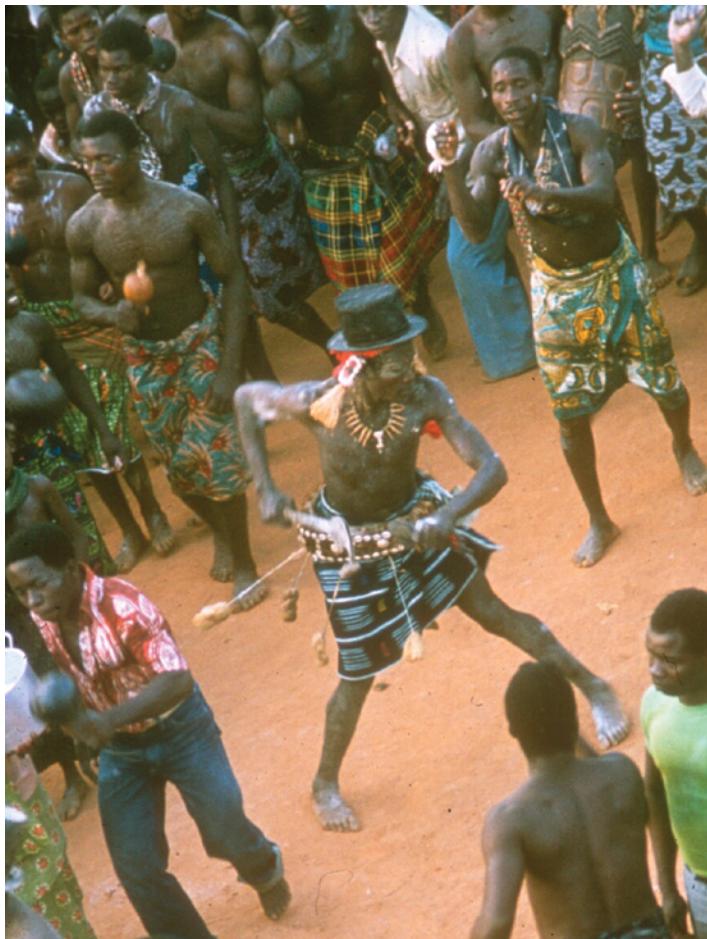


FIGURE 9.3 War captain (*chef guerrier* or *sabohin*) of an Akye age-set during an initiation ceremony, 1981. Memni, Côte d'Ivoire. Photograph by Monica Blackmun Visonà.

There were separate *chefs guerriers* for firstborn sons, secondborn sons, thirdborn sons, fourthborn sons, and all of the youngest sons, and each danced in the midst of their contingent (Figure 9.3). The full force of competing supernatural powers was said to fall upon them. Their attire, therefore, drew upon a full range of metaphorical associations and empowered materials. These included a war belt of leather, often covered with leopard skin, studded with cowries or red shells, and hung with amulets – the same type of belt worn by the rifleman photographed on a glass plate in the first decade of the twentieth century, whose image was discussed above.⁵⁸

As may have been the case with Urhobo warriors, animal teeth, tusks, or claws are part of the costume of a war captain – for Akye champions, leopard teeth were hung around the neck. Indigo dyed cloth was wrapped around the hips and worn underneath the war belt. As was true for senior warriors (including the one in the postcard) the long red cloth worn around his head, under the top hat, was once used

by Lagoon women as a loincloth. Normally this cloth could never be touched by a man, for it was believed to have the power to make him impotent, and Akye men assured me that the cloth had never actually been worn by a woman. But as a powerful invocation to a women's sexual energy, it conveys complex messages about the role of women in protecting their brothers and sons.⁵⁹ Similar appeals to female powers by male leaders occur in Bidjogo ceremonies initiating men into adulthood, when girls participate in order to allow deceased male members of a generation to take part in the experience.⁶⁰ The top hat and the woman's loincloth were said to be beautiful (as is the handwoven wrapper) but they are also frightening. While the elders discussing the age-set initiations present attractive and scary images (and male and female items) as dualities, these supposed dichotomies seem to overlap in the attire of the champion warriors.⁶¹

Top Hats as Transfers of Technology

Why then, have top hats been adopted as war helmets, receptacles of hidden power, in such disparate places along the West African coast? The potential of this particularly striking headdress for mystical manipulation must have been readily apparent to diverse peoples located at considerable distance from each other. Whereas most African populations connected the display of imported dress to claims of modern political, social, or economic identity, or referred to foreign hats in modern art (such as the *asen* from Whydah), communities in these regions appropriated them as military gear. Moreover, these expensive headdresses, once worn throughout the continent as markers of modern fashion, are now seen in these three regions as part of a warrior's "traditional" attire, as tied to ancestral values rather than to the contemporary world, as expressions of local knowledge rather than cosmopolitan culture.

Archaeologists such as François Richard have hoped "that artifact trajectories, and the regimes of value that guided them, can shed promising light on these dimensions of Atlantic encounters, by offering a conduit into embodied experiences and the local negotiation of global forces."⁶² They look for ways "African modes of valuation, some of which pre-date the Atlantic trade, helped to re-contextualize trade materials in ways that were locally meaningful, and how, in turn, these global contacts opened the way for new horizons of social practice."⁶³ The transformation of imported silk hats during the course of their trajectories (from foreign factory to coastal port to rural community) is indeed remarkable. Transformations also occurred, of course, once the top hat became a vital part of a performer's body, empowering, protecting, and inspiring him as a temporary representative of supernatural forces. In his writings on *Art and Technology*, Arnold Rubin argued that art can be evaluated for its efficacy.⁶⁴ Applying his insights to hats, Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Kreamer argued that

Headgear and hairstyles can no longer be viewed simply as passive reflections of culture. They not only mean something, but through the mediation of human action, they can do something as well. Hats and hairstyles, as well as other material objects, need to be understood as one of the technologies that people use to construct social identities and to produce, reproduce, and transform their relationships and situations through time.⁶⁵

The top hats worn by warriors are not only a peculiarly personal technological device because, like all hats, they are intimately connected to the body.⁶⁶ They are also objects whose empty, invisible void (the hollow cylindrical interior of the hat) is placed directly over the head of the wearer. This may be why top hats are favored by magicians in Europe and the Americas who hide objects within their depths, and why warriors can claim to “use” them.

When we compare these hats to other forms of military technology – such as uniforms and guns – we place them into context of African constructions of modern warfare. Geary has written on the royal workshops in the city of Fumban in the Cameroon Grasslands, and the elaborate military uniforms they created for King Njoya in the years before World War I. The impressive attire of his palace guards was instrumental in increasing his status among his own people as well as in regards to his rivals, both African and German. Imported cylindrical hats may be closer equivalents than one might think to imported rifles, which until the late nineteenth century were not very good at killing people, but were extremely effective at intimidating an enemy in an unpredictable and dramatic manner.⁶⁷ As tall, imposing and unusual objects, top hats were also intimidating, lending visual force to whirling, fighting warriors and sculptural guardians alike.

When we investigate why silk toppers were reconfigured or reimagined as weapons for military leaders (rather than merely serving as their insignia of office), we engage with intriguing questions concerning the intersection of magic and modernity, and the nature of armed conflict in African societies. In the words of Nathalie Włodarczyk,

Looking more closely at the use of beliefs and practices that appeal to a supernatural, spiritual world to wage war is bound to help us rethink the way we think about war as an activity and the place of culturally specific practices in it.⁶⁸

Włodarczyk’s research into the magical preparations used by child soldiers, mercenaries, and other warriors during the tragic civil strife in Sierra Leone did not describe their use of headgear in any detail, but many observers have noted the imported wigs worn by the armed militias during those conflicts.⁶⁹ Contemporary markers of urban, feminine, or cross-dressing diasporic culture (the types of images one would see in a late twentieth-century music video, for example) were invoked by fighters who wished to confuse and intimidate their victims and their enemies. More recently, militias formed by rebellious youths in the Niger Delta have adopted dramatic headcoverings that recall those worn by Islamist insurgents from the Maghreb to Afghanistan. While the Niger Delta rebels have no Muslim roots, they have identified the Islamist garb seen in televised images and on the internet as quintessentially “terrorist,” adopting these globally recognizable markers of militancy for their own attacks against foreign oil workers. We can see these twenty-first-century transformations as similar to the use of top hats by early twentieth-century warriors. At the very least, the disorienting, threatening images from Sierra Leone and the Niger Delta remind us that the use of top hats also arose in times of great conflict. Today, top hats in Bidjogo sculpture, Lagoon performance, and Niger Delta sculpture and performance are integral elements in artistic displays characterized as tradition, but a century ago they were the focus of modern art invented for contemporary warriors.

Notes

- 1 For information on their manufacture, see Folledore (1989, 14–22).
- 2 Although early twentieth-century European modernists incorporated temporary, improvisational, and multimedia or intermedia transformations of their bodies into the artistic practices of Dada and futurism, the critical apparatus now used to describe performances in the USA and Europe was developed in the second half of the twentieth century (Schnechner 1988). Africanist art historians have often modeled their own analyses on that of Robert Farris Thompson (1974). Particularly noteworthy studies of African art as performance include Ravenhill (1988) and Arnoldi (1995), and valuable essays were gathered into an anthology by Harding (2002).
- 3 Robinson (1993). While Robinson's study is mostly limited to the bowler hat as markers of European and North American modernity, it does cite the wearing of such hats by Bolivian women in the Andes; see fig. 50. I am also grateful to a graduate student who attended my 2011 lecture at La Sapienza Università di Roma; he described how multiple hats are worn on top of each other in central America, and redirected my attention to Taussig's discussion of hats as "male gear" that "create magic" in Cuna culture (1993, 189–190).
- 4 Ross (2008).
- 5 Ross (2008, 71).
- 6 Ross (2008, 72).
- 7 Finnane (2008, 95, fig. 4.21).
- 8 Ross (2008, 114–115). These ordinances were intended to regulate patterns of dress so that politicians could overturn social and religious traditions.
- 9 Whitford (1967, 33).
- 10 Ross (2008, 137, 204, n. 68); Ross took the reference to Jehan de Witte's 1913 book, *Les Deux Congo*, from C. Didier Gondola (1999) "Dream and Drama: the Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review*, vol. 42, no. 1, 26. Evidently the translation from the French was made by Gondola.
- 11 Ross (2008, 97–98).
- 12 See Drewal chapter 2, Bridges chapter 3, and Jewsiwicki chapter 17 this volume.
- 13 See Quarcoopome (2009a and 2009b, 84, fig. 8) and that catalogue's discussion of H. M. Cole (1989, chapter 8). A valuable contribution to the discourse is made by Catherine Cole, who found that Ghanaian actors and audiences of the 1920s and 1930s misread contemporary accounts of American vaudeville "minstrels," not realizing that they parodied African Americans. She thus proposes that the "concert parties" featuring Ghanaian performers in blackface and top hats should not be seen as subversive commentaries on racism, but as comedic skits akin to performances created for local festivals (Cole 1996).
- 14 Prein (1994).
- 15 Ross (1990, 96–98).
- 16 For a discussion of the complex notions of identity negotiated by other "returnees" from the Americas who were living in Africa, see chapter 6, this volume.
- 17 Furbay (1943). An "up-country" version of a top hat, reproduced in animal pelts and other items of local interest, is reproduced by Arnoldi and Kreamer (1995).
- 18 Quarcoopome (2009a, 79, fig. 4).
- 19 Quarcoopome (2009a, 79–81).

- 20 Quarcoopome (2009a, 81). Here I will challenge Quarcoopome's belief that this attire was "an attempt to demystify the priest-kingship" rather than a manipulation of "unconventional" sources of supernatural power.
- 21 See Geary (2009, 97). Anderson and Peek (2002, B3, 82) identify this ruler as a king from the Niger Delta, probably the Opobo king Frederick Sunday Jaya.
- 22 The literature on the art of the Niger Delta follows early publications in using the term "Ijo" (Anderson and Peek 2002), but "Ijaw" is closer to the actual pronunciation of the name, and is usually preferred.
- 23 Paul Méraud's collection of artworks and his interest in Akye culture is described in Visonà (2010, 46–7, 68, 77, 98).
- 24 Illustrated and described in Menut (2010, 40–41). The photograph is in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly.
- 25 See Geary, chapter 4 this volume.
- 26 See Geary (2009, 96).
- 27 Because Pigeon's Egg has exchanged his ceremonial pipe for a loosely rolled cigarette, this portion of the image was adopted during the 1960s as an avatar for those advocating the use of cannabis (marijuana). I am indebted to a top-hatted gentleman in San Francisco for this piece of cultural knowledge.
- 28 All of the images discussed in this paragraph are cataloged in the Artstor database (<http://www.artstor.org/index.shtml>), where they may be viewed (but not downloaded) by the general public.
- 29 *Asen* by this artist, whose name is also transcribed as Ekplekendo Akati (Bay 2008, 27) are in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the National Museum of African Art, and the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University.
- 30 It is also important to note that various hats were associated with deities of the local religious system known as *vodun*, and that the manifestations of these deities in the Caribbean sometimes appear in top hats. James Bond is threatened by a top hat-wearing "voodoo" master in the movie *Live and Let Die*.
- 31 For historical background on the Bidjogo, see Gallois Duquette (1983, 16–20).
- 32 Gallois Duquette (1983, 179).
- 33 Bernatzik (1933, vol. 1, 294–295, vol. 2, 221). Bernatzik estimates that the figure, photographed on the island of Formosa, was about 80 years old, suggesting that it had been carved around 1850. The enthroned figure accompanied a more ambiguous form topped with the head and wings of a sculpture taken from the prow of a European ship.
- 34 Gallois Duquette (1983, 179).
- 35 Gallois Duquette (1983).
- 36 Gallois Duquette (1983, 180).
- 37 Video footage of a recent Bissagos masquerade was projected in May 2012 during the *Mascarades et Carnavals* exhibition at the Dapper Museum in Paris.
- 38 Despite their name, the Kalabari did not live in the city of Calabar, which is on the Cross River.
- 39 One example illustrates the cover of the 2001 paperback version of the first edition of Visonà et al. (2000).
- 40 H. M. Cole illustrates several of these in a discussion of personal altars from the lower Nigeria region, in Visonà et al. (2000). He ties examples from the Niger Delta to the *ikenga* of the Igbo peoples and the Edo *ikengobo* in the kingdom of Benin, both of which are meant to give metaphorical strength to a man's right hand.

- 41 Anderson and Peek (2002, 107).
- 42 Foss (2004, 33, fig. 12), notes that the statue was purchased at Wukari, a town hundreds of miles upriver, evidence that Urhobo were part of a far-flung network connected to the palm oil trade – even if they had little direct contact with Europeans at this time.
- 43 Foss (2004, 17).
- 44 Chief Arubi Omamohwo, cited in Foss (2004, 84–87).
- 45 See Foss (2004, 109–110, 137).
- 46 Anderson and Peek (2002, fig. 3.5, 96).
- 47 Foss (2004, fig. 39, 74) reports that the Urhobo name for these was translated as “teeth of bush pig.”
- 48 Foss (2004, 120, 146) does not provide much background on these important facial marks.
- 49 Anderson and Peek (2002, 126).
- 50 Salami (n.d.) and personal communication, 2012.
- 51 Kalabari Ijo hats have been studied in detail by Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima. See Daly, Eicher, and Erekosima (1986).
- 52 There are separate terms for these champions in each Lagoon language, and other local differences depending upon the dialect.
- 53 My research in 1981 was made possible by a grant from the University of California, Santa Barbara, from funding provided by the Kress Foundation, and a Fulbright dissertation award funded fieldwork in 1983–1984. I am grateful for this support, and for the hospitality and assistance of members of several *générations* who allowed me to view and discuss ceremonies I witnessed in the towns of Memni, Ahoutoué, Abidjan-Agban, and Grand-Alepe in Côte d’Ivoire. See Visonà (2010).
- 54 Mark (1987). The carved posts were probably located in Abure and Gwa communities within the Lagoon region; see Visonà (1987). A postcard published by the Société des Missions Africains, and taken with the assistance of the French priest discussed above, shows a similar house post that was still standing in the 1920s or 1930s; this object also includes male figures in tall hats. For a fuller discussion of these objects, see Visonà (2010, 103–105).
- 55 H. M. Cole discusses difficulties in distinguishing between iconic foreigners and indigenous peoples dressed in distinctive foreign garb (Cole 1989).
- 56 I was invited to attend a spectacular *fête de génération* in Abidjan-Agban for a Kyaman (Ebrie) age-set taking adult rank in 1989, but in this case the champions wore locally made headgear rather than imported top hats. Instead, several wore imported military coats that had been modified by the addition of pockets and appliqués.
- 57 Yvoirplus (2007) According to the website, uploaded on Nov 27, 2007, these are “quelques images du Fakwé, une cérémonie importante des fêtes de générations Gwa (m’batto). Les Gwa sont une ethnie de Côte d’Ivoire et appartiennent au groupe Akan.” There are four segments, labeled “Fakwé – part 1,” “Fakwé – part 2,” “Fakwé – part 3,” and “Fakwé – part 4.” Visual evidence for the use of both the top hat and the cloak of blackened fibers also comes from illustrations in books published by Bohumil Holas in the 1960s, through captions do not reveal where or when the original photographs were taken (Holas 1969). Color photographs published as a calendar by Étienne Niangbo in 2000 captured several scenes of Akye and Gwa age-set ceremonies, but none show a warrior in a top hat.
- 58 The sword slung on the back of the soldier in the photograph, and the small gold-handled knives stuck into his belt, are not part of the Akye or Gwa war captain’s attire

- today. While similar items were kept as heirlooms by Lagoon families in the 1980s, such treasures have also been collected in other Akan regions of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.
- 59 Female performers in Europe and the Americas have also worn top hats to produce a sexual frisson; notable examples from the 1930s include Josephine Baker and Marlene Dietrich.
- 60 Gallois Duquette (1979).
- 61 For a fuller description, see Visonà (2010).
- 62 Richard (2010, 4).
- 63 Richard (2010, 6). It may be that art historians can work with data that is far more nuanced than that available from archaeological contexts; despite his wonderful articulation of his research program, the only conclusions Richard could draw from the actual excavations were that varied percentages of gin bottles versus wine bottles reveal that separate social groups preferred different types of imported drinks.
- 64 Rubin and Pearlstone (1989).
- 65 Arnoldi and Kreamer (1995). Unfortunately, their excellent catalogue omits discussion of imported hats, and is devoted to hats made in Africa rather than hats that were imported into Africa and then transformed for local needs.
- 66 For one example of this, see Robinson's discussion of Magritte's bowler hats (1993, 147).
- 67 Northrup (2000, 97).
- 68 Włodarczyk (2009, 6).
- 69 Scheffler (2003).

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Part V



Colonialism, Modernism, and Art in Independent Nations

Algerian Painters as Pioneers of Modernism

Mary Vogl

A century and a half after Eugène Delacroix painted *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, the London-based Algerian artist Houria Niaty (b. 1948) deconstructed his “masterwork” in her 1982 installation *No to Torture* (Figure 10.1). Five oil paintings rendered in an abstracted style – plus drawings, photos, a soundtrack, and live performances – reflect, distort, reject, and invent anew the *Women of Algiers*. The glaring primary colors, twisted shapes, and unambiguous title send the clear message that contemporary Algerian artists are deconstructing European art on their own terms.¹ Niaty’s work represents a dominant trajectory in the Algerian art of the last century: a generative confrontation with European art. New forms are created not by simply rejecting models but by recombining and transforming them. As the highly influential Algerian artist and critic Mohammed Khadda (1930–1991) argued, European influence on the art of the Maghreb, as the countries of northwestern Africa are known, has been “complex, mutilating and enriching at the same time.”²

Regrettably, even Algerian scholars have largely remained ignorant of the place of modernist painting in the art history of Algeria. The National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, the country’s capital, houses a stunning collection of these works, and paintings by Algerian artists are now found in galleries and museums around the world. While in many aspects the development of modern Algerian art is similar to that of its “sister” countries of the Maghreb, Morocco and Tunisia, and in some aspects to that of its “cousin” Egypt,³ Algeria’s long colonial history and violent struggle for decolonization has shaped its art in unique ways. The gradual loosening of French hegemony and strengthening of local agency can be traced in the history of painting in Algeria. This essay will examine Algerian and diasporic painters who have made a significant contribution to the development of modern art both locally and internationally.

In 1832, Delacroix traveled to North Africa as part of a diplomatic mission and returned to France with a multitude of sketches and watercolors and a sense of wonder at all he had seen.⁴ He did not observe any paintings hung on walls and North Africans



FIGURE 10.1 Houria Nati. Painting from the installation *No to Torture, After Delacroix' Women of Algiers, 1834*, 1982. Mixed media on canvas, 188 × 270 cm. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

regarded his activity as a curiosity, which led him to remark on indigenous “prejudices” against painting.⁵ Indeed, almost a century passed between the arrival of European artists in North Africa and the first generation of Maghrebi artists who adopted easel painting and began to exhibit their works in the early twentieth century. The absence of a pictorial tradition in the Maghreb has been attributed to injunctions against the representation of living beings in the sacred writings of Islam.⁶ But in North Africa indigenous artists who represented humans and animals on a painted surface do not seem to have been censured by their compatriots. Rather, from the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 to Algerian independence in 1962, it was the “prejudices” of French colonialism that kept the European settlers and Muslim Algerians in separate political, economic, social, and artistic spheres.

Under that system, indigenous Algerians had little exposure to modern art and limited access to formal art education. Some artists and intellectuals of Muslim and *pied noir* (European settler)⁷ origins collaborated, but the majority of Maghrebi artists struggled to gain autonomy and recognition for their work. Muslim patrons were scarce and the general public was not made to feel welcome in galleries or museums. Unlike in Egypt, where national artists were writing manifestos and creating a specifically Egyptian art as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the Maghrebian art scene was monopolized by Europeans for decades longer.⁸ Schools, galleries, salons, and intellectual circles were slow to open to indigenous artists.

However, during the last decades of the colonial era, painting developed into a medium that lent itself to producing “authentic” Algerian artforms. In the struggle for national and artistic autonomy, forms of nonfigurative painting emerged.

The country's independence in 1962 then paved the way for an indigenization of the arts infrastructure. Today oils or acrylics on canvas remain the dominant medium in North African contemporary art, although sculpture and photography are also widespread and video and installation art have become part of contemporary artistic practice.

French Colonialism and Its Impact on Algerian Art

France's colonization of Algeria, lasting from 1830 to 1962, had devastating human, economic, and social consequences. As many as three million Algerians were killed resisting the conquest in the nineteenth century, and the war of independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962 claimed the lives of perhaps a million more. The colonial economy was structured to benefit the French while indigenous Algerians were dispossessed of their lands and impoverished. Colonialism's impact on Algerian arts was equally dramatic. Culturally, the system alienated Maghrebis from their own past and promoted a model of French supremacy. Access to education became restricted and French replaced Arabic as the language of instruction. The local cultural environment was devalued, when not annihilated to make way for European needs. Throughout the colonial period, most European settlers, and the French administrators, thought of their own art as superior to the art produced by local peoples. French academic art was the privileged model and easel painting the favored genre, while "indigenous arts" were considered "crafts," "decorative art," or "minor arts."

By 1900, the arts infrastructure in Algeria – art schools, museums, galleries, publishers, exhibitions, prizes, and fellowships – was geared almost exclusively toward the European settlers and expatriate visitors. Europeans organized themselves into societies and associations, held annual salons and exhibitions locally as well as in Europe, awarded prizes and scholarships, and helped educate the settlers about European and Islamic arts. The first formal drawing school in the Maghreb opened in Algiers in 1843, becoming the École des Beaux-Arts in 1881. During the colonial era, it was led by French directors and staffed by French instructors. This art school is still in existence as the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ESBA). Other art schools were opened in the Algerian cities of Oran and Constantine (the second and third largest cities) in 1930. All these schools were created to prepare Europeans to continue their studies in Paris. The National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, which remains among the largest art museums in Africa, dates from 1897. It houses an impressive number of classical, Orientalist, and modernist masterpieces by European artists, but, from 1930 to 1960, only 55 works in its collection were by artists of Algerian heritage. After independence aggressive efforts were made to collect more pieces of Algerian modern art.

Until recently, the history of North African art was written predominantly by European, and particularly French, scholars. European Orientalists – archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians – assisted colonial administrators in gathering documentation and publishing articles and books on the "Muslim arts." In the twentieth century, European art critics slowly began to take an interest in the rare indigenous painters who were singled out for attention. Some critics gave thoughtful analyses of the artwork, while others expressed their views in paternalistic terms.

“Parsimonious” Inclusion of Algerians in the Colonial Arts Scene

In the early twentieth century, certain colonial administrators began to recognize the irreparable damage done to Algeria’s culture and sought to reform policies. These included Charles Jonnart, Governor General of Algeria (1900–1911), who worked to preserve Islamic monuments, commission administrative buildings in a “Moorish” or “Arabizing” style, and create ethnographic museums. Jonnart also tried to “modernize” and regulate local craft industries in order to assert their dominance and to “protect” them from further “deterioration” as a result of competition with cheaper manufactured goods imported from Europe. Practices that had been transmitted through families for centuries were replaced by larger-scale production models proposed by French administrators.⁹

Arts education for indigenous North Africans had as its goal “to train perfectly qualified craftsmen to restore historic monuments, maintain or resuscitate them in their authentic original forms and thus contribute toward the preservation of the national heritage,” according to Mohamed Serghini.¹⁰ Serghini was the first Moroccan to study at the School of Art founded in 1946 in Tetouan, in Morocco, and he became the school’s director in 1956. Several Algerian painters in the early twentieth century received their early training in craft workshops. The attention to pattern, architectural detail, geometry, floral designs, and calligraphy apparent in the works of the miniaturists discussed below is representative of the Islamic art traditions that were preserved, or reinterpreted, in the colonial era.

A few rare Algerians held position in arts administration in Morocco under the French protectorate which began in 1912. The painter Abdelhalim Hemche (c.1908–1979) became an arts inspector in Morocco in 1929. Azaouaou Mammeri (1886–1954), also born and educated in Algeria, was also a teacher and then arts inspector in the 1930s and 1940s. He founded the Museum for Indigenous Arts, Dar Si Said, in Marrakesh. Hemche and Mammeri joined Moroccans such as Ahmed Sefrioui (1915–2004), the son of an artisan and a pioneer of French-language writing in Morocco, who helped preserve historic monuments, served as curator of the Museum of Fez and published essays on Moroccan arts and crafts. While the idea of creating a synthesis of Western-style painting and North African “indigenous” arts in an individual work was still at an embryonic level in this early period, these Algerian art administrators helped to valorize both types of art.

The colonial system at all levels of education did little to expose indigenous North Africans to European or international art. Scholars have often described art education for Muslims in colonial North Africa as being dispensed “parsimoniously.”¹¹ As noted, during its first 80 years the École des Beaux-Arts of Algiers excluded non-European students and it was only from the 1920s that courses began to be offered for Muslims, in special sections labeled “indigenous” or “Muslim” arts.¹² A few Algerians taught in the “Muslim arts” sections led by Europeans. Art education saw a gradual opening of opportunities to Maghrebi students from the 1940s. Independence, in particular, paved the way for radical changes in the curriculum, administration, faculty, and student body of schools. The national infrastructures for arts education in the Maghreb have faced strong demand, with a population explosion and the tightening of visa regulations since the 1990s that have made study in France more difficult.

North Africans with specialized training in art history are a relatively recent phenomenon. Of the few Muslim students in the fine arts academies during the colonial period, even fewer were permitted to study art history.¹³ Even today few institutions in the Maghreb offer formal art history courses. So Maghrebi art historians are often trained in Europe or the USA and they usually write in French (although some write in Arabic as well). The current generation of North African scholars of Maghrebi arts includes a greater proportion of women than was the case in the years directly after independence, and recently women have served as director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers and as the Algerian minister of culture.¹⁴

The First Algerian Painters, 1920s and 1930s

Painting in Algeria prior to the arrival of the French had mainly been used to illustrate or illuminate sacred books. In fact, their writing itself constituted an artform. Calligraphy based on the Arabic script was a highly respected artform in Algeria as in other Islamic societies. Illuminated Qur’ans and architectural inscriptions were part of the national visual heritage. In the early twentieth century, calligraphy and illumination were still practiced by Algerians in their own workshops, but more and more in centers organized through the colonial government. Other religious paintings were made on panes of glass, and sometimes acted as souvenirs of pilgrimages. Scholars believe that painting on glass was introduced in Algeria and Tunisia by the Ottoman Turks who ruled much of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century, but there is scarce documentation on its practice.

The first Maghrebi easel painters began to be active in the 1920s. Some were from artisan families and studied in the “indigenous arts” sections created at fine art schools or in special workshops. Some studied in Paris where they visited museums and galleries and were exposed to contemporary art movements that did not exist in their home countries. They were introduced to networks of intellectuals and political activists when they traveled abroad in Europe or in other North African countries. Other Maghrebi artists were self-taught, encouraged by the Europeans for whom they worked. Some recent studies have argued for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship of North African artists to European Orientalist artists and educators.¹⁵ There is a need for a systematic study of the mutual influences of Algerian painters and their *pied noir* counterparts.

Azouaou Mammeri (1886–1954) is considered to be the first Algerian to create oil paintings. In a *plein air* style that emphasized nuances of natural light, he depicted mosques, monuments, landscapes, and North Africans in outdoor settings in Algeria as well as in Morocco (a French protectorate since 1912). Mammeri was a school-teacher in the Algerian mountains when his paintings were admired by French artists and colonial officials such as Prosper Ricard. His first exhibition was in 1917 in Paris. Soon after he became a drawing professor in Rabat, Morocco, where his cousin worked for the royal family. Easel painting was an emerging art in Morocco in 1918, when an exhibition at the new Excelsior Hotel in Casablanca included paintings by Mammeri and European Orientalists.¹⁶ With a scholarship from the colonial government in Algeria, Mammeri studied at the Casa Velazquez in Spain in the 1920s. In 1955 he was posthumously awarded the Grand Prize for Arts of the City of Algiers, and his paintings appear in several European and Middle Eastern museums.¹⁷ Mammeri’s work has been viewed as an emulation of Western art but, according to a

study by Roger Benjamin, “the way Mammeri’s work is now being rediscovered by art experts from the Arab world encourages a reading of his work as containing grains of resistance,”¹⁸ seen especially in “his effort to prove that a North African could excel at the colonizer’s mode of expression.”¹⁹

Abdelhalim Hemche followed a career path similar to that of Mammeri and explored similar subject matter. He studied decorative arts at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers and received art scholarships from the colonial government. Like Mammeri, by the late 1920s he was teaching drawing in Morocco, where he also became an arts inspector. He studied, and later taught, at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His brightly colored artworks, full of vivid complementary hues, were featured in exhibitions in Algiers (1927, 1930) and Paris (1948) and his illustrated manuscripts were displayed in the Algerian pavilion during the 1937 Universal Exhibition in Paris.

The Racims and Miniaturist Painting

Miniature painting was a genre imported to the Maghreb from the east, particularly from Persia. While its ultimate source was in the manuscripts of the Byzantine world, it had been reinterpreted by Islamic artists for centuries. In Algeria, the term “miniature” refers to framed calligraphy of the sacred Arabic script, which can be combined with – or “illuminated” by – decorative images, and small-scale portraits and scenes based on book illustrations. Algerian artists who practiced this form of painting inspired appreciation of it by European painters who visited the Maghreb, such as Henri Matisse and Alexandre Rouibtzoff.

Mohammed Racim (1896–1975) the most highly acclaimed of the Algerian artists emerging before the 1940s, was particularly involved with this painting tradition. He and his brother Omar (1884–1959) came from a distinguished family of artists of Turkish descent. Their father sculpted and painted wood frames and coffers, illuminated manuscripts, and worked in copper. Mohammed was trained in state workshops and became the first Muslim artist to receive Algeria’s Grand Prize for Arts in 1933 and a scholarship to study in Paris. During his eight years in Europe, he became interested in Persian miniatures, developing his own style by combining their stylization with Arabic calligraphy and incorporating a three-dimensional perspective and modeling borrowed from Western art. Racim also collaborated with *pied noir* artists who were interested in the “decorative arts” and in the aesthetic traditions of the Maghreb, working with Etienne Dinet on the book *The Life of Mahomet* and with Léon Carré to illustrate an edition of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Richard van Leeuwen, an Islamic studies scholar, has argued that, through their illustrations of the Arabian Nights tales, modernist artists “closed the gap” between Orientalist and modernist painting: “the two components merged to such an extent that Orientalism became a regular aspect of the modern artistic expression, and that artists incorporated Oriental influences into their own styles.”²⁰

Although his work was later criticized by some Algerian nationalists for not portraying colonial exploitation or contemporary suffering, it has been celebrated by the postcolonial regimes who have seen in it visual confirmation of Algerians’ strength in the precolonial era. In 1975 the Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers received a collection of 65 of Racim’s works. Recently art historians have revisited Racim’s case to show that, while he was encouraged and promoted by the colonial regime, at the same time he conveyed subtly subversive messages about Islamic splendor and pride in indigenous artistic traditions.²¹

Some of Racim's paintings depicted a mythical universe of aristocrats in an Algerian age of glory. *The Rais*, a 1931 gouache painting with gold leaf that is less than a 30 cm square, depicts a seventeenth-century Algerian sea captain in elegant robes and a turban, standing near ships in a port, with cannons by his feet and a drawn dagger in hand. This image recalls the important role played by such mariners during the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Another of Racim's portraits features the emir Abdelkader, a nineteenth-century warrior and political figure who, because of his resistance to the French, is considered a national hero in Algeria. The painting depicts the Sufi leader looking grave and dignified, dressed in rich clothing with a white shawl draped around his head, holding a dagger in one hand and prayer beads in another. Enclosing the portrait is a series of frames painted in geometric, arabesque, and floral motifs.

Racim is credited with helping organize a path-breaking exhibit with the Franco-Muslim Circle in Algiers in 1944, *Young Muslim Painters and Miniaturists from Algeria*, where 13 artists were represented, including several of the Racims' protégés.²² The public recognition the artists received encouraged them and inspired others. Both Mohammed and Omar Racim influenced numerous Algerian artists in their role as professors at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers where they taught illumination and miniature painting. Their instruction and inspiration were evident in Algerian art for decades.

Other Algerian Miniaturists

Among the many important Algerian artists to study with the Racims, Mohamed Temmam (1915–1988) is known for his ability to synthesize Western and Islamic arts. Drawing on themes from Algeria's cultural and historic heritage, he produced miniatures, illuminations, calligraphy, and oil paintings. He began studying ceramics at age 13 and studied in the "indigenous arts" section at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers. In the 1930s he received a scholarship from the colonial government to attend the National School of Decorative Arts in Paris and worked as a designer at the famous porcelain factory in Sèvres, France. After independence he returned to Algiers where he taught the art of the miniature at the École des Beaux-Arts and was curator of the National Museum of Antiquities and Islamic Arts for a quarter century. In 2007, 80 of his works were shown in a retrospective exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers.

In the postindependence period the masters of miniature painting and illumination have been criticized as "aristocratic" and "feudal,"²³ for reflecting a nostalgic view of the ancient glory (of the upper class). Overall, however, North Africans appreciate the accessibility this figurative genre offers and perceive it as culturally authentic. Today Algerian artists such as Farida Hamza (b. 1959), and Zakaria Morsli (b. 1964) continue this legacy with their floral and "arabesque" motifs and detailed depictions of "traditional" clothing and activities.

Algerian Artists and European Orientalists – 1940s

A number of Algerian artists in the 1940s were influenced and encouraged by European Orientalists who had popularized easel painting. Some were formally trained, including by indigenous teachers such as the Racims, while others were self-taught. Although their works rivaled European Orientalist paintings in their technical proficiency, and are often superior in their ability to evoke a specific landscape, the artists merit more recognition for their personal contributions to the genre than they have generally received thus far.

Ahmed Bensliman (1916–1951) was a native of Bou Saâda, a popular winter resort in Algeria where numerous Orientalist painters came to work and live. Several of them encouraged him to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers. He is known for his still lifes and landscapes depicting oases, sunsets, the port and old city of Algiers, and for his portraits of anonymous Algerian women.

Miloud Boukerche (1920–1979) began his career as a designer at a silk company, but he also attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His work was influenced by Delacroix and Dinet and he specialized in idealized or even stereotypical portraits that catered to the tastes of his patrons. The typically Orientalist subject matter of other works is evident in their titles: *Berber Woman near the Oasis*, *Elegant Girl on the Terrace in Algeria*, *The Goat Market*.

A self-taught artist, Mohamed Zmirli (1909–1984) first earned his living painting images on wedding trunks. His first easel painting, a still life, was executed in 1930. From 1935 on he participated in many salons and collective exhibitions, including the first Salon of Independence in 1962. Zmirli is known for his still lifes, landscapes (especially of the port of Algiers), floral paintings, and portraits in pastel colors. Another self-taught artist, Hacene Benaboura (1898–1970), recipient of Algeria's Grand Prize for Art in 1957, painted automobiles before taking up easel painting in the mid-1940s. He was influenced by Orientalist artists whom he had watched paint in his childhood.

After independence, works by these early Maghrebi artists were avidly collected by North African museums and private individuals. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, they remind Maghrebis of their pride in local landscapes and revive their nostalgia for traditions, costumes, customs, and festivals that are no longer features of daily life for most Algerians. Furthermore, these artists represent North Africans' early engagement with an internationally recognized art medium. In recent years, paintings by North African artist from the first half of the twentieth century have fetched high prices through auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's and Moroccan companies like the Compagnie Marocaine des Œuvres et Objets d'art (CMOOA).

The impact of these twentieth-century painters may still be seen in contemporary Algerian art. A number of artists make a living from copying Orientalist works or creating their own versions of nostalgic images of a simpler or more glorious past. One artist who stands out for his skills is the self-taught painter Hocine Ziani (b. 1953). His works share the subject matter of Orientalist art including horse cavalades, reclining odalisques, and beautiful Kabyle women carrying water, but also include heroic figures such as the legendary Tuareg queen Tin Hinan. In the 1980s he donated two large-scale (200 × 400 cm) paintings to the Military Museum in Algiers that depict scenes of the Emir Abdelkader's nineteenth-century victories. They bear a striking resemblance to battle scenes painted by European artists a century earlier, but with the key difference that the Algerians are portrayed as the victors.²⁴ Like many other artists of his generation, Ziani moved in the mid-1990s to France where he enjoys patronage and acclaim.

Female Algerian Artists

Only a handful of women artists were recognized in the Maghreb in this early period and were rare even until the 1980s. Women had fewer opportunities to travel, even less access to formal education than men,²⁵ and their artistic production was limited



FIGURE 10.2 Baya. Untitled, 1947–1950. Paint on paper, 74 × 99 cm. Photograph by Jean Genoud SA, courtesy of the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

to certain fields such as weaving and embroidery, ceramics, murals, and body arts (such as henna painting and tattoos).

The most famous Algerian woman artist was known simply as Baya (1931–1998). Orphaned at age five, she was raised by her grandmother and later taken to Algiers by a French woman who encouraged her to make art; she had no formal education. Her clay figures and gouaches were admired by the French collector Aimé Maeght who invited her to exhibit in his gallery in Paris in 1947. The preface to the catalogue was written by André Breton who exclaimed, in a burst of enthusiasm for this “Arab primitive”: “Baya is queen. Baya, whose mission is to give new sense to these beautiful, nostalgic words: ‘Happy Arabia’; Baya who holds and revives the Golden Bough.”²⁶ Her work (Figure 10.2) also appealed to Picasso, when both artists worked with the same ceramics studio in southern France in 1949. The positive reception of this untrained artist’s work in France was due in part to the concept of “*art brut*,” promoted by the French artist Jean Dubuffet in 1945. Baya’s vividly colored gouaches of girls, flowers, fish, birds, and animals were celebrated for their “wild,” “primitive,” “naïve” creativity.²⁷ The dreamlike quality of her works also led Europeans to label her work “surrealist,” believing that she was drawing upon a collective unconscious.

Yet Baya’s work was clearly informed by her Algerian cultural heritage in both style and subject matter. In this sense her aesthetic joins that of highly educated academic artists such as Mohammed Khadda and Rachid Koraichi, who incorporated precolonial Algerian artforms in their work (discussed below). Some of her abstracted faces

and figures appear to display tattoo patterns and Baya exhibited with Denis Martinez, Choukri Mesli, and other artists of the Aouchem (“tattoo”) group who drew on an ancient local heritage.

Very few Algerian women artists were academically trained until the twenty-first century. One exception was Kheira Flidjani (1912–1991), who studied in Paris and returned to Algeria to become the only female member of the National Union of Plastic Arts in 1963. She is known for her portraits and for nudes, which did not please some of her compatriots, but she was not apologetic about depicting the female body.²⁸ Another was Djamila Bent Mohamed (b. 1933), whose somber works focus on myths and legends; she studied in Algiers, Amsterdam, and Paris and taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran, Algeria. Unsurprisingly, several female artists were politically active. Myriam Ben (1928–2001) was a well-known Jewish Algerian writer who joined the communist party and fought for Algerian independence. Her abstracted paintings date from the 1960s until her death. Aïcha Haddad (1937–2005) was a miniaturist, high school art teacher, and anticolonial activist. One of the first women to join the National Liberation Army, she was arrested and imprisoned by the colonial forces. In the early 1970s she began to exhibit her paintings, whose subject matter includes women of the Kabyle region, Tuareg warriors, and folk festivals. An exhibit hall at the Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers is named after her. Leïla Ferhat (b. 1939), who was trained at the Écoles des Beaux-Arts in Oran and Algiers, is known for her semi-figurative works, often featuring the color blue, such as the painting “Message of Freedom.”

The Algerian Revolution, Independence, and Modern Art

The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962) was one of the most important wars of decolonization in the twentieth century. In 1954 the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) issued a proclamation calling for the establishment of a sovereign state of Algeria to put an end to more than 120 years of colonial oppression, segregation, racism, and injustice. For both the Algerians and the French, the long war of independence was unspeakably traumatic. Characterized by terrorism, torture, rape, and chemical and biological weapons, it divided loyalties on both sides and produced many civilian deaths, especially among the Algerians. For the French, who called it a “pacifying operation,” it remained for decades a “war without a name.”²⁹ Starting in the 1950s, painters from around the world mobilized to give testimony to the horrors of the war.³⁰

Algerian artists, in particular, were deeply engaged in representing the causes, traumas, and results of the war. Imprisonment, torture, and massacres were alluded to, and sometimes represented graphically, although rarely in realist modes. Representative works of this era include Mohammed Khadda’s *Hommage à Maurice Audin* (1960), an abstract painting of fractured sticks of turquoise and blood red on a brown and rust background. Audin, a *pied noir* and a university professor, was tortured and assassinated by the military for his anticolonial activities. Choukri Mesli’s 1959 painting *The Bombarding of Sakiet Sidi Youssef* testifies to French military reprisals on a Tunisian border village, an act of brutality that shocked the world. His *Algeria in Flames* (1961) is an abstract work that evokes a chaos of bodies and architectural forms punctuated by fiery red marks. Many of M’hammed Issiakhem’s abstracted works portray the sufferings of women, such as *The Martyr’s Widow* (1968). In one of his “violently expressionistic” works, *To Those Who Wanted to Pass and Remained Behind* (n.d.), a skeletal black

figure, crying out in pain, puts out a hand past barbed wire fences.³¹ Suffering and resistance were major themes in the works during this period of bloody warfare.

A few important exhibitions have documented Algerian and international images of the war. In 1964, the *Art and the Algerian Revolution* exhibit at the Ibn Khaldoun Hall in Algiers featured the works of 80 painters from 26 countries. In 1996 a retrospective at the Palace of Culture in Algiers, *November 1954 through the Eyes of Painters*, commemorated the date of the beginning of armed struggle for national liberation. Forty-two Algerian artists were represented. An exhibition curated by Anissa Bouayed, *International Artists and the Algerian Revolution*, was held at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Algiers (MAMA) in its inaugural year, 2007.³²

Postindependence Phase

After independence in 1962, Algeria entered a phase of reconstruction and revival that was both physical and psychological. The scorched earth tactics of the French military and the terrorist bombing by the anti-independence *pied noir* group, L'Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), destroyed infrastructure and demoralized the population. The École des Beaux-Arts and the National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers, for example, were bombed by the OAS in 1961. Colonial authorities transferred many of the museum's works out of the country. Later the museum's director negotiated the repatriation of those works and developed the collection of paintings by Algerians.

Independent Algeria, portrayed by the new government as an “absolute rupture” with the past,³³ did bring major transformations to the arts sector. In some respects the shift to artistic sovereignty could be said to be an ongoing quest that continues in the twenty-first century, linked to the pursuit of decolonization itself.³⁴ Algerians took over leadership of much of the infrastructure, as directors of schools and museums and as teachers and students in the academies. They formed artist unions that are still operating today, such as the Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (UNAP), founded in 1963, which is now the Union Nationale des Arts Culturels (UNAC).³⁵ Many of the Maghrebi artists who began their careers in the 1950s helped transition their countries from nationalist struggles to a postindependence phase that lasted through the 1980s.

Public work projects such as large-scale monuments, sculptures, and murals were commissioned by the socialist governments from 1962 to 1992. Artists were also solicited to design postage stamps, posters, and banknotes to commemorate local heritage, replacing the resented “*République française*” designs. The monopolization of power by the FLN as a one-party state was evident in the promotion of particular artists and styles. Soldier-artists who fought with the FLN were favored and nationalistic works with revolutionary themes were encouraged. Boukhatem Farès (b. 1941), who fought with the National Liberation Army and drew scenes of military struggle, exemplifies this trend. As in the Soviet Union, representational painting was well accepted in the postindependence era.³⁶ Abstract artists, on the other hand, were sometimes criticized by their nationalistic compatriots for being bourgeois, individualistic, uncommitted, and inauthentic.³⁷

As the countries of the Maghreb fought for independence, artists gradually became aware of how much of their own tradition was obscured by the colonial powers. The project of decolonizing Maghrebi art and its history entailed restoring, revalorizing, and sometimes reinventing a precolonial artistic heritage. For artists looking to return

to their roots, finding traces of local art and tradition proved especially challenging in Algeria where so much of this heritage has been systematically wiped out. The colonial models available were rejected as backward-looking and stylistically passé. Algerians felt that Orientalist art was produced by and for foreigners, as were the museums, galleries, and salons organized by its practitioners. European promotion of Algerian “naïve” art (Baya’s for example) was seen as demeaning to trained artists with avant-garde or nationalist perspectives.

Modernism in Western art is seen by many scholars as a form of rejecting tradition.³⁸ However, for Maghrebi artists under colonial rule, modernism meant borrowing European painting techniques and materials while recuperating elements of Islamic and African arts. The art historian Wijdan ‘Ali describes a “search-for-identity stage” when indigenous artists throughout the Islamic world rediscovered their heritage, showed nationalist pride through their works, and “develop[ed] an indigenous art language based on traditional elements of Arab art” such as the arabesque, miniature painting, calligraphy, and themes from legends and folktales, while “employing contemporary media and modes of interpretation.”³⁹ On the other hand, again according to ‘Ali,

The majority of Algerian artists who came into their own during the 1950s and 1960s . . . made a complete break from both Orientalist painting and indigenous forms (such as the miniature) and, by doing so, initiated a modern art movement. Through their travels and studies in France they came into contact with the latest trends in Western painting.⁴⁰

Yet ‘Ali goes on to claim that this generation was also searching for ways to express an Algerian identity.

While movements such as the FLN gained momentum, artists explored an increasing range of themes and styles. Some artists depicted their country’s problems through social realism (no doubt influenced by Soviet art) or expressionism. Others, such as the Aouchem (tattoo) group from Algeria, the Casablanca Group from Morocco, and the Tunis School, revisited national heritage. Unlike their predecessors, who selected subject matter that championed indigenous values, they did this by using local materials, architectural shapes, Arabic calligraphy, and symbols, and based on the arts of the Berber peoples (who prefer to refer to their cultures as “Amazigh”) – all in abstract formations to create hybrid modern artforms.

The oldest of this generation of artists, Bachir Yellès (b. 1921), has been a leading figure in modern Algerian painting. At age 23 he participated in the first exhibition of Muslim painters and miniaturists from Algeria at the Franco-Muslim Circle along with ‘Ali-Khodja, Hemche, Ranem, and Temmam. In the 1940s he was awarded the Prix d’Honneur Beaux-Arts by the colonial government. His early work resembles Orientalist art in its pastel colors and subject matter: odalisques, landscapes, and Amazigh women from the Kabylia region in their regional dress; as an inspector for art and craft in Kabylia, he had a special interest in Amazigh jewelry. From the late 1960s his works became more abstract.

Yellès helped organize the Premier Salon d’Indépendance and was the founding president of the UNAP artists’ union. He became the first Algerian director of the National School of Architecture and Fine Arts in Algiers. For two decades, he helped shape a new curriculum that included architecture, painting, drawing, printmaking, and art history, as well as miniatures, illumination, painting on wood, ceramics,

bookmaking, calligraphy, and mosaics. The various arts were no longer hierarchically separated into “fine” arts to be studied by Europeans and “applied” arts or “crafts” for the Muslims; rather every student was expected to learn all aspects of what constituted art for both traditions.

Yellès was among the postindependence artists who emphasized the importance of connecting with the Algerian public. His works include monuments such as the massive “Sanctuary of the Martyr” sculpture (1982) and the clock in the Arts Center (2001), both in downtown Algiers, as well as murals at the Algerian embassy in Paris. He also designed postage stamps featuring Algerian costumes, carpets, and crafts.⁴¹ His lifespan of more than nine decades has allowed him to contribute to several phases in the development of modern Algerian art.

Like Yellès, M'hamed Issiakhem (1928–1985) studied miniature painting with Omar Racim. He directed the École des Beaux-Arts in Oran in the late 1960s. From an Amazigh family in the Kabylia region, Issiakhem experienced personally the tragic effects of the Algerian war. At age 15 he picked up a grenade that exploded, killing his two sisters and a nephew and causing him to lose his left arm. His work has been seen as a vision of collective traumatism, made acute by the painter’s individual anguish.⁴² As mentioned above, many of his works depicting anonymous archetypal figures reflect the harsh realities of colonization and the struggle for independence. His work has been described as a mix of social realism, expressionism, figuration, and abstraction. His use of collages, thickly layered paint, and earth colors make his paintings easily recognizable. Like the other artists of his generation cited here, Issiakhem’s work embodies the quest for a plural Algerian identity, in opposition to the reductionism of nationalistic discourses. His compositions incorporate “diverse writings, poems, dedications, quotations and signs symbolizing the historical diversity of Algeria, in Tamazight (the language of the Amazigh, or Berber, peoples), Latin and Arabic.”⁴³

The critic Mohammed Khadda is equally well known as a pioneer of abstract Algerian painting (Figure 10.3). A typographer and a self-taught artist, in 1953 he went with Abdallah Benanteur (b. 1931) to Paris, where he was influenced by lyrical abstraction and cubism. Khadda’s mother’s family members were direct victims of colonial violence and he was engaged in the struggle for independence. When he returned to Algeria in 1963, he rejected the politically engaged social realist style of painting that was encouraged by the Algerian state, but he did participate in collective mural painting and designed a “monument to the martyrs.” He was one of the leading members of the School of the Sign that evolved in the 1960s, and was among the first Maghrebi artists to use both Arabic calligraphy and Tifinagh, an alphabet used to write Tamazight. Khadda’s 1971 book *Éléments pour un art nouveau* offered a history of Algerian art, from the ancient petroglyphs of Tassili to Amazigh art from Kabylia, Arab arts, Orientalism, and the new generation of Algerian painters.⁴⁴ Khadda argued that Maghrebi art, from its origins, was a “nonfigurative art par excellence” and that in its abstraction it was modern before its time.

Similar arguments were made by Choukri Mesli (b. 1931) and Dennis Martinez (b. 1941), cofounders of the Aouchem Group in the late 1960s. Aouchem, the Arabic word for tattoo, an ancient art of the Maghreb, conveyed these artists’ desire to rediscover an authentic tradition of the sign. Conceiving of their modern works as having continuity with a long history of indigenous art, they declared in their manifesto:

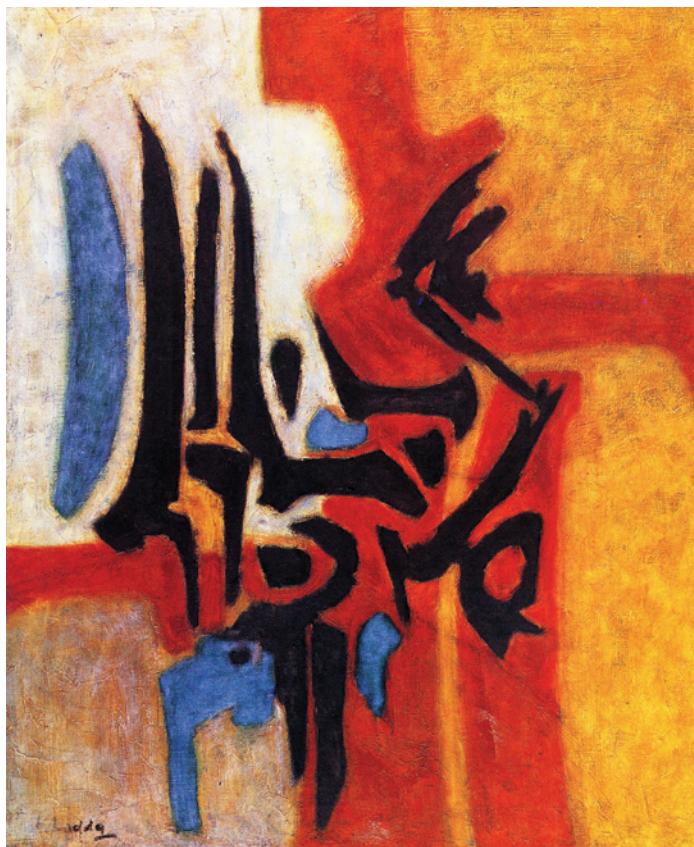


FIGURE 10.3 Mohammed Khadda. *Calm Noon*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 66 × 53 cm. Reproduced with permission from Najat Belkaïd, the artist's widow.

Aouchem was born thousands of years ago on the walls of a cave in the Tassili Mountains. Its existence continues into our own time, sometimes in secret, sometimes in the open, according to the fluctuations of history.⁴⁵

They thus claimed kinship with the Paleolithic and Neolithic artists who created the rock art of the central Sahara and whose abstract figures were echoed in the Aouchem artists' modern work.⁴⁶ Although the Aouchem Group only lasted until 1971, the focus of its members on signs and calligraphy, their use of unusual materials (leather, copper, sand, etc.), and their affiliation with poets, had a lasting influence on other Algerian artists.

In the early 1950s Mesli helped organize the exhibition *La jeune peinture algérienne* (*Young Algerian Painting*), founded the cultural journal *Soleil*, collaborated with other painters and poets, and won the First Prize of the City of Algiers at the Orientalists' Salon. In the mid-1950s he attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris but his scholarship was revoked after he participated in a student strike. After independence he began teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers and was a founding member of UNAP. His painting *Algeria in Flames*, an abstract with blocks of red and black, was one of the first acquisitions of the Algiers Museum of Art after independence. Mesli's monumental

works include a 100 square meter enamel-block mural made in the 1980s in Algiers. Although not a figurative work, the mural evokes doves, suns, and hands that float across bold squares and triangles of red and blue. Mesli's bright canvases are covered with abstract forms that suggest dreams and mythological themes.

Mesli proclaims his affinity with local culture rooted in the African continent.⁴⁷ He participated in the Pan-African Festival organized in Algiers in July 1969 that featured a large exhibition of African and diasporic art from collections around the world. In conjunction with the Second Pan-African festival, held in Algiers in 2009, he held an exhibit entitled *Mesli the African* at the Algerian Museum of Modern Art. Silhouettes of women reminiscent of the Tassili cave paintings, canvases rendered in ochre, red, blue, and yellow and titles like *Dance*, *Twilight*, *Magic*, and *Zebra Stripes* are his poetic homage to an “eternal” Africa. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of Mesli and other like-minded artists, artistic collaboration between the Maghreb and the rest of the continent remains limited. As the Algerian curator and critic Nadira Laggoune recently lamented: “We don’t know so much about art made in Africa and artistic exchanges are practically non-existent.”⁴⁸

Of Spanish ancestry, Dennis Martinez was born in Algeria and considers himself an Algerian artist, not a *pied noir*.⁴⁹ After studying at the fine arts schools in Algiers and Paris, he returned to Algeria and became a professor at his alma mater. In his works he also explores Amazigh motifs and symbols in Arabic and Tifinagh alphabets.⁵⁰

From the time of independence on, the Algerian government insisted on the Arab and Muslim character of the nation. During a popular uprising in 1980 known as the “Berber Spring,” protestors demanded official recognition for Amazigh cultures and languages, which had been repressed by the government in the name of “Arab unity.”⁵¹ Through their works, artists such as Issiakhem, Khadda, Mesli, and Martinez helped promote pride in Algeria’s Amazigh heritage. The influence of these artists was so strong that “until the 2000’s, the recurrent themes in Algerian art remained history, memory, identity, cultural heritage, authenticity.”⁵²

An ongoing interest in locally inspired artforms including calligraphy is evident in the more recent works of “cosmopolitan” artists Rachid Koraïchi (b. 1947) and Samta Benyahia (b. 1950) who identify as Algerians, live in Paris, and show their work in galleries, museums, and biennales in numerous countries. Koraïchi and Benyahia both studied at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and work in various media including painting, printmaking, and installation art. Koraïchi’s work is inspired by Arabic calligraphy, Tifinagh characters, and talismanic symbols, and he has also worked in ceramics, textiles, and metalwork. Benyahia explores geometrical patterns and architectural motifs drawn from Islamic art. Her work often combines photography and serigraphy.

Artists and the Algerian Civil War 1991–2002

During the 1990s, Choukri Mesli and Dennis Martinez were among the many Algerian artists who fled to France to take refuge from the Algerian civil war, a period of intense conflict between government and Islamicist forces in which as many as 200,000 people were killed.⁵³ The period from 1991 to 2002 became known as Algeria’s “dark decade” or “lost decade.” Many visual artists, musicians, writers, and journalists were threatened with death or murdered, and intellectuals fled the country. The director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Algiers, Ahmed Asselah, and his son Rabah, who was a student there, were assassinated in 1994. The abstract

painter ‘Ali Silem (b. 1947) left for France that same year after Abdelkader Alloula, a playwright for whom he created costumes and décor, was killed. Artists who stayed in Algeria were driven underground. Galleries closed and patrons – governmental and private – disappeared.

Although there is a rich literary production that deals with this tragic period of Algerian history, most visual artists at the time felt too threatened to treat it directly in their works. It has only been since the end of the civil war in the early 2000s that a younger generation of artists has broached the subject in their photographs, videos, and installations.⁵⁴

Painting and Contemporary Trends in Algerian Art

While relative security was restored to Algeria during the first two terms of Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s presidency (1999–2009), emergency laws were only lifted in 2011 and Algerians remain wary of oppressive forces in the government as well as of Islamists. In the past dozen years there have been hopeful signs for the art world, however, including the reopening of the French Cultural Center in Algiers, the creation of several galleries, and the opening of the new Museum of Modern Art in 2007. Oran began hosting a biennale of contemporary art in 2010. Still, many of the country’s best known artists live and work abroad.

These cosmopolitan expatriates include Houria Niati, whose 1982 *No to Torture* was described at the beginning of this essay. While that installation is strongly linked to the painterly tradition, her bold use of art historical imagery to refer to the brutality of government oppression (particularly, given the use of Delacroix’s images, colonial oppression) was groundbreaking in Algerian contexts. Other early experiments in installation art were made by Zineb Sedira (b. 1963) who was born in France and resides in London. She is known internationally for her haunting reflections on migration and displacement. Her works include the 16 mm film *Middle Sea* (2008) and a video installation on 14 LCD screens entitled *Floating Coffins* (2000), filmed at the “ship graveyard” in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, where migrants attempt to depart for Europe, on voyages that often end in their death.

Not all digital artworks are produced by artists from the Algerian Diaspora. A recent example of a provocative and celebrated work by an Algerian residing in the country is Ammar Bouras’s (b. 1964) media montage *Tag’out*, exhibited at the 2011 Sharjah Biennale. A former photojournalist, Bouras received degrees from the École des Beaux-Arts of Algiers in visual communication and painting and taught photography there from 1995 to 2006. The work, whose title means “treason,” featured graphic news images from the 1990s that flashed on large screens, displayed in mosaic fashion, incorporating photos of assassinated political figures and artists, and pictures from the artist’s life.

Conclusion

Modern Algerian art emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century and developed between 1930 and 1970 despite, but also thanks to, colonial arts infrastructure including schools, salons, and museums. A number of self-taught artists were

encouraged by their peers and by European artists and patrons. More privileged artists who attended schools and became teachers contributed to the education of new generations of artists. Independence opened a space for dialogue on a more equal footing between Maghrebi and Western painters, and modern art began to develop in myriad forms. The pioneers of Maghrebi modernism continued to exchange techniques and ideas with Europeans while revalorizing their inherited traditions. They also paved the way for today's proliferation of styles and young artists' openness to the international scene. The violence of the Algerian revolution inspired painters to find ways to put that revolt into images, whereas the civil war led artists to flee the country and stifle their reactions.

Painting continues to dominate Algerian art and academic instruction remains relatively traditional. Increasingly, however, videos and installations represent new opportunities for contestation and creation, with artists responding to more recent political and social upheavals rather than to the Orientalist and colonialist discourses that had served as a catalyst for innovation by their predecessors. The international acclaim garnered by the young generation of artists, the restoration of a relative peace inside the country, and the burgeoning art scene in the Diaspora have all contributed to a renewal in Algerian art as Algerians continue to grapple with the multiple legacies of their history.

Notes

- 1 Hassan (1997).
- 2 Khadda (1972, 10–11), translation by Mary Vogl.
- 3 Shabout (2007).
- 4 Arama (2006).
- 5 Dumur (1988, 43); Pouillon (1996, 183).
- 6 Many scholars have nuanced this interpretation. See for example Naef (2004). Also see Ramadan, chapter 7 this volume.
- 7 *Pieds noir* refers to the colonial settlers in the Maghreb, specifically in Algeria. In the 1950s there were approximately one million settlers of European origin and nine million Muslim Algerians. Most of the Jewish Algerians left for France and a small number for Israel. More than 80% of the *pieds noir* left Algeria around the time of independence.
- 8 Irbouh (2005).
- 9 Irbouh (2005).
- 10 Cited in Pieprzak (2010, 17).
- 11 Pouillon (2003); Irbouh (2005); Benjamin (2003); Laggoune-Aklouche (2011).
- 12 Khadda (1972); Laggoune-Aklouche (2011).
- 13 Bellido et al. (2003).
- 14 These art historians and critics include, to name a few: Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, Malika Bouabdella, Dalila Mohammad-Orfali, Zahia Rahmani, and Mohamed Djehiche. Dalila Mohammed-Orfali directs the Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers and Khalida Toumi is the minister of culture.
- 15 Beaulieu and Roberts (2002); Benjamin (2003); Pouillon (2003).
- 16 Benjamin (2003). Jacques Majorelle and Bernard Boutet de Monvel were among the other painters represented.
- 17 Angeli (1955); Benjamin (2003).

- 18 Benjamin (2003, 50).
- 19 Benjamin (2003, 440).
- 20 Unfortunately, he does not mention the importance of Racim's contribution to "closing this gap," and he does not appear to be including Algerians in his description of these "modernists" (Van Leeuwen 2010, 223, 229).
- 21 Pouillon (1996); Benjamin (2003).
- 22 The next collective exhibit of Algerian artists was not until the Premier Salon d'Indépendance in Algiers in 1962 (Laggoune-Akhlouche 2011).
- 23 For example, see Khadda, cited in Pouillon (1996, 194).
- 24 Pouillon (1996, 203–205).
- 25 At the time of the war of independence, less than 5% of Algerian women could read and write. The figure was only 15% for the overall population (Stora and Harbi 2004, 201).
- 26 Baya (1988). Martine Antle also sees in Baya's work "motifs and colors reaching back to folkloric and Arabo-Berber traditions . . . The female bodies and the objects she paints form intricate decorative and repetitive rhythmic patterns reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy, Islamic Art, and oriental carpets" (2006, 10).
- 27 Pouillon (1996); Khanna (2008); Makhoul (1998).
- 28 Rouache (2009).
- 29 Stora (2004).
- 30 Bouayed (2005). For example, Pablo Picasso, the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta, and the French painter Robert Lapoujade, through their portraits of Djamilia Boupacha, called attention to the celebrated cause of this female Algerian liberation activist who was tortured, raped, condemned to death, and finally granted amnesty.
- 31 Bouayed (2005).
- 32 Bouayed (2009).
- 33 Pouillon (1996, 198).
- 34 Related questions are addressed in the Egyptian context in studies by Winegar (2006) and Omnia El Shakry (2009).
- 35 Yellès, Mesli, Farès, and Zmirli were among the founding members of the Union.
- 36 Algeria benefited from close relations to the Soviet Union during the war of independence and after. The impact of Soviet art on Algerian production merits further study.
- 37 Pouillon (1996, 199).
- 38 For example, Hughes (1991); Weston (2001); Calinescu (1987).
- 39 'Ali (1994, 74).
- 40 'Ali (1994, 93).
- 41 Muhammad-Orfali (2009).
- 42 Bouayed (2005, 38).
- 43 Dorbani-Bouabdella (2010).
- 44 Like many works of that era, the book appeared in French, the language that members of the Algerian intelligentsia used for academic writing.
- 45 Manifesto (2009, 188).
- 46 Magnificent paintings and carvings dating back at least 8,000 years adorn rock walls in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountain range in southern Algeria. See L'Hote (1959); Lajoux (1963).
- 47 "For a discussion of "Africanité" in the Maghreb, see Pieprzak and Winegar (2009).
- 48 Haupt and Binder (2009).

- 49 Becker (2009, 25).
- 50 Becker (2009, 25).
- 51 It was only in 2002 that Tamazight was recognized as a national language and it is still not an official language, as it was recently declared in Morocco. See also Maddy-Weitzman (2011).
- 52 Laggoune-Aklouche (2011, 189).
- 53 Following riots in 1988, the government made political reforms that allowed for the participation of political parties beyond the FLN. However, in the elections in the early 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) appeared to be winning a majority of votes, the army intervened and an armed struggle ensued between the military and radical Islamist groups. Most of the victims of this conflict were innocent civilians, and women were particularly vulnerable to attack.
- 54 Diasporic artists working in new media who reflect upon aspects of the civil war include Kader Attia (b. 1970), Nadia Seboussi (b. 1971), Abdel Abdessemed (b. 1971), and Zoulikha Bouabdellah (b. 1977). Perhaps the most iconic image of the conflict is the photo known as the “Madonna of Bentalha” taken in 1997 by French Press Agency photojournalist Hocine Zaourar (Algerian, b. 1952). In the village of Bentalha near Algiers, more than 200 people were massacred in one night by the Armed Islamic Group. The next day Zaourar photographed a woman mourning outside a hospital. The composition is reminiscent of a Christian pietà, and the image, which was published on the front pages of many newspapers and won a World Press Photography award, helped call international attention to the Algerian tragedy.

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Kofi Antubam, 1922–1964

A Modern Ghanaian Artist, Educator, and Writer

Atta Kwami

Introduction

I grew up in the 1960s in Ho, capital of the Volta Region in Ghana. There were American, British, French, German, Russian, Dutch, and Hong Kong Chinese expatriates in town. By this time, though, the Ghanaians on the teaching staff of Mawuli Secondary School, where my mother was an art teacher, far outnumbered the foreigners. My mother, Grace Kwami (1923–2006), had trained at Achimota and Kumasi College of Technology (later to become Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) as one of the first art specialists in the Gold Coast (now Ghana).¹ She was head of the art department at Mawuli School from 1957 to 1970. Ghanaian artists (including Kofi Antubam, Ernest Victor Asihene, Albert Osabu Bartimeus, and Oku Ampofo), British art tutors (Jim Mackendrick and John Hillocks), Russian Jewish artist Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, and South African artist Selby Mvusi were part of the conversation my mother had with her friends in Ho. At home a transistor radio was dear to my mother's heart; on this gadget we heard the news and music from around the world.

The most influential modern artist of Ghana who came into conversations in my mother's circle was Kofi Antubam. Along with my mother, he was an important influence in art education in Kumasi, where I later studied, and his work and writings had a lasting impact on Ghanaian art history. Antubam once stopped by in Ho in 1963, back from one of his trips to Nigeria; although I was only six or seven, I remember that he seemed shy and awkward. Grace Kwami told us that he was a great artist who was so driven that he never stopped working. His pen-and-ink drawing of a figural group, made for a calendar, hung up on the wall for several years. Visiting the Old Parliament House in 1966, I was gratified to be allowed to sit in Ghana's Seat of State, designed by Antubam; I was struck by its elegance. It was the direct result of

the modernist philosophy of the “African Personality” originally promoted by Kwame Nkrumah as the vehicle for moving into the postcolonial age.

For Ghana the decade leading up to independence in 1957 was particularly turbulent. This period of upheaval, as it laid the foundations for self-government, also provided a context that allowed the flourishing of the arts.² Art and culture in the 1950s were considered to be romantic things – in the sense of “feeling,” “imagination,” “experience,” and “yearning”³ – and they were tied to the longing for freedom from colonial rule that spread across West Africa. It was within this context that talented young artists such as Kofi Antubam were exhorted to work hard, laying the foundation upon which others might build. Antubam revealed yearnings for recognition:

The present stages of politics and religion in the Gold Coast call for real hard work on their [Gold Coast artists’] part to lift their art, from the low level of provincialism to the higher and brighter plane of world standard.⁴

This period was steeped in discourse surrounding two men: Kwame Nkrumah, who became the first president of Ghana, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal. For example, their ideas had an impact upon the Nigerian artist Uche Okeke, and Okeke declared to members of the Zaria Art Society (“The Zaria Rebels”): “Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are!” Nkrumah elaborated on his vision, when he declared that

once Africa is free and independent we shall see a flowering of the human spirit on our continent second to none. The African Personality in liberty and freedom will make a particular contribution to the totality of culture and Civilization.⁵

In Ghana, President Nkrumah made an impact on Kofi Antubam, and upon other young artists such as J. C. Okyere, Oku Ampofo, Vincent Kofi, and Grace Kwami; so too did Dr. Emmanuel Kwesigir Aggrey of Achimota College, Accra. Nkrumah had been deeply moved by Aggrey’s political ideas for African emancipation and Pan-Africanism, later offering free education and providing the framework for a cultural policy. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts, personally championing the wearing of the smock (*fugu*) of northern Ghana and *kente* robes of southern Ghana, both of which signified his idea of the “African Personality.” Nkrumah was a leading activist and theoretician of the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, a movement that seeks to unify African people. Nkrumah sought the advice and cooperation of Kofi Antubam, in whom he found a cultural lieutenant.

Kofi Antubam would make his mark as a muralist and designer of state regalia. Because of his profile as a major proponent of his promotion of explicitly Pan-African subject matter, Nkrumah shared an affinity with him; in Antubam, Nkrumah found someone with whom he could work. Of course, others, such as Ampofo and Kofi, along with a raft of craftspeople, also benefited from state patronage, and contributed to the building of a Ghanaian modernism.

This article aims to fill in gaps in scholarship on Ghanaian contributions to Ghanaian art history made by Kofi Antubam, and draws on Antubam’s seminal book, *Ghana’s Heritage of Culture*.⁶ When it came out, Antubam was already regarded as one of the most accomplished African artists of his day. Sadly, he would die of a stroke at the early age of 42, in 1964. He was survived by two wives, Mrs. Aba Antubam and

Madam Carr Quarley, and by 10 children. Serving as art master at Achimota and playing the role of national artist made for a hectic lifestyle. One wonders how the history of modern Ghanaian art would have unfolded had he lived longer. More specifically, then, this essay will focus upon the contributions to Ghanaian art history made by Antubam, whose life and work serve as a bridge from the colonial to the postcolonial era. Politicians and artists in the 1950s and 1960s saw in art the tools for expressions of identity, ideology, statehood, and nation-making.

The Formative Years of Kofi Antubam

Antubam was born in 1922 at Oppong Valley in the Western Region of Ghana to Maame Akua Mesuah and Nana Ntiako Mensah, the paramount chief of Wassaw Amanfi State. His father died before the young Kofi started school. As he was the grandnephew of the chief linguist of his father's court, Kofi had been expected to serve in his father's household. A maternal uncle, sensing that his nephew's talent would be wasted as a courtier, sent him to school at Kumasi; Antubam's mother died a few years later.

In Kumasi, he stayed with a Fanti family, the Class-Peters. After primary school Kofi continued his education in Jos, Nigeria in 1936. Kofi's talent as a sculptor was "discovered" by an Anglican priest, Reverend Father John Knight, then principal of Adisadel College, Cape Coast, who suggested to the governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Arnold Hodson, that he commission the young artist to make a clay portrait bust. Antubam so surprised the British governor with what Bedu-Addo has described as "a precisionist's three dimensional job," that the official promised additional support for Antubam's future career.⁷ Within two weeks a letter had arrived from the Castle asking Antubam to go to Accra to display clay modeling at an agricultural and general exhibition. There the governor drew the attention of Canon H. M. Grace, principal of Achimota, and Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, the newly arrived art master, to the young artist's work. The encounter resulted in Antubam's scholarships to attend the college.

In British West Africa, Achimota College was considered an unusually privileged coeducational colonial institution designed to produce an elite. Kwame Nkrumah and several successive Ghanaian statesmen were educated there. Achimota became a fertile ground for training pioneer modern Ghanaian artists. Five artists who trained at Achimota, Amon Kotei (1915–2011), E. V. Asihene (1915–2001), Saka Acquaye (1915–2007), Vincent Kofi (1927–1974), and Kofi Antubam, are generally cited as being the formative forces of modern art in Ghana, and they were featured in the book and exhibition, *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art*.⁸ To illustrate how European art teachers interacted with students at Achimota, I will first discuss Antubam's further development and then look at two of the most influential art tutors in his career.

Antubam's full scholarship covered the four-year teacher training course at Achimota College and subsequently a three-year specialists' art and crafts course at Achimota in 1943 where he studied with Meyerowitz. On finishing the course in 1946, Antubam went to teach art for a few months at Tamale Government Middle Boarding School, then, from January 1947 to September 1948, at Kumasi Government Boys' and Girls' School. While teaching in Kumasi, he was engaged as a part-time tutor for the workers

of Abura Printing Works, imparting skills to them three hours every Saturday in typesetting, poster-making, and lettering. In addition, he always supplemented his income through sales of work. Antubam's figurative pictures, for which he would be known, were being developed at this stage. In August 1948, he mounted a solo exhibition of 50 works at the YMCA Hall in Kumasi. His main media were pen-and-ink drawing and ink wash, or watercolor; poster color, pastel, and crayon works were also shown in this exhibition. He was cultivating himself as an artist through his portraits and genre scenes, choosing "subject matter of women carrying water pots on their heads, mothers preparing local meals amidst indigenous home surroundings and barefooted children at play."⁹

Following their training at Achimota College as art specialists, promising artist-educators such as Antubam and his fellow students E. V. Asihene and Kate Ofori were offered scholarships by the British Council and the Gold Coast Government, called the Colonial Secretary's Scholarship. Antubam won this funding for a two-year art teacher's certificate course at Goldsmiths College, London, under the headship of Clive Gardiner, from 1948–1950. Throughout his stay in Britain he was busy mounting various exhibitions: during June 1949, at the Berkeley Gallery, London, and during June–July 1949, in the Colonial Office, Marble Arch, London; during December 1949, at Black Hall, St Giles, Oxford (organized by the British Council and the West African Student's Club); during April 1950, for the British Council Colonial Students at 45 Grosvenor House, London (a joint exhibition); in May at the Galleria Cit, 193 Piazza Colonna, Rome; in July 1950, for La Galerie Palmes, Paris (a solo show);¹⁰ and, finally, in 1950, at the Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf, Germany (to aid German refugees). His travels in Europe gave him a chance to see masterpieces in France and Italy. He was already familiar with the National Gallery, the Tate, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Through his exhibitions, Antubam was gaining international exposure and more confidence. On his return from Britain to Ghana in 1950, Antubam became the head of the art department at Achimota School.

Institutional History, from Achimota to "Kumasi Realism"

During the colonial era there were two main types of art education: the indigenous workshop or household apprenticeship, and European-derived art schools. In Ghana today this is still largely true. Drawing on paper and other surfaces from observation was introduced into Ghanaian culture before the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1908, "hand-and-eye training" was introduced in schools and training colleges in the Gold Coast, whose objective centered on industrial training, through the adoption of the 1887 British Education Code.¹¹ An expatriate instructor, Hugh McLaren of the education department, introduced a method of drawing called "hand-and-eye" in 1909. It was the antithesis of drawing from the imagination and largely revolved around drawing objects based on observation, for which the hand and eye were coordinated. In academies such as the Slade School of Art, University of London, this method reduced the drawing of the human figure to "sight-size," that is, the figure seen against one's thumb in an outstretched hand.

The earliest British colonial institution in the Gold Coast was Accra Training College, which merged with Achimota College when the latter was opened in 1927. Achimota College was a brainchild of Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the Reverend Alek

Fraser, and Dr. Emmanuel Kwegir Aggrey. Achimota was described by Guggisberg as “a model for all education which was to set a standard of attainment.”¹² Guggisberg, who became governor of the Gold Coast in 1919, “was deeply interested in education, which he regarded as the keystone of policy.”¹³ Although an imported model of education, Achimota College was seen as innovative by local people, and as offering the opportunity for initiative to teachers.

Clyde Chantler would later discern that the main purpose of Achimota was: “To provide on African soil an education equal in technical quality to the best that can be provided in England, and at the same time adapted to African conditions and requirements.”¹⁴ According to a report of 1952, Achimota had aimed at producing students who were “Western” in intellectual and spiritual outlook, but African in sympathies and anxious to keep the best in “tribal life and customs.”¹⁵

The first art tutor at Achimota, George A. Stevens (1900–1980), came from England to the Gold Coast in 1924, when the foundation stone of Achimota was first laid. He had trained at the Slade School of Art but was keen on imparting some of what he had learned about early European modernism to the “natives.”¹⁶ Antubam wrote, “Stevens who came to Achimota from the old Technical School, Accra, had already started on his own to conduct research into the history of West African art.”¹⁷ Stevens believed tradition-based art forms and local product design of the Gold Coast must form the basis of any vital modern African culture, yet he encountered opposition from his students, who were interested in European modernity. After the founding of Achimota there was also a move by chiefs and the elite against “Africanization” of the curriculum at the expense of a broader education. In 1929, Stevens exhibited his students’ drawings and paintings in London, demonstrating that he had indeed provided his students with a foundation in European two-dimensional painting practices. After he left Achimota, he devised a syllabus for art education and instruction in West Africa in 1936, placing much emphasis on imaginative composition.¹⁸

Stevens was interested in promoting vernacular traditions in Ghanaian art alongside the teaching of European techniques. He criticized “hand-and-eye” as an imposed model: “the dull drudgery of ‘drawing from objects.’”¹⁹ Stevens sought the “conceptual as opposed to the imitative” (that is to say, he wanted to go beyond verisimilitude). He suggested alternative methods of learning and teaching art, including the keeping of log books by students on artists in their home districts so as to organize workshops and meetings to harness all their rich resources and skills.²⁰ He provided research avenues for his teaching of “a history of West African arts” (mostly based on sculpture and masking traditions) that he introduced with an assistant, Carl Dey. According to Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, his successor, Stevens “taught very few definite rules about how to draw. What he did most was to encourage pupils to use their eyes well.” He abhorred “copy-work.”²¹ In his innovative approach, Stevens had students draw humorous cartoons of the daily life at the college. These were valued more highly than academic works, for he saw them as the germ of the African art of the future. He explained,

These cartoons became the basis of my teaching, and were regarded as the most important part of a student’s work, and later won the more respectable title of “imaginative composition.” The rest was easy. It was one of the most wonderful experiences I have ever had, to see, month by month, the new life that came flooding in to the drawing lesson. Ideas, wit, humour, a wealth of subject-matter never

before dealt with by the hand of the artist, poured over each other in a stream of ever-increasing force and vigour . . . Strangely enough hand and eye were trained, accuracy of representation, where it was needed, was acquired, by the way. Why? Because the purpose of the whole business was understood. The dull drudgery of “drawing from objects” became the practical necessity of “making studies.” Memory drawing became a useful and intelligent drill in the rapid analysis of form.²²

As he encouraged students, they became highly motivated in what he called a “Renaissance.” Meyerowitz later remembered that Stevens delivered a series of lectures on the history of art, covering Assyrian, Egyptian, and Greek sculpture, early European painting, Renaissance and modern painting, and Oriental art. On other occasions he read Ruskin, Pater, and other writers on art, and followed the reading with discussion. An excellent artist himself, he was intensely interested in the simple drawings of his pupils, and when the ethnographer and government anthropologist Captain Robert Sutherland Rattray asked him to illustrate his volume of Asante folk tales, he was confident that his students could produce the images. The result was *Akan-Ashanti Folk Tales Collected and Translated by R. S. Rattray and Illustrated by Africans of the Gold Coast Colony*.²³ Stevens remained at Achimota until late 1929. His departure led to frequent staff turnovers, involving Ghanaian and foreign staff. Gabries Pippet, head of the department from 1931 to 1936, considered teaching a few rules in drawing a necessity, and so he taught perspective and human proportion. Crafts, as an after school activity, were introduced during this time. Antubam viewed Pippet’s time as “a step forward” until Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz (1900–1945) came to “revolutionize” (Antubam’s word) art teaching at Achimota in 1937.²⁴ Antubam was a student of this Russian Jewish émigré from South Africa, who was director of the Achimota art department from 1937 until 1945, when he died while on leave in London.

The “Meyerowitz Approach,” a document given to me by his former student, Mawere Opoku, sums up the curriculum and provides insight into how it contributed to the development of a generation of artists whose works are identified with what has been called the “Kumasi School of Art.” It laid out the bases for convincing art students that they have an African viewpoint to express and to share with the rest of the world. Like Stevens before him, one of Meyerowitz’s guiding principles was that the quality of life would be improved if people made use of all the available local materials and human resources. He believed that education was a form of training for creative citizenship. In 1959, Kofi Antubam, then head of the Achimota School art department, wrote about the Meyerowitz era:

The fact of change which often heralds development and progress has not in the case of the Arts and Crafts Department, been altogether a blessing. Established late in 1936, it was to serve the artistic needs of such a modern college, a multi-purposed institution made up of middle and secondary schools and Teacher-Training colleges with additional departments of Domestic Science, Intermediate Engineering and degree courses. It developed so very rapidly in the early years that by 1947, it had assumed the status of a full-fledged School of Art. It had so established itself as an art force that its influence was felt everywhere in educational institutions in the country.²⁵

After Meyerowitz's death, his wife Eva took over the running of the art department at Achimota for an additional year (until 1946). Eva Meyerowitz was a sculptor, ethnographic field worker, and author, who was considered by her husband to be "by far the better sculptor." In her numerous books and writings, she argued for unity between concept and skill. Like other colleagues of her time, she was an adherent of essentialist notions of "tribal-styles" but she made important contributions to African art history. For example, she undertook significant fieldwork in Nigeria, where photographs she took provided vital information about the Shango temple that had been sketched by Carl Arriens for Leo Frobenius in 1910, and which documented the figurative columns by master Yoruba carvers. In Gold Coast (modern Ghana), Antubam was her assistant researcher on field trips to the Bono region. He illustrated her report on the queen mothers of Bono-Manso-Takyiman in 1945/1946.²⁶ Because this field-work with Eva Meyerowitz supplemented the research Antubam had undertaken with her husband, and with his own education and experience in Europe, Antubam was considered the most knowledgeable artist of his time by fellow Ghanaians.²⁷

A decision was made in June 1945 to develop colonial colleges of arts, science and technology. At the British parliament in London, Sir Walter Elliot, chairman of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa, had presented a report (now known as the "Elliot Report") that paved the way for the construction and foundation of universities in Ghana. In 1949, Achimota College agreed to be incorporated into the proposed regional college. The proposal had the support of influential "chiefs," as the rulers of Akan kingdoms were known, and the most powerful of these, the Asantehene Otumfuo Nana Sir Agyeman Prempeh II, generously offered three sites where a university could be built in his capital, Kumasi. One of these was accepted, and plans for the relocation of the training college were prepared and work commenced on the site in January 1951. Jim Mackendrick was appointed by the British Crown Agents for the Colonies as the new supervisor of the school of art at the teacher training department in Achimota in 1951, in time for the college's incorporation into the new university and its move to Kumasi in 1952.

It seems from the accounts of Stevens and Meyerowitz that the early leaders in Achimota art education imported European values of art as "high art," despite showing respect for local forms. The idea of "high art" is linked to the sixteenth-century developments in Western European traditions elevating sculpture, architecture, and painting. These arts were designated as 'fine arts' because they were said to play important roles in society, representing moral and spiritual ideals and creating worthy buildings for religious and state institutions. "Artists were considered to require gifts of imagination and intellect, which were not required for making 'decorative' or 'useful' arts."²⁸

Street Painters and "Kumasi Realism"

The new institution in Kumasi was given a succession of titles, but the one that was most widely known is the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) (shortened in local speech to "Tech"). The art department at KNUST immediately had an impact on the wider artistic community of Kumasi, for sign painters in that city, for example King Samino and Alex Amofa, picked up skills from practitioners at the school of art, from Ernest Victor Asihene and Edmund Jimmy Tetteh. They often exhibited together, and studied through observation (looking). Even workshop-trained artists

and masters, who did not engage with the school directly, such as Azey and Akoto, were nevertheless influenced by these professors; their own apprentices familiarized them with the material taught at KNUST. There is thus a connection between Kofi Antubam and these commercial artists, as Tetteh and Asihene had taken part in exhibitions organized by Antubam as far back as the 1950s.

It is noteworthy, though, that KNUST was not the only source of European ideas about art. The inception of art school training at Achimota, round about 1927, coincided with the arrival of the first advertising agencies in Ghana. By the time KNUST was founded, two-dimensional representational images, and even reproductions of European artworks, were widely available in the environment. The United Africa Company spread posters and enamel signs, imported from England, all over the country inside buses, trains, and at railway stations, and on trees.²⁹

The sign painters of Gold Coast and Ghana also created influential works. Commercial artist Yemo Kwei Anang painted posters for the Convention People's Party (CPP) (President Nkrumah's party) in the 1950s and large paintings for state visits. Anang had produced some outstanding portraits and murals for hotels in Accra and in Ho. Two professional sign painters known as Yenoo and Clement, based in Accra, also painted gigantic portraits of famous Ghanaian statesmen. Yet, in Kumasi, the interplay between the street painters of Samino's circle and the painters at the KNUST automatically led to what is now a conscious "fine art" movement, Kumasi Realism, to use Alex Amofa's term. Amofa, whose business is called Supreme Art Works, said: "I do painting, sign writing and fine art but all are the same."³⁰ Kumasi Realism draws upon photography, advertising, graphic design, European art history, Ghanaian history and culture, and current social problems. It is informed by a twin concept of illustration and mechanical reproduction, including photography and realistic depiction; it is notable that Kofi Antubam, during his time at government schools in Kumasi, also worked at Abura Printing Press.

In summary, throughout the twentieth century, the global trafficking of images infused the Ghanaian art scene with a contemporary cultural history not dissimilar to that of northern Europe. Here, we have the workings of a local African modernity which had been sparked off by photography by the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries. The root of academic painting and street painting in Kumasi is similarly influenced by collage, the fusion of image with text, and so on. The influence of photography was a particularly important factor in the history of Kumasi painting. This influence can still be felt today; a recent painting by Amofa, *A Game of Mind (The Draughts Players)*, 2000 (Figure 11.1), was based upon a mid-century photograph by Willis E. Bell reproduced in *The Roadmakers: A Picture Book of Ghana*, compiled by Efua Sutherland.³¹ The work depicts a child and a young adult enjoying a game of draughts while an old man looks on.

Kofi Antubam as an Educator

Antubam believed that very rarely was a pupil without aptitude for, and interest in, some form of art. He also held that confidence could be nurtured by letting a student sample art activities, and that pupils should be encouraged to discover their own individuality within their work. Nevertheless, his methods for quickening interest in art remained heavily dependent on Eurocentric sources. For example, the Art Club had talks,



FIGURE 11.1 Alex Amofa. *A Game of Mind (Draughts Players)*, 2000. Oil on calico. Photograph by Atta Kwami, reproduced with the permission of the artist.

illustrated by a great range of large Medici Prints [of European Renaissance painting and drawing]; visits are paid to exhibitions at British Council House, Accra; the show boards carry post-card prints of famous art pieces, with explanatory comments; and the senior master himself prepares large-scale visual aids of an ingenious and effective kind to illustrate his teaching.³²

In his teaching and his own studio practice, Antubam was beginning to evolve strategies for merging the best of the two spheres of art production: tradition-based art and art based on European influence. For example, the oval-shaped head of a fertility doll known as *Akua'ba* (Wednesday-born child) could be used as a module for the head and other parts of the human form. This distinctive theory of applied art based on basic Akan ideals of beauty would be taught in his classroom.³³ On the other hand, he referred to European color theory when he taught the four qualities of hue, value, chroma, and temperature and how “local color” is modified by light, atmosphere, texture, and reflection.³⁴

The influence of Antubam remains at Achimota and other schools in Ghana, years after his death; it takes the form of cyclostyled notes on figure drawing and color theory used by teachers. Sadly the mural he painted at Achimota art department was less durable; it flaked off the wall in the 1970s. However, Alex Offei-Aboagye, art master and sculptor at Achimota, continued producing replicas of Antubam’s doors

and wooden bas-reliefs up until the 1970s at Achimota School; he maintained three or four carvers at the same workshop. This filled long-standing commissions by state and local institutions, the Ho Regional Museum being an example.

Kofi Antubam as a Writer

Antubam's *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (1963) is an early theory of aesthetics that would provide a means of curriculum enrichment for the mainstream of art education and a template for visual arts practice as Ghanaian artists developed a national art. In a publication in 1954 he had revealed his yearnings for the visibility of Ghanaian art within a global art arena. Two exhibition catalogues, *From Ghana Folk Art to Kofi Antubam* and *Kunst aus Ghana: Kofi Antubam*,³⁵ illustrated the artist's own paintings and drawings, other modern Ghanaian works, and Ghanaian textiles, terracotta, and wooden sculptures from local workshops. The indigenous art forms were also discussed in his earlier essay, "Die Kunst als Ausdruck der Traditionellen Kultur Ghanas" in the 1960 catalogue *Kunst aus Zentralafrika*, with a photograph of an *akua'ba* figure and Akan stool.³⁶ His aim in writing *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, similarly, was to examine "the nation's contribution to the [world] arts."³⁷ Antubam considered artifacts made in two Ghanaian art spheres, those from old tradition-based contexts and those based upon experimentation using new techniques in drawing, painting, and sculpture, and in public art. The bulk of *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* examines ethical values: notions of religion and society, goodness or virtue, names, ideas of time, color, and so forth. Discussions of the disciplines of painting, sculpture, literature, music, and dance follow. Poetry in drum language and ensembles is documented along with "expressive modes of art." These include figures (such as *akua'mma* and representations of spiritual beings known as *sasabonsam*), symbolic marks to adorn the face and body (especially at initiations marking girl's puberty), ceremonial sword ornaments, textile symbolism, gold weights, designs on canoes, and ceremonial stools, in addition to a discussion of basic ideals of beauty. All of the examples were taken from the Akan cultures of southern Ghana.

In this groundbreaking book Antubam's accounts of formal art education in Ghana were limited to his description of academic training since 1918. Although he did not reflect on indigenous artistic practice in relationship to art education, he did explore folklore, and drew from the courts of chiefs and from daily life in modern Ghana.

Antubam argued that all art should serve a useful function in society. It is possible that he was influenced by Marxist thinking, because the USSR had contacts with the Nkrumah administration during the 1960s. This position was in contradiction to "Western" "art for art's sake" or esoteric abstraction (despite the wealth of "abstraction" in the content of local cloth, pottery, canoe, architecture, wall painting, beadwork, and music). Antubam's text chronicled developments in the modern Ghanaian art scene in urban centers, art groups, cultural institutions, and organizations central to the promotion of art. The accounts regarding the traditions of training, patronage, or display were limited to formally trained individuals, again overlooking household or workshop training. Yet, had he not written the book, it is possible that much of the history of art education at Achimota, and the history of Ghana's twentieth-century arts, would have been lost.

The overall goal of the volume was to translate Kwame Nkrumah's and Léopold Sédar Senghor's concepts surrounding the "African Personality" and Négritude into ideas for a modern Ghanaian aesthetic; the text encapsulated Antubam's critical attitude towards essentialism and racism, and Antubam was highly critical of the European discourse on African art. This modernist strategy for revival, in the aftermath of almost 60 years of colonial policies, became a philosophy. By 1962, Antubam had infused a new principle into his work; he noted, "what the Ghanaian expresses in art today needs not necessarily continue to be featured by disproportions and distortions which undoubtedly are the greatest qualities of the sort of art expected of him by the world outside Africa." These are features associated with indigenous African sculpture, the very features which European avant-garde artists so admired and imitated to infuse European art with new life. In this section he appears to be of similar mind as Rhoda Woets, who points out pertinently that in the debates concerning definitions of African art, terms like "African" and "European" are biased since there is no such thing as pure European and African culture and civilization.³⁸ Yet Antubam also claims that he wrote the book to help "the African becoming aware of his personality," to gain strength from his roots so he could withstand the utilization of European media and techniques.³⁹

Antubam observed that, "painting [by which he meant easel painting] is a new form of art in Ghana. But there is every reason to believe that the twentieth century Ghanaian will continue to paint once he has learnt to do so." Yet, architectural murals as practiced by the Asante, and indigenous wall painting of the Gurunsi of northeastern Ghana, were not new forms of visual practice. It is surprising that Antubam omitted wall painting in the north, and canoe painting in southern Ghana, within the wider field of painting.

Antubam's attitude towards easel painting was that it was adaptable to Ghanaian needs,

provided that the Ghanaian painter expresses the Ghanaian as distinct from any other country's personality. There is no reason why Ghanaian African artists should not paint. It is highly probable that what our friends of the West fear is a possible future competition. I am sure it is just that.⁴⁰

He considered the advantages regarding modeling or chiaroscuro (light and shade), defending his stance: "accepting the fact that he is a sculptor by nature, the Ghanaian artist stands a better chance of expressing three dimensions than anybody else. He has a better feeling for shape than one who is not a sculptor by nature."⁴¹ In another section of the book he lists as a trend of African life and culture a "priceless possession of a great love of colour." For one of the most difficult words in the English language, "culture," Antubam offers an open-ended definition of "ways of life."

It does appear, therefore that there is not one orthodox or universal definition, which does not exist anyway, but an individual's possible premise . . . As a rule, culture, which is spiritual and abstract, takes form in a people's architecture, sculpture, ceramics, drawings, writings, music and dancing, poetry, drama and literature . . .⁴²

Antubam's consideration of indigenous aesthetics was a strategy for understanding modernist expression in Ghana.

The Lasting Impact of Antubam’s Art

Antubam sought a national art, “art [associated] not only with a country’s political history, but also with its people’s traditions and ways of life.” Paradoxically, though, the art forms of the northern half of the nation were missing from the book.⁴³ Moreover, his incorporation of *adinkra* (the extensive body of symbols used on Akan memorial cloths, goldweights, and other art forms) into his own artwork exposed a conflict; his declaration of his abhorrence for “abstract art” was contradicted by the ample evidence of his use of this abstract imagery. Examples include symbols he used in his masterpieces at Parliament House in Accra, especially the simple and complex use of abstractions on the ceilings of the main hall (1959 and 1960). Circular concentric shapes (the *adinkrahene* sign), embedded with smaller *adinkra* motifs, are distributed over a grid. Antubam described carved wooden panels made for the same building: “symbolic wooden reliefs hanging on either side of the balcony face you. They are purported to symbolize Ghana’s dedication to the cause of effecting African unity.”⁴⁴ Later, Antubam was to experiment with oval shapes, taking the oval as an important elemental form in Ghanaian culture.

The European influence in Antubam’s work is seen in his handling of the figures and the deployment of illusionistic space through the use of perspective. However, according to Antubam, mere naturalism applied in visual representation was vulgar since, if naturalism was the aim, photographs would be more appropriate.⁴⁵ Astonishingly, some of Antubam’s opinions have relevance today, as abstract art still is seen by many Ghanaian artists as peculiarly Western, with no social relevance. This is so despite the complex meanings embedded in the abstract designs on Ghanaian pots, cloth, and so forth.

Antubam first appears to turn to *adinkra* symbols in eight illustrations for J. B. Danquah’s first edition of *The Akan Doctrine of God* (1948) (Danquah 1968). He continued to refer to these images as he illustrated numerous books and pamphlets, including Kofi Abrefa Busia’s *Self Government* (1951) and a work by the noted composer and musicologist, J. H. Kwabena Nketia (1963). In his graphic artworks, a bold use of abstraction was most evident. It could be argued that his usage of *adinkra* symbols as graphic images was not abstract art, but merely schematic, a way of simplifying a depiction rather than rendering it in detail. Some bas-relief designs on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Asante architecture would also appear to be schematic renderings of natural forms rather than abstract symbols. In Antubam’s graphic artworks, a bold use of these patterns was most evident in what he termed “symbolisms.”

The conflation of subject matter from the modern and “traditional” realms is embodied in a colored pen-and-ink drawing by Antubam from 1961, *The Divine Supreme Chief Dancing to the Rhythm of the State-Drums* (Figure 11.2). An emblem of power (a state sword designed by Antubam) is featured. A drum ensemble plays on as they are cheered by a royal courtier; a woman bows down and lays a cloth on the ground as a mark of great respect for a great chief who, dressed in *kente*, dances on the cloth. In this scene of jubilation, which was reproduced in a local newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, the “divine supreme chief” shown as Nkrumah wields the sword as an instrument of power, authority, and leadership.⁴⁶



FIGURE 11.2 Kofi Antubam. *The Divine Supreme Chief Dancing to the Rhythm of the State-Drums*, 1961. Colored pen-and-ink drawing. Reproduced courtesy of the Deutsche Kunst Akademie, Berlin.

This is also seen in the murals Antubam painted for the Ambassador Hotel in 1957. These present agrarian landscapes from northern and southern Ghana and family scenes in idyllic settings. In two parts, the mural shows pictures of promise and prosperity for a new unified nation. On the left, two northern chiefs, mounted on caparisoned horses, converse as musicians perform against a backdrop of Ghanaian mud architecture. Shown in the distance are sailboats and the modern buildings of a booming township in southern Ghana. The self-sufficient nation is evident in the bumper catches of the fishermen. In the second mural (Figure 11.3), to the right, horn blowers, linguists, and king are depicted in court life bordered by a royal purification ceremony and by a scene where six men enjoy a game of *oware* under a shady tree. Behind them, women pound *fufu*; a woman and a girl carry pots to fetch water, children are at play; this group merges with a farming family harvesting cocoa (of which Ghana was the largest world producer). In both murals Antubam combines modern and vernacular architecture. His color scheme is influenced by colors of Ghanaian *kente*; the artist excelled in the use of complementary oranges and blues, evoking the rich atmosphere that prevails at the court of chiefs in southern Ghana.



FIGURE 11.3 Kofi Antubam. *Mural B*, 1956–1957. Distemper on cement wall (destroyed 2008), Ambassador Hotel, Accra. Detail. Photograph by Atta Kwami, 1996.

Antubam did not give a title for the murals at Ambassador Hotel. The British government presented Ghana with the modern building at independence, and it is likely Antubam was asked by Nkrumah to make a painting that would be a sign of unity for Ghanaians. The subject matter links the agricultural landscapes and occupations of townspeople as well as celebrating industry. “Work and happiness” was the slogan of the Young Pioneers, the political group set up by the Nkrumah regime. Understandably, in executing the Ambassador Hotel murals the scale of the work probably demanded simplification of the color gradations, leading to flattening out of planes; the dark lines surround the figures in this major work are unusual for Antubam. Art students from Achimota, such as Joyce Yawa Tawia and Seth Galevo (both practicing artists) and Frederick Adu-Nyako (now a civil engineer), had assisted the artist.

That we do not find Antubam’s sketch books suggests all of his sketches and drawings were distributed widely or destroyed. One of his finer drawings in pen and ink and watercolor is *Bathing a Baby* (1963). Perspective and formalized contours fuse with close observation of the human form. In this work there is a sense of depth suggested by the dark washes that outline the figures. As far as I know, this is one of only two drawings by Antubam that remain in public collections in Ghana: the other is *Oware Game* (1959), another pen-and-ink and watercolor which is a typical composition. In this image, under a tree, after the day’s farm work is fulfilled, two men turn to a relaxing game of *oware* before dusk. Drums, stools, and other paraphernalia of the palace are piled up on either side of the court in the shady foreground. The lines in Indian ink are drawn by a firm hand and later washed over with transparent watercolor, imparting light and shadow. All incongruities relating to the picture plane and proportions of the human form seem resolved in this work.

The most enduring of Antubam's works are the arts of leadership which he carefully researched and produced as commissioned work for the state. His designs for the presidential seat, personal standard, and mace, all based on the form of a typical Ghanaian linguist's staff, have an eagle superimposed on top. Together with the sword of state, another symbol of presidential authority, all are still in use four decades later. These are art objects that "clothe all cherished ideas and values of life in verbal and graphic symbols."⁴⁷ They are also expressions of a concept called *sankofa*.

Sankofa

Sankofa was widely discussed during the period surrounding independence and is what ultimately allowed Antubam to create his own "natural synthesis," that is, to bring his misconceptions and contradictions to a resolution. *Sankofa* occurs in Asante art as a bird looking back towards its tail, with the implication that there is nothing wrong with learning from the past; it is also the name of a stylized pattern and *adinkra* symbol. The idea was taken up in the work of artists and writers like Oku Ampofo and Kobina Bucknor, who probably felt it was a more solid or natural concept than that of an "African Personality."

Other artists working before independence translated and selected or appropriated modernist imports, and gave them local emphases, as when Grace Kwami acquired realist and impressionistic techniques, which had been introduced in 1952 by British art lecturer James Hillocks. Because the emphasis at Achimota was on independence and inventiveness, students did not "just copy" the European images. These attitudes of independence from mere imitation of European artistic imports informed the artists who gathered around the theme of *sankofa* and the idea of a genuine Ghanaian philosophy. It is apposite to consider the ways in which concerns about identity informed their practices after several decades of a struggle in which Antubam played a central role, for he said, "One has also to stand up for the idea of negritude, African Personality or Africanness . . ."⁴⁸ According to the UNESCO document, *Cultural Policy in Ghana*, the African Personality was a prop to help "rehabilitate African cultural values, and a creative philosophy which sought to bring an African perspective into contemporary African politics and modes of life."⁴⁹ In the late 1960s, Ghanaian concepts of *sankofa* – go back and pick up what you have left behind, do not be afraid – turned into a beacon for artists looking instead for a distinctively Ghanaian modernity. It enabled artists like William Charles Owusu the ceramicist, Oku Ampofo, J. C. Okyere, Kobina Bucknor, Vincent Kofi, and El Anatsui (artists associated with the watershed *Cultural Heritage* exhibition of 1968), to adapt their individual attitudes about cultural authenticity to modernism.

The Cultural Heritage Exhibition

The *Cultural Heritage* exhibition and national art contest organized by the Arts Council of Ghana in 1968, with the aim of promoting modern Ghanaian art for the state, was a watershed event in Ghanaian art history. It took place four years after Antubam's death and produced a collection of works assembled for Mobil Oil Ghana Limited as the nucleus of a permanent national art gallery, now housed at the Arts Centre Accra. It also produced a souvenir brochure printed in color, the cover of which was a pastiche of

Antubam's decorative iconography. In this brochure, Ernest Victor Asihene identified three types of "artist" within "an upward trend in the art of creative painting."

The first is the artist who works from a virgin, unsophisticated and unbiased source. His work is exciting, stimulating and fills one with hope. The second is the artist who has been copying from the western artist and aims at becoming a first class artist. He remains second-hand; he is confused and frustrated. The third artist has studied his own culture. He is aware of foreign influence and is able to discriminate between what he really wants and what he does not like. Often you have an interesting and invigorating work of art as a result of his efforts.⁵⁰

These ideas, indeed, the entire *Cultural Heritage* exhibition project thus became a celebration of Antubam's philosophy that the "hard ground" for progress must be "the lasting values of a people's traditions . . . which have guided the particular people to survival through the ages."⁵¹

Notes

- 1 Court (2008, 10–11).
- 2 Kwami (2012).
- 3 Gaarder (1999, 287).
- 4 Antubam (1954, 4).
- 5 Nkrumah (2001). See Grabski, chapter 14, this volume.
- 6 Antubam (1963).
- 7 Bedu-Addo (1977, 17).
- 8 Fosu (2009).
- 9 Fosu (1993, 16).
- 10 Antubam (1950).
- 11 Foster (1967, 148); Kwami (2003, 288).
- 12 *Report upon Achimota School* (1952, 7).
- 13 Hilliard (1957, 86).
- 14 Chantler (1971, 92).
- 15 *Report upon Achimota School* (1952, 7).
- 16 Harrod (1998, 148).
- 17 Antubam (1963, 198).
- 18 Harrod (1998, 150).
- 19 Stevens (1929, 3).
- 20 Stevens (1930, 150–160).
- 21 Meyerowitz (1937, 38).
- 22 Stevens (1929, 1–3).
- 23 Rattray (1930); Meyerowitz (1937, 38).
- 24 Antubam (1963, 199).
- 25 Antubam (1959, 1).
- 26 Meyerowitz (1958, 1972).
- 27 Kwami (2005, 1).
- 28 King (1999, 256–260).
- 29 Akatu (c.1980, 2).

- 30 Kwami (2007, 56).
- 31 Sutherland and Bell (1961, fig. 31, *Children under Family Care*).
- 32 *Report upon Achimota School* (1952, 60).
- 33 Antubam (1963, 130).
- 34 Antubam (1950).
- 35 Antubam (1961a, 1961b).
- 36 Antubam (1960, 193, 197).
- 37 Antubam (1963, 187).
- 38 Woets (2010, 6–7, 11).
- 39 Antubam (1962, 6).
- 40 Antubam (1963, 131).
- 41 Antubam (1963, 131).
- 42 Antubam (1963, 187).
- 43 Antubam (1963, 220–222).
- 44 Antubam (1963, 14).
- 45 Adedze (2008, 7, 19, 20).
- 46 Hess (2006, 17).
- 47 Antubam (1963, 23).
- 48 Antubam (1963, 19).
- 49 Ministry of Education and Culture (Ghana) (1975, 9).
- 50 Asihene (1968, 18).
- 51 Antubam (1963, 13).

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Patron and Artist in the Shaping of Zimbabwean Art

Elizabeth Morton

Zimbabwe has had a thriving modern art scene for almost 70 years. Within the British colony of Rhodesia (1923–1965) (and the white minority state that succeeded it until majority rule was won in 1980) workshops primarily focused upon painting and wood carving. However, during the 1960s, stone sculpture became the medium that would bring widespread recognition to artists of this nation. By the 1980s Zimbabwe was one of the world's major centers of production for stone sculpture, with an array of talented artists working for an international clientele.

Today Zimbabwe's art is still rooted in the interactions of artists and culture brokers that began in the colonial era. From the 1940s through the early 1970s, hundreds of local artists worked for four major European patrons. Each of these patrons promoted a distinct style, which they usually claimed to be "African" in nature, although in truth each patron had arrived in Africa with a clear vision about what this art should look like. Much of Zimbabwean art history can be read primarily as a dialectic between the artistic vision of the artists themselves (and their desire to realistically depict the world around them) and the prescribed modernist style their patrons sought to impose upon them. This dialectic became far less pronounced in the 1990s, as the artists became more successful and international sales dramatically increased. If the current artists have far more control over their work, nevertheless they are still restrained in subtle, indirect ways. Most still work within the styles and genres established during the colonial era. Colonialism, and the pronounced inequality that it created between African artist and white patron, had a profound influence upon the entire artistic experience in this nation.

The Mission Workshops

Before discussing these interactions in detail, it is worth noting that Christian missions were the locales in which local populations first encountered modern artforms.¹ Much early modernist artistic production in the region thus served Christian churches, and

the techniques and styles developed there continue to be found in contemporary wood and stone carving.

Cyrene, an Anglican school, was the first missionary arts program in Africa to gain widespread recognition. If eventually the work of Father Kevin Carroll in Nigeria or Father Marc Stanislaus in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) would gain far more critical acclaim, Cyrene was famous in its day. During the school's heyday, Cyrene's students were probably Africa's best-known artists. Established by Canon Ned Paterson, a young British priest, this boarding school for rural African boys was located near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Guided by principles he had absorbed at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London in the early 1920s, Paterson made art a mandatory subject for all students when he organized the curriculum for Cyrene in the late 1930s. His goal was to "turn out the self-contained burger type, able to farm rationally and to care for his cattle, able to build his own home and to make its furniture and even to enrich them by carving and design."² "In addition," he continued, "we hope to develop a really strong center for the study and practice of art, and especially what is known as African Art. About this last subject my Bishop is as keen as I am."³

The first artist who taught classes for Canon Paterson was an Ndebele carver known as Sibiza, but he left after a year. Little is known of Sibiza's background, but we know that he trained students to make items of daily use (such as bowls or headrests). The students, though, were not particularly enthusiastic about learning his skills. Forced to abandon his original intent to teach the production of what he saw as "traditional crafts," Paterson began to offer instruction himself in painting and sculpture.

Paterson described his own teaching philosophy as "absence of teaching,"⁴ in which students were encouraged to find their subject matter in what they read in books or the scriptures, but they were allowed to draw any subject that appealed to them. He did not show them reproductions of European artworks, and told them to ignore the illustrations they encountered in their textbooks. His training consciously excluded instruction in anatomical proportions, linear perspective, or the principles of design. He thus claimed:

Cyrene, in as great a measure as we are able to achieve, exists in an artistic vacuum. All expressions of the art of other times and peoples is rigorously excluded from its pupils . . . This almost complete vacuum was created because the principal was curious as to what would happen . . . they had the materials to express themselves but not the influence of European art.⁵

However, Paterson did insist that students fill all the spaces of paintings and reliefs with decorative elements. The end result was a recognizable Cyrene style, characterized by human and animal figures in crowded decorative landscapes, often with multiple narratives played out in a simple vertical perspective. The heavily outlined, highly simplified profile figures and the overall compositions notably resembled Paterson's own murals and carvings, which decorate the well-known chapel at Cyrene (Figure 12.1). Cyrene was best known for its paintings and relief panels in wood, but artists there also produced extensive figurative freestanding wood and stone sculpture, the latter from surplus grave headstones from the British army. Cyrene artworks had widespread appeal for foreign buyers, and sold by the thousands in exhibitions across southern Africa, England, and in the USA.⁶ The British royal family insisted on meeting the Cyrene artists during their 1947 tour of southern Africa, and further heightened interest.



FIGURE 12.1 Students of the Cyrene Mission School. Murals in the school's chapel, 1940s. Photograph by Elizabeth Morton, 1999.

At Cyrene, all students took art classes twice a week, but a group of disabled boys worked during the afternoons when everyone else was playing sports or doing construction projects. One of the leading artists to emerge from Cyrene was Lazarus Khumalo, who went on to have a five-decade career as a sculptor and art teacher.⁷ Khumalo, according to his own account, had spent most of his childhood in seclusion after an accident had rendered him lame. Believing himself marked for death by his family members, he managed to escape and ended up begging for free tuition at Cyrene. Khumalo was able to use his training at Cyrene to become a professional artist and to attend art school at Makerere University in the 1960s. Following his return to Bulawayo, Khumalo was instrumental in spreading modernist art practices during his long tenure at the Mzilikazi Art School.

Cyrene's most famous product was Sam Songo. His childhood resembled Khumalo's, although his biography was more embellished for foreign consumption. In the aftermath of meeting the British royal family in 1947, Songo was cast in the lead role of a feature movie, *Pitaniko*, made by one of Cyrene's sponsors – the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. In this stirring drama, Songo's character – a despised, secluded, disabled boy – is saved from a vicious ritual execution organized by a fiendish "witchdoctor." Following his escape, the young man finds a promising future as a fervent young convert at an Anglican mission station. The prodigious Songo came to epitomize Cyrene's style. His decorative watercolor landscapes often placed scenes within the scene, such as in *Mining of Gold by the Bantu of Southern Rhodesia in Ancient Days* (1951), the best known of all Cyrene works. Because Paterson refused to teach (or was incapable of teaching) perspective and anatomy, Songo's work was technically limited. But because he followed Paterson's prescribed

style, he became the school's art teacher in the early 1950s. His wood and stone sculpture also typically depicted human figures. But, once again, Songo's desire to create the body accurately was stymied by his lack of training. As a result, his bodies are essentially ordered, basic shapes. In these sculptures, the hands and feet tend to be heavy and block-like, with the legs being especially thick and shapeless. Despite these setbacks, Songo learned to create freestanding, four-sided sculptures (often along biblical themes) that depicted figures in action.⁸

Songo and Khumalo moved to Bulawayo's municipal Mzilikazi Art School after 1960. Songo eventually led a full-time carving workshop producing works on commission for churches or for tourist outlets. He was thus a key player in what Sidney Kasfir has called an "enlarged and internationalized space of patronage . . . the rise of the African souvenir market after World War II."⁹ Despite his successes, Songo was not able to obtain further training, and he continued to teach and propagate the Cyrene style until his retirement in the 1990s. Simply put, he and Khumalo taught art the way Paterson had taught them. He also used Paterson's methods in his personal work, and only in his sixties did he begin experimenting with styles and imagery that were not derivative. We can probably assume that only late in his career did he feel confident enough to become more innovative and experimental.

Another artist who started out with Paterson was Job Kekana, who ran a wood carving school from the mid-1960s through the 1980s onward at another, smaller, Anglican mission, St. Faith's. Unlike Canon Paterson and his protégés, Kekana possessed genuine talent in depicting figurative realism. Providing instruction in human anatomy was central to the St. Faith's program. Kekana had moved to Rhodesia from South Africa with his patron, a nun named Sister Pauline, in the 1940s,¹⁰ and thereafter produced for her and Paterson an array of commissions for churches and for various governments (such as busts of presidents). By the late 1950s he was generally considered the leading sculptor in wood in southern Africa, and obtained a scholarship to attend art school in London in 1960. Unlike Songo, Kekana then gained the anatomical training to depict the human form with unusual accuracy. Moving back to Rhodesia, he obtained corporate funding to establish his own carving school at St. Faith's in the mid-1960s. Here he utilized nude models and taught students how to create naturalistic figures, which were both extremely rare in colonial Africa.¹¹ It was through Kekana that many Zimbabwean artists learned to sculpt lifelike forms, and his teaching had an effect on both formal sculpture and the tourist art trades.¹²

Paterson himself moved to Chirodzo School in Salisbury (the national capital, now known as Harare), in 1953, where he ran a large urban arts program with the same educational philosophy he had developed at Cyrene. Ultimately, his schools also graduated many prodigious wood carvers who would end up dominating southern Africa's tourist-oriented curio art. His students, such as Songo and Khumalo, further contributed to the training of large numbers of artists focused on selling "airport art."

Serima, a Catholic mission in the rural agricultural land in the center of the country, produced a cadre of sculptors with a distinctive architectural style from the late 1950s onward under Father John Groeber, a priest of the Swiss Bethlehem Mission. Groeber's ambition, like Paterson's, was to construct a mission school that had mandatory art classes for all students. Groeber had a professional background in architecture as well as several years of art school training in Basel.¹³ Where Groeber differed dramatically from Paterson was in his emphasis on giving his students a much wider range of technical training as well as demanding much higher standards of performance from his

advanced artists. These emphases derived from Groeber's drive to build an iconic neo-Romanesque church using modernist European architectural techniques and materials, and to decorate it using an equally modernist African aesthetic. Since this aesthetic did not yet exist, it would have to be created by the teenage boys who enrolled at the mission boarding school.

Groeber and his congregation managed to build the church at Serima (St. Mary's), between 1947 and 1966. They had practically no funding or external support of any kind, and used only local materials. This ranks as an extraordinary feat. Additionally, the unity of the interior program with the architectural design is meticulously achieved.¹⁴ The result is a building of undoubted originality and beauty that deserves to be far better known than it is. Unfortunately, Groeber's dislike of publicity, combined with the site's distance from the paved road linking the national capital to Bulawayo, have led it to remain relatively obscure.

Groeber's meticulous art training was first described by the well-known British author Evelyn Waugh:

Every boy on arrival from his village is told to draw an account of his journey. Many are capable of nothing; some produce pictures not much different from the nursery scrawlings of European children some years their juniors. Those with discernible talent are then taught to control the pencil, the chalk, the pen, the brush; they make abstract symmetrical patterns, they draw "matchstick" hieroglyphics of figures in action. Perhaps all this is a commonplace of "progressive" education. I don't know. It was quite new to me.¹⁵

Once this basic training was done and the best draftsmen identified, there was a certain segregation of the students by drawing ability.¹⁶ Because Groeber was convinced that masks constituted the true art of Africa, he next had his more talented students work on designing mask-like images in two dimensions: "I give them a piece of paper and tell them to draw two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. I tell them to draw a face just as they like it."¹⁷ Life drawing was not part of this training, and hence students were taught stylization from the outset. Groeber encouraged them to utilize their drawing and design lessons to create these faces using squares, cubes, circles – while also paying attention to proportion, line, contours, and planes. These drawings were then redone and improved. At this point Groeber asked the students to model clay into reliefs based upon the flat drawings. Only after this stage were the students introduced to the chisel, and instructed to carve their design onto wood.¹⁸ Groeber presented this process as a way to save good wood, rare in the Serima area. Readers familiar with the practices of African artists who create masks will note that this way of working would be completely alien to most of them – only modernist sculptors in Africa work with drawings.

Students who excelled in these exercises became part of an afternoon workshop group that carved freestanding and relief sculpture for St. Mary's. Groeber taught a stylized set of proportions that he felt approximated those used in West African figural sculpture in which the body was divided into three equal parts: the head to the shoulder, the shoulder to the hip, and the hip to the feet. Since necks were usually absent from Serima work, the face was proportionately large. In addition, Groeber maintained that hands should be the same length as the face, which made the hands, like the face, oversized. It is this simple, yet distinctive, anatomical formula that, when combined

with mask-like patterns on faces, gave Serima work its definitive character and made it instantly recognizable. Groeber's instructional methods, with their focus upon drawing, encouraged flat patterns on the architectural surfaces. The one area where Groeber allowed his students latitude and freedom was in the actual design of their figures. His most famous student, Nicholas Mukomberanwa, noted, "Father Groeber was a wonderful man. He had different kinds of ideas [from most teachers]. He would explain to us: 'You must be creative.' He would say, 'Express it in your own way.'"¹⁹

Of the Serima carvers, Cornelius Manguma was the most important, since he became Serima's art teacher and the major sculptor working on the St. Mary's interior once his own schooling was completed. He left Serima to head an art school at Driefontein after it was established by the Swiss Bethlehem Mission in 1972. There he taught numerous sculptors over the next quarter of a century while continuing to work with religious subjects. Three of Zimbabwe's leading stone sculptors, Nicholas Mukomberanwa, Joseph Ndandarika, and Tapfuma Gutsa, were all trained according to Groeber's methods by Manguma and taught to sculpt in wood. Unlike the students of Paterson, all three had the technical grounding to keep developing once they left the mission, allowing them to move into stone sculpture.

Artists such as Sam Songo, Cornelius Manguma, and Lazarus Khumalo all worked for decades under religious patrons. They operated conservatively within the confines of the style in which they were trained for a long time, and only when much older and very secure in their jobs did they begin to experiment. Songo began working in a wide variety of media in the 1960s, while Manguma only began extending himself into secular, freestanding sculpture in the early 1980s. Given that they were all at their most innovative in their fifties and sixties, we can only speculate as to how prodigious they would have become had they received a broader education at a young age. Meanwhile Job Kekana, educated in England, handed over his commissions to his students once his school at St. Faith's was established, and instead concentrated on his naturalistic, freestanding pieces.

Stone Sculpture: McEwen and the First Generation 1960–1973

Sometime in 1959 a man named Joram Mariga was leading a road-building crew in the eastern highlands of Rhodesia,²⁰ and discovered a deposit of soapstone. This material, used five centuries ago to create the six stone eagles found at the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe, has since dominated the nation's art. Mariga himself began to experiment with this stone as a medium, and was to adopt many of the key techniques he taught to the "first generation" of stone sculptors in the 1960s. He also developed and taught a coherent philosophy of style, form, and meaning that was to be decisive in shaping the genre. Along with Mariga, the other major figure in the development of stone sculpture was the newly arrived British director of the Rhodesian National Gallery, Frank McEwen. The latter was to embrace stone sculpture, promote it, and make it internationally recognized. The interaction between these two men was to shape the production and marketing of stone sculpture from Zimbabwe.

Mariga's decisive role in shaping the stone sculpture movement was the result of his multifaceted education and his intellect. Mariga was Shona, the son of a traditional healer, who like others of his occupation cured diseases with herbal remedies or mediated

with ancestral spirits to resolve problems afflicting the living. Mariga's father was also a wood carver, while his mother was a potter. Mariga, then, was well versed in Shona artistic practice. He also possessed a deep knowledge of the designs and iconography of the patterns used to embellish and sanctify objects of daily use. Although Mariga completed his high school education in South Africa and was a devout Catholic throughout his adult life, he nevertheless remained very culturally conservative. At a time when the Shona farmers were becoming increasingly impoverished as their land was appropriated by white settlers, and families were separated as men were forced to move to urban areas in search of work, Mariga worked to preserve Shona values. Mariga was by nature a teacher, and after finding the soapstone he immediately used it to train his workmen in carving techniques. Isolated and away from home, Mariga's men needed healthy outlets. Using the stone, he showed them how to make small heads using penknives, adzes, and hacksaws, and other tools available to the road crew. These pieces were smoothed and polished like a wood carving. The heads were essentially small, rounded stones with a neck and some facial features. Other works were decorative boxes and jugs, and small human figures. Soon the men were selling their works along the sides of the roads they were repairing, many earning more this way than from their salaries. Soon word got out that soapstone had been rediscovered in Rhodesia.

It was at this point that Mariga's life intersected with that of Frank McEwen. McEwen, an Englishman with a long arts career in France, had been hired to start a new National Gallery in the capital in 1957. Eschewing the insipid landscape painting typically produced by amateur artists among the white settlers, McEwen instead sought out and began exhibiting works by various mission-trained artists such as Lazarus Khumalo, Boira Mteki,²¹ and Cornelius Manguma. McEwen, however, was unimpressed by their work. Not only did he believe their training to be suspect, but he believed that their religious education would have impeded their ability to express "the Collective Unconscious."²² Due to these perceived deficiencies he began to train his own group of artists at the National Gallery, who came to be known as the "Workshop School."

Thomas Mukarobgwa, whom McEwen had hired to be the head gallery attendant, was one of the first members of the workshop. McEwen gave Mukarobgwa painting materials and was delighted by the results. However, unbeknownst to McEwen, Thomas Mukarobgwa had already begun to paint under the supervision of Paterson.²³ Mukarobgwa, furthermore, was entrusted by McEwen to act as the workshop's gate-keeper. As such, he was expected to weed out the "wrong" types of artists from the many young men who came to the gallery and to put the word out that those who were artistically inclined should attend the workshop.²⁴ The end result of this arrangement, of course, was not the exclusion of mission-trained artists from McEwen's workshop. Instead, artists with experience in mission schools joined Mukarobgwa and simply did not reveal their backgrounds to McEwen.

Joseph Ndandarika, a painter who had left Serima Mission at the end of 1959, was one of the artists who became part of McEwan's Workshop School, as was Nicholas Mukomberanwa, a sculptor who had been part of a Serima workshop in 1960, and who had also worked with Paterson at Salisbury.²⁵ At his workshop, which ran through 1964, McEwen utilized Gustave Moreau's "free approach," which he had encountered during his years in France.²⁶

McEwen believed he was promoting "self-trained" artists, untainted by exposure to Western schooling or religion, all potentially capable of expressing the "Collective

Unconscious.” As a result, when Job Kekana visited his workshop immediately after returning from art school in London, he was thrown out and not allowed to interact with McEwen’s students in any way:

In our workshop I had to expel young ex-art school students who had been deformed in London, New York, and elsewhere. In their misunderstandings these youngsters tried to “teach” our artists – had they succeeded in arresting individuality there would have been no Shona Art today – but only a copy of a copy of Western productions. What is instinctive must be nurtured to come forth, not nipped in the bud.²⁷

McEwen’s “free approach” included some forms of art instruction for his “highly gifted beginners.”²⁸ Carole Pearce, a white Rhodesian, taught painting at McEwen’s workshop.²⁹ From 1960 to 1964 painting was the primary form of art produced at McEwen’s workshop, with some 50 or so artists attending on a regular basis.³⁰ During this period, McEwen himself gave the workshop members lectures on various aspects of modern art, with much discussion of Picasso and Henry Moore. Moreover, his gallery held a number of significant exhibitions featuring a range of modern and traditional art from both Europe and other regions of Africa, which his artists all attended and paid very close attention to.³¹ In fact, and contrary to McEwen’s stated objectives, the artists who attended the National Gallery workshop were exposed to a very wide variety of influences.

During the short life of this first workshop, the artists gradually shifted from painting to sculpture, supplanting it by 1964. Sculpture eclipsed painting for several reasons. According to Pearce, the artists found oil painting on canvas to be too technically demanding given their lack of training in European figurative traditions.³² Moreover, the sculpture attracted far more interest from collectors and the press than the painting did. McEwen’s retail art outlet saw its sales jump dramatically when it began to emphasize sculptures, and thereafter his own exhibitions featured very few paintings. “Whereas in past years our painters dominated the advance, it is obvious that sculptors have now drawn level, and their massive, three dimensional serious art appears to overpower the rest.”³³

After 1964 the Workshop School stopped operating, in the sense of it having regular classes. Instead, McEwen simply patronized a number of artists, primarily sculptors, in various ways. A few, such as Mukarobgwa and the gallery attendants, continued to paint in the National Gallery storerooms, along with several others (such as Ndandarika). The vast majority, though, worked elsewhere and simply sold their work through the Gallery store. McEwen’s interactions with his artists changed thereafter as a result. He would see them when they brought work to be sold or exhibited, or when he took collectors to see them. So, although McEwen after 1964 labeled practically any artist selling or exhibiting at his gallery as a member of the Workshop School, the vast majority of the sculptors rarely set foot in the National Gallery Workshop.

Joram Mariga met McEwen in 1962, and may also have instigated the Workshop School’s interest in stone sculpture. After studying Mariga’s small stone curios, McEwen obtained European chisels for Mariga, and suggested that he make larger pieces. As Mariga had discovered a deposit of green serpentine near his home in the Nyanga district in the eastern region of the country, these tools were quite useful in working with the harder stone. In 1963 Mariga submitted *Tall Man* to the Workshop School’s annual exhibition, a breakthrough work for Mariga and a

significant influence upon the artists of the Workshop School as well. Notably larger in scale, this figure featured an oversized head and slightly twisting body that followed the natural form of the stone. The carefully defined features, smoothed surfaces, and textured hair all demonstrated not only Mariga's evolving technical sophistication, but also his determination to create a major artwork, no matter how labor intensive.

Through 1966, Mariga and his associates in Nyanga (including Bernard Manyandure, Frank Vanji, David Zindoga, John Takawira, Moses Masaya, and Crispin Chakanyuka) produced most of the sculpture for the National Gallery store and for the annual exhibitions.³⁴ Additionally, McEwen sent a number of the workshop painters to Mariga to learn sculpting from him. As a teacher, Mariga presented his own philosophy of art, at which he had arrived around the time he created *Tall Man*. Mariga explained his sculpture's solidity of form in ideological terms. He said that the shape of the stone itself should inspire and guide the sculptor, and tell him (for all of the sculptors were men) where to place each part. Also, because stone blocks did not come with holes through them, there was no place for negative space. Perhaps the most important guide to his works derived from his belief that God was the world's first sculptor.³⁵ According to Mariga, all sculptures made by humans were to reflect the original creative act. Humans and animals were the first creations of God and ranked at the top of the hierarchy of all things. Hence they were to be the primary focus of sculptors.

Subject matter alone did not define Mariga's work. Of equal importance to Mariga was that all artists working in stone (whether or not they were ethnically Shona) should create sculpture in accordance with a Shona aesthetic, since God had created the Shona people and their world. For example, since straight lines do not exist in nature or in Shona life, Mariga insisted sculptors should not use them. He claimed the sculptor needed to follow God's design in depicting the human body using a "V" shape, especially the head and shoulder region, the arms, mouth and eyes, and legs. "To create a human body, don't struggle to make a decision. Just play with the letter V," he once told me.³⁶ Additionally, Mariga believed that since, in Zimbabwean tradition, the head is the center of the spirit and life of a human, the head should be the most prominent part of the body. Because of Mariga's belief in the spiritual importance of depicting humans and animals, these subjects were always to be depicted in some state of action to show their life force. Thus even his stand-alone heads were wide-eyed and are turned slightly.³⁷

The ideas and forms that Mariga developed in Nyanga the 1960s (initially supported by McEwen's marketing strategy) became the foundation of Zimbabwean stone sculpture – in terms of both subject matter and style.³⁸ Following Mariga the vast majority of subjects have been solitary humans and animals. Nearly all works prior to the 1990s were serious or didactic, and rarely suggested politics, humor, or urban life, which were ironically so prominent in the lives of artists. Stylistically, forms were dictated by the solid shapes of stone; artists rarely employed negative space. No hard edges were found in early works – contours were rounded and the whole form smoothed and polished. While one cannot discount the importance of various workshop educators such as Groeber, Paterson, or McEwen, the early work and teaching of Mariga in the 1960s ended up defining the genre.³⁹

In 1967 a third stone sculpture venue emerged to be added to the production from the National Gallery and Nyanga venues. Tom Blomefield, a settler who ran a tobacco

farm named Tengenenge, had some limited art training. Reading of McEwen's exhibitions that featured African artists, Blomefield created a bust of the white president of Rhodesia, Ian Smith, and delivered it to McEwen demanding that it be included in the National Gallery collection.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of this dramatic and near-violent confrontation Blomefield had a massive change of heart. Instead of denouncing Black-produced art as he and so many of his fellow settlers had done, he gained an appreciation for the emerging stone sculpture medium. Moreover, he saw that sculpture produced on his farm might save him from bankruptcy! He then employed a Mariga protégé, Crispin Chakanyuka, who found extensive black serpentine deposits on the farm. Blomefield himself went to Nyanga and spent some time learning sculpture from Mariga. On his return he and Chakanyuka began teaching stone sculpture to the Tengenenge farm workers.⁴¹ Soon to emerge from this group were three talented sculptors, namely Henry Munyaradzi, Bernard Matemera, and Sylvester Mubayi.

The emergence of Tengenenge served to highlight the economic benefits to be derived from the stone sculpture movement. Following Ian Smith's declaration of independence from Britain in 1965, Rhodesia's white minority state quickly decimated McEwen's budget. The latter's determination to promote African art in a highly charged racist atmosphere meant that he virtually lost all his government funding. As a result, he would have to fund his entire budget through the sales of his Gallery shop and from travelling exhibitions. To make real money, McEwen organized a series of major stone sculpture exhibits overseas – most notably at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1968, at the Musée d'Art Moderne in 1970, and at the Musée Rodin in 1971 – that introduced the art world to the “first generation” of the country's sculptors. These shows were great critical and commercial successes and managed to keep McEwen close to solvency for a period. They also caused a rift between McEwen and Blomefield, who discouraged Tengenenge artists from selling through the National Gallery after 1968 as the latter felt he was being shortchanged by the arrangement. Additionally, Sylvester Mubayi (who in 1968 was the first artist to sell a work for over £1,000)⁴² created another matter of conflict for the two patrons when he left Tengenenge to work directly for McEwen.

Despite their varied financial arrangements with McEwen, artists from Nyanga, Tengenenge, and the Workshop School in Salisbury were all included in his international exhibitions. The shows featured all of the major “first generation” sculptors – such as Ndandarika, Mukarobgwa, Mukomberanwa, Mariga, Takawira, Mubayi, Munyaradzi, and Matemera. In his promotion of the art, McEwen did not favor one group over another – even though by 1968 he had come to believe that Tengenenge was producing too much repetitive “airport art” rather than exhibition-quality pieces. What McEwen did in these international shows, though, was to shape the reception of the stone sculpture in a novel manner, creating a narrative that was far different from those found in catalogs of his Rhodesian exhibitions. In other words, he consciously created myths about the art in order to increase its sales abroad. As he once remarked to a visiting academic: “We don't make motion pictures of Africa as it is, but as Kansas City knows Africa to be.”⁴³

A primary assertion of McEwen's was that the stone sculpture was the product of a single Workshop School – a fiction that he based on his 1960–1964 painting workshop. In this mythical stone sculpture workshop, untrained artists were brought

together and encouraged using the methods of Gustave Moreau. Their development then proceeded in distinct stages. In the first stage they produced “Pre-Columbian” works (i.e., large, unpolished heads), from where they proceeded to “child art,” following which they arrived at “personal sophistication.” During this multi-year process McEwen’s artists “crossed the frontier between the ‘instinctive’ and the conscious and willful operation of the creative mind.”⁴⁴

The second feature of McEwen’s promotion was that the sculpture was a revival of an ancient Shona tradition that dealt primarily with mythological subjects based on legends and folk tales (even though many of the artists were not, in fact, Shona). This strategy derived from McEwen’s desire to appeal to collectors of non-Western art in Europe and the USA. Most of these collectors of “primitive art” were Jungians.⁴⁵ McEwen further asserted that his artists were inspired either by their subconscious or that they were possessed by spirits: “For the most part, Shona artists sculpturally recount their visions, their waking or sleeping dreams . . . ”⁴⁶ As a result, their work was original, did not derive from external forms of art, and had the ability to express the “collective unconscious,” since it derived from a primitive, nonwestern background.⁴⁷ A 1970 catalog McEwen wrote for the Musée d’Art Moderne exhibition provides a good example of this writing.

The Shona artists living today don’t know them, but some speak of the existence of secret and sacred caves where stone sculptures in the shape of ancestors and mythical creatures are hidden. Nevertheless, in ancient Shona sanctuaries, devastated during the wars and raids of the Ndebele around 1850, damaged sculptures have been found that give witness to a tradition of stone art . . .

This discovery partly explains the surprising explosion of present day creativity in sculpture. It seems actually, that we are witnessing a renaissance of Shona tradition, that imposed itself despite the imbalance created in the tribal structure due to the intervention of the Ndebele and colonial wars.

Here, a true cultural re-birth, undoubtedly motivated by a violent need to express, where the entire profound and mystical past of these refined people addresses the future through a powerful modern language.

Here is an authentic art, vibrating with vital energy, that thanks to its extension through time and space is not yet contaminated by the sterile and indoctrinating “triviality” that often rules our Western lives.⁴⁸

McEwen’s efforts brought international successes to the first generation sculptors, even though they barely kept his gallery afloat. In late 1968, McEwen asked Mariga to create a new rural workshop featuring all the leading sculptors. Mariga found a spectacular farm named Vukutu located near large serpentine deposits, which was then purchased by McEwen’s wife. With the farm purchased, the new Vukutu workshop began in 1969 – only with Sylvester Mubayi as its leader. Mariga, who had been suspected by the government of providing aid to the fledgling Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) guerrilla insurgency, had been transferred to a sandy, rock-free location where he was unable to sculpt. McEwen refused to let Mariga move to Vukutu despite their earlier arrangement. This would have allowed Mariga to leave his government job and carve full-time. The reason was that Mubayi, along with John Takawira, had pioneered new “transformation” themes with skeletal structures, such as *Skeletal Man God*,

that had attracted considerable praise in Paris and abroad. McEwen wanted to encourage the production of these “supernatural” themes while Mariga was opposed to them; he considered such shamanistic transformations to have little basis in Shona culture.

Despite the success of their exhibitions, the first generation of Shona sculptors soon felt the impact of the prolonged war for majority rule. Vukutu folded in 1972. McEwen left the National Gallery in 1973, and his successor focused primarily on art by white settlers. With the National Gallery no longer actively promoting stone sculpture, several commercial galleries in Salisbury began representing artists such as Ndandarika, Takawira, and Mukomberanwa,⁴⁹ but sales prices declined dramatically during the 1970s from their late 1960s peak.

Majority Rule and the Second Generation

Stone sculpture was to undergo a renaissance following the end of the minority regime in 1980, and the emergence of the new, independent Zimbabwe. Following a rebound in tourism new opportunities for international exposure arose, and Zimbabwean sculptors regained their international reputation. During this second phase, artists rarely worked in workshops directed by a single leader or a white patron. The work was created by individual artists (often aided by their family members) and was marketed as such. As a result, the genre became increasingly professionalized, with works utilizing ever harder stones, on larger and larger scales, with far more diversity of subjects, styles, and techniques. While many of the first generation artists revived their careers in the 1980s, a “second generation” of much younger sculptors such as Tapfuma Gutsa and Dominic Benhura also emerged.

This resurgence was not immediate. However, vastly increased tourism and the presence of large new Western embassy staffs and aid organizations revived the careers of first generation masters in the early 1980s. An important venue during this rebirth was the revitalized Annual Exhibition of the National Gallery, which received corporate sponsorship and became far more visible. Initially dominated by veterans such as Mukomberanwa and Matemera, a group of younger “second generation” sculptors emerged to dominate the scene following Tapfuma Gutsa’s winning the first prize in 1988.⁵⁰

Many of the economic and critical successes of the 1980s were brokered by Roy Guthrie, a white Zimbabwean, who emerged as the dominant patron in this second phase, although his approach was far different from predecessors such as McEwen. Whereas the latter was primarily concerned with shaping the reception and interpretation of the work in the West, Guthrie encouraged artists to speak for themselves. For many exhibitions he created catalogs that included artist biographies that often featured extensive interviews. In this way the artists could interpret their work directly for the public. The interactions between gallery owner (Guthrie) and artist (stone sculptor) were now increasingly similar to practices common in twenty-first-century American and European art galleries, with Guthrie taking a percentage of every sale he made for the artists. Although the National Gallery had revived the practice of featuring stone sculpture in annual exhibitions, the staff did little to promote or collect it. Guthrie took on these tasks himself. He gradually transformed a small, downtown commercial gallery that had sold works by first generation luminaries such as Mukomberanwa and Mubayi in the depressed market of the 1970s into the impressive Chapungu Sculpture Park in the 1980s, located in a bucolic suburban location.



FIGURE 12.2 Joram Mariga. *Chapungu Bird*, 1994. Springstone. From the Permanent Collection of Chapungu Sculpture Park. Photograph by Elizabeth Morton.

Guthrie purchased large-scale pieces to display at this new outdoor park, which in due course developed into a major tourist attraction as well as the world's premier collection of Zimbabwean stone sculpture. It featured such masterpieces as Mariga's *Communicating with the Earth Spirits* and *Chapungu Bird* (Figure 12.2) and displayed works for sale (although Guthrie never drew up exclusive contracts). Chapungu Sculpture Park also promoted new and younger artists with a residency program, giving an important professional boost to sculptors such as Tapfuma Gutsa and Dominic Benhura. By the late 1980s, the growing stature of Chapungu Sculpture Park opened up an impressive array of international contacts. Not only did Guthrie mount large joint exhibitions across the world, but he was able to help individual artists mount big solo exhibitions, especially in Europe.⁵¹ So although Guthrie was superficially following in the footsteps of McEwen, his publicity no longer constructed elaborate narratives for the works.

By the late 1980s, as prices for stone statuary increased, the artists became far wealthier, with many acquiring property and vehicles. Many purchased their own quarries. As a result, they became able to cut and transport bigger rocks. Because the

larger pieces fetched higher prices, artists such as Mariga and Mukomberanwa found it efficacious to develop family workshops. Children and impecunious relatives could be used to take care of the more laborious duties associated with large sculptures. Before long, many of these family members would become accomplished artists in their own right.

An associated trend was a move away from polished surfaces in the late 1980s. Mariga and McEwen had always favored polishing, and only the occasional sculptor, such as Boira Mteki, had utilized unfinished surfaces in the past – primarily because he had relied on extremely hard and unworkable stones. The move towards new surfaces, though, was driven by the success of Tapfuma Gutsa.⁵² Gutsa, who had spent a year at Driefontein with Cornelius Manguma learning Groeber's wood carving techniques in the late 1970s, eventually attended the City and Guilds of London Art School. His move to stone sculpture following a residence at Chapungu energized Zimbabwean sculpture in many ways, but his treatment of surfaces was particularly influential. Once the artists chose to leave the stones unpolished, springstone – which allowed for vivid contrasts between its white textured and black polished surface – became their stone of choice. This was not the only arena in which Gutsa was influential, since he also incorporated wood or other materials into mixed media sculptures. Many of the younger artists followed his lead.⁵³ Therefore, at least for a time, artists in Zimbabwe were no longer expected to make "Shona stone sculpture."

Another way Gutsa opened up sculpture was in his choice of subject matter. Having attended art school in London, he was far less wedded to local or regional cultural concepts or religious ideologies, or to Mariga's attitudes towards suitable subject matter and his aesthetic rules. Instead, current political and social issues featured in Gutsa's work, and themes highlighted features of urban life in contemporary Africa. Because of Gutsa's encouragement and influence, most of the emerging second generation artists left behind many of Mariga's ideas.

Perhaps related to this new, more contemporary trend was the emergence of many female sculptors, most notably Colleen Madamombe.⁵⁴ Whereas in the past the mission-derived "mother and child" image had been prominent (if not overworked), Madamombe and others have added the female form and women's issues to the stone sculpture repertoire, and with it more immediate and less clichéd expression. Madamombe has also been highly adept at expressing movement, using surfaces to depict clothing, and using humor in her works. Her full-figured subjects move and dance with grace and elegance, but usually have a melancholic side that reflects their subordinate position in society.

While Gutsa, Madadombe, and Benhura brought new ideas and themes to Chapungu Sculpture Park, the first generation icons continued to flourish in the later portions of their lives. Mariga and Mukomberanwa both left the civil service after full careers and carved with renewed vitality in their "retirements." Mukomberanwa in the 1980s reached beyond the frontality of the architectural forms he had carved for Groeber and explored a large range of styles. His later works ranged from thin, geometric, and sometimes abstract forms to large blocks with dynamic contrasts between rough natural stone and beautifully carved and polished figurative areas. Mariga (b. 1927), meanwhile, flourished even into his seventies, when he created some of his finest works. Although he continued to produce compact works, Mariga's large-scale lepidolite and springstone sculptures of the 1990s were a far cry from the small soapstone busts he began carving in 1960.

The vitality of the stone sculpture movement began to ebb around 2000, as Zimbabwe collapsed under the political and economic problems created by President Robert Mugabe. Dominic Benhura now runs Tengenenge, while Guthrie, still the most important dealer, moved Chapungu Sculpture Park to Loveland, Colorado and kept the majority of its significant collections there. He is currently transitioning back to Zimbabwe again. Perhaps the most pertinent issue is the decline in artistic innovation during this troubled period, when neither established sculptors nor young artists can afford to experiment. It would appear that a new arrival, equivalent to Tapfuma Gutsa, is needed to develop a new set of themes and forms that will excite art buyers. When Zimbabwe finally reemerges from its current predicament, it remains to be seen whether or not the newest generation can take their remarkable skill and training and rethink how they can relate to a new and quickly growing postmodern international art scene in southern Africa.

Notes

- 1 Regarding mission art in Zimbabwe, see Morton (2003); Plangger (1974); Randles (1997, 71–83); and Walker (1985).
- 2 Paterson (1939, 3).
- 3 Paterson (1939, 4).
- 4 Paterson (1973).
- 5 Paterson (1953, 2).
- 6 Paterson's exhibits went to venues like the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Royal Watercolor Society in London. Cyrene's entire arts budget was funded by sales at its travelling exhibitions. The visit of the British royal family to Cyrene on their Africa tour of 1947 gave the school tremendous visibility.
- 7 Khumalo, personal communication, Bulawayo, March 27, 2002. Khumalo has not been the subject of much study, although he exhibited frequently from the 1950s onwards and completed many public art commissions.
- 8 Morton (2003, 89–94).
- 9 Kasfir (2007, 18).
- 10 Butler (2000, chapter 6).
- 11 See Morton (2012).
- 12 Rankin (1993, 6–10).
- 13 Background information on Groeber can be found in his personal file at the Swiss Bethlehem Mission Archive, Immensee, Switzerland.
- 14 For more information on Groeber, see Morton (2003, chapter 3), and Plangger (1974).
- 15 Waugh (1960, 128).
- 16 Plangger (1974, 16).
- 17 Groeber cited in Plangger (1974, 15).
- 18 Emson Mujuru, personal communication, Bulawayo, March 27, 2002; Gilbert Tuge, personal communication, Driefontein, March 29, 2002.
- 19 Rasmussen and Rasmussen (2000).
- 20 Mariga was employed by the Rhodesian Department of Agriculture as both a road builder and an agricultural demonstrator. See Joosten (2001) for an extended profile.
- 21 Boira Mteki had been trained by Paterson at Chirodzo in the 1950s, and then worked as a gem cutter. His profession gave him the ability to work with hard stones that few other Zimbabwean sculptors ever attempted to use.

- 22 A concept popularized by Carl Gustav Jung in the post-World War II era, the “collective unconscious” maintained that all people had a universal psyche. Westerners, though, tainted by their long exposure to industrialization and the Enlightenment, lacked the ability to express it. Only “primitive man,” still untainted by modernity, could authentically express these universal “archetypes” through myths and art. Most European and American collectors of non-Western art during this period interpreted their pieces in this way.
- 23 See Zilberg (2007, 16).
- 24 See Mukarobgwa (1994, 4).
- 25 Ndandarika, see below; Mukomberanwa hid his training with Paterson until the late 1980s. See National Gallery of Zimbabwe (1988, 47).
- 26 The free approach was a reaction against the old traditions of the French Academy, which stressed technique and the endless copying of old masters. Gustave Moreau, the originator of this method, instead focused on developing each student’s innate, instinctive, individual qualities and strengths. See McEwen (1963, 174–177).
- 27 Guthrie (1990, 4).
- 28 See “What Encouragement” (1961).
- 29 McEwen (1968, 25). On Pearce, see Pearce (1993).
- 30 Noted in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, September 24, 1962.
- 31 Zilberg (1995, 16); Sidney Kasfir, interview with Thomas Mukarobgwa (transcript), Harare, July 25, 1996.
- 32 Pearce (1993, 103).
- 33 McEwen (1964, n.p.).
- 34 Mariga’s mid-1960s group included Bernard Manyandure, Frank Vanji, David Zindoga, John Takawira, Moses Masaya, and Crispin Chakanyuka.
- 35 Mariga was a devout Christian his entire adult life, and he eschewed witchcraft. However, he did not differentiate between the Christian God and Mwari, the Shona deity.
- 36 Mariga, personal communication, Harare, June 25, 1998.
- 37 On Mariga see Morton (2013) and Mawdsley (1994).
- 38 Carol Pearce and I agree on the similarities of the types of stone sculpture produced by artists in Zimbabwe, but Pearce does not consider the possibility that the uniformity in style she describes might be due to the influence of Mariga. See Pearce (1993, 97–98); Morton (1998).
- 39 As early as 1965 the Salisbury art critic Robert Nisbet – a rare local European who took the workshop artists seriously – noted the tendency of the sculptors to copy and imitate each other (Nisbet 1965).
- 40 Hall (1994, 51–54).
- 41 Joram Mariga, personal communication, Harare, June 26, 1998.
- 42 See Nisbet (1968).
- 43 McEwen in 1962, cited in Zilberg (1996, 110).
- 44 See McEwen (1968, 88); Zilberg (1995, 4).
- 45 This is not a topic that has been explored in great detail. For a view into the outlook of this generation of collectors, see the *Primitive Art Newsletter*, distributed in New York City from 1978 to 1993 by Irwin Hersey.
- 46 McEwen (1972, 11).
- 47 Zilberg (1995, 4).
- 48 Translated from the 1971 Musée Rodin exhibition (Musée d’Art Moderne) and reprinted in McEwen (1995, 6).

- 49 See Kuhn (1978).
- 50 See National Gallery of Zimbabwe (1988).
- 51 Lists of exhibitions can be found in various Chapungu Sculpture Park publications, including numerous catalogs associated with its shows (for instance, “Zimbabwe Stone Sculpture” 1997). Much of my information about Chapungu came from discussions with Guthrie in Loveland, Colorado, July 2008.
- 52 See Sultan (1999, 24–25).
- 53 See *Zimbabwe* (1997, 20, 26).
- 54 See Mawdsley (1995) and LaDuke (1997, 94ff.).

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“Being Modern” Identity Debates and Makerere’s Art School in the 1960s

Sunanda K. Sanyal

Ulrich Middeldorf was a historian of Renaissance art. A student of the legendary Heinrich Wölfflin, he headed the art department of the University of Chicago. On May 16, 1950, he wrote a letter to his contact at Uganda’s Makerere University College, thanking him for sending an exhibition of student paintings to Chicago. “I have seen many things coming from curious outposts of civilization,” Middeldorf wrote:

From Asia, from the Americas, from our city slums . . . but the material which you lent us is really the most surprising and most satisfactory which I have ever seen. What seems to me so remarkable about it is that it seems altogether developed from genuine feelings and interests of the students, with little or no reference to European conventions. That gives the work an amazing freshness and makes it . . . excellent study material for the psychologist of art, on the same level as good children’s drawings or genuine primitive art.

He also felt strongly about the artists’ choices of palette:

I very much hope that the modern magentas, greens, purples and reds and yellows never will come to your corner of Africa before this particular color taste is firmly established. I have seen so many good folk arts completely ruined by them.¹

The unequivocally essentialist and paternalistic tone of Middeldorf’s remarks shouldn’t surprise us, since it was the norm of colonial culture. Rather, what we should find odd is that his “curious outpost of civilization” was actually an *art department* of an African institution of higher learning. Why, then, did Middeldorf find “little or no reference to European conventions” in those images?

Margaret Trowell, an English artist and educator, trained at London's Slade School, brought formal art education to Uganda in 1937. Having accompanied her doctor husband to Kampala, she organized art classes first at her house, and then at Makerere College, which, in the following year, became the Higher College of East Africa. This art training enterprise was soon recognized as the college's informal art department, a status that became official after the institution became Makerere University College in 1949. Because Trowell's primary goal was to produce art teachers for Ugandan schools, the department became attached to Makerere's Institute of Education, offering a three-year teacher's certificate. This obligatory relation ended after Trowell's retirement in 1958; the department was eventually named the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts, offering an independent degree course.

Like Middeldorf, Trowell was convinced that Africans had a unique way of seeing, and that the European model of art training was completely ill suited to their creative pursuits. Deeply religious, Trowell regarded the Bible as a potent source of subject matter. She rejected the Renaissance pictorial convention for its dependence on the emulation of nature and disregarded modernism for its formal experiments that underscored the artist as the subject, a creative strategy she dismissed as "soulless superficiality."² As an alternative to both, the art of the Middle Ages (though it isn't clear what exactly she meant by her reference to this vast epoch) offered her the correct balance of pictorial abstraction and concrete content. So, in order to nurture what she saw as the innate naïveté of her young adult students, she encouraged them to visualize East African rural life, or poems and stories she narrated to them. Such a strategy, she firmly believed, would help them forge an authentically East African pictorial art. The growing urban experience of a changing East Africa thus remained irrelevant to most of her early students. It was the outcome of this endeavor that so pleased Middeldorf. During the 1940s, several exhibitions of the art of Trowell's students were held in England and the USA, of which the Chicago exhibition is one example. Middeldorf's comment about the absence of "European conventions" in the images sent to Chicago testifies to one of the consequences of Trowell's instructional priorities.

However, after Margaret Trowell retired from her position as the head of the art department in 1958 and returned to England, a group of British and African instructors educated in the language of modernism took charge of the art department. Even though the department was named after Trowell soon after this transition, the new leadership tacitly dismissed the products of the Trowell era as crude and naive, and introduced a mode of training that they believed would bridge the gap between the local and global arena of art. In other words, Middeldorf's "folk art" produced with "genuine feelings" under Trowell's supervision was "ruined," after all. As the despised "magentas, greens and purples" reached that "corner of Africa," the art lost its "amazing freshness." This transition in the identity of the art school, which operated within the confines of a university college that was destined to be a full-scale university, is central to this essay.

Since I have elaborately discussed Trowell's pedagogical methods and their rationale elsewhere, here I do not dwell on that history.³ Rather, against the background of that account, I revisit the discourse of modernity and modernism at Makerere's art school during the early postcolonial years. Instead of engaging in an image-based art historical analysis, as I did in my previous work, here I take a critical look at a series of texts – essays, interviews, letters, speeches, and memoirs – to interpret the art school's

attempt to forge an institutional identity for itself, in light of the larger debates over education and identity that defined the culture of Makerere campus in the 1960s. Agencies of specific individuals who contributed to these debates receive special attention in this discussion.

The Art School in Transition

In 1962, Makerere's status changed from University College to a constituent campus of the new University of East Africa, with those at Nairobi and Dar es Salaam as sister institutions. Though Nairobi later founded a fledgling design and architectural studies department, Makerere was the only campus that offered art training in such conventional mediums as painting, sculpture, and printmaking.

Margaret Trowell's favorite student, the Tanzanian Sam Ntiro, had succeeded her as the head of the school in 1958, but the following year he was replaced by Cecil Todd, a Scottish artist who left a teaching job in South Africa to come to Uganda. Soon, beginning with the Tanzanian-born English artist Jonathan Kingdon in 1960, a new group of teachers joined the faculty in the subsequent years: the English ceramist John Francis, the Zanzibari painter Ali Darwish, the English painter and printmaker Michael Adams, and the Sudanese printmaker Tag Ahmed. The only faculty member who had been a Trowell student was the Kenyan sculptor Gregory Maloba. With the exception of Darwish, who had trained at the Slade School (Maloba was partially trained there as well), all the full-time instructors, including Cecil Todd himself, were alumni of London's Royal College of Art.

Unlike Margaret Trowell, these teachers wanted to prepare students with strong academic grounding in the modernist methods, techniques, and the grammar of visual representation. Contrary to Trowell's goal of producing art teachers for Ugandan schools, they aimed at training professional artists. Cecil Todd, according to his student Kiure Francis Msangi, was a perfectionist.⁴ Most of Todd's former students clearly remember his insistence on the mastery of the elements of visual representation, such as the European conventions of drawing, rules of pictorial construction, and the science and theory of color. The faculty members of the school generally held the belief that such a European model of instruction offered a body of knowledge that was relevant to art training anywhere in the world. Indeed, it seems most of them wanted to make a clean break with the Trowellian past, and were often indirectly dismissive of it. "Todd wanted to forget about Trowell," says Pilkington Ssengendo, a student from the mid-1960s. He succinctly describes Todd's attitude about the Trowell years: "She did her job, and that's it. Now we have a different mission, namely to introduce a modern art school based on European art."⁵ The importance of the artist's individuality, central to the modernist discourse, was paramount in this endeavor. Consider, for instance, Jonathan Kingdon's reminiscence of his teaching methods:

I thought it was fine to teach people color theory and history, but [that] it shouldn't overshadow their individual, unique experiences of the world. And that's what I really made a particular point of. I taught them one-to-one, so that they got individual critiques . . . the student was in a sense running the show. He was telling me what he wanted to do, and my role was only really to provide suggestions.⁶

By artistic individuality, the new instructors meant that a student would handle a wide range of subjects and explore new approaches to visual expression; their work would illuminate various dimensions of subject, content and form. The goal was, as the painting department declared in the school's handbook of the mid-1960s, "to develop the intrinsic talents of the students."⁷ Needless to say, such individualist approach to the artist's identity was entirely opposed to Trowell's ideals. While Trowell had been attentive to the development of a student's individual creative potential, her insistence on a distinctly "African" cognition, conceptualization, and execution of images always took precedence in her teaching; individual artists were always framed by their ethnic identity. The allegiance of the new pedagogy, on the other hand, was primarily, if not only, to modernist art, where an artist's aesthetic decisions overrode personal religious convictions. The curriculum not only emphasized rigorous studies from life, such as sketching outdoors, but students were also expected to broaden their knowledge base of art beyond Africa.

The school's production in the 1960s went well beyond mere academic exercise. Kampala was rapidly turning into an affluent urban center, where Makerere proudly offered a cosmopolitan setting for higher education. The number of international students at the art school steadily increased, which provided opportunities for cross-cultural exchange that enriched student work. While acquiring formal and technical skills and expanding their understanding of art, many students used such experience in numerous ways to explore crucial questions about tradition and identity. We need, therefore, to examine certain issues in the larger debates that were shaping the culture of the campus at the time, before returning to evaluate the role of the art school in that scenario.

Two Dominant Colonial Views of Africans

Imagine a scale with two poles: affinity (variously understood as sameness or universality) at one end, and diversity (difference or particularism) at the other. Individual as well as collective assertions of cultural identity fundamentally involve ongoing negotiations between these two extremes. In light of the disparate power relations of the colonialist discourse, asserting selfhood while acknowledging the historical inevitability of the colonial impact can be especially complicated for the colonial subject. Ernesto Laclau sheds light on the issue:

European imperialist expansion had to be presented in terms of a universal civilizing function, of modernization, etc. As a result, the resistances of other cultures were presented not as struggles between particular identities and cultures, but as part of an all-embracing, epochal struggle between universality and particularisms – the notion of peoples without history expressing precisely their incapacity to represent the universal.⁸

The dichotomy of universality and particularism that Laclau explains had crucial implications for the identity discourse in East Africa in the 1960s, the groundwork of which had been laid in the colonial era. Examine, for instance, the argument of Victor Murray, a professor of education at the Shelley Oaks College in Birmingham, who surveyed schools in anglophone Africa in the 1920s. In the book that resulted from his trip, Murray elaborately explains his universalist view of African cultures. "Any race with a long history of struggle and achievement is a superior race, and we need not

quibble about the fact,” he says about the British. “Grown men are ‘superior’ in the same sense to children of their own race . . .” But then he continues:

Their attitude to them is determined by the belief that the children will grow up to be like them, even, perhaps, to surpass them. Relationships, therefore, are conditioned by the end in view. And it is the same with the African.⁹

Notable are the quotation marks around the term “superior” the second time it is used. Though Murray begins by establishing the idea of British superiority over Africans, he qualifies the term, suggesting that Africans are capable of ascending to the level of the British. He sees culture as the deposit of history, and Africans, according to him, have yet to build culture.¹⁰ However, he generously confers to Africans an equal right to the accomplishments of Western civilization:

For them [Africans] as for us the treasures of the world’s past have been heaped up. We received the treasures of Greece and Rome and Judaea, and have added to them. And if for us, barbarians and Gentiles, Plato thought and Virgil sang and Jeremiah agonized – and Christ died, these things happened for the African too. For him also in later days Beethoven played, Leonardo painted, Shakespeare wrote, Pascal invented. There is no “African culture,” – as of yet. *There is this universal heritage waiting to be taken up by them.*¹¹ (my emphasis)

Later, he adds:

What we call “Western” or “European” or “modern” civilization is a blend of various elements not all of them Western or European or modern. It has come to us from Greece and Rome and Palestine, and doubtless the cultured Roman of the Augustan Age would have been shocked to think that the barbarian British could ever have “carried on” his culture.¹²

Despite his admiration for the achievements of Western civilization and his denial of any form of cultural identity for Africans, Murray is not saying that everything Christian–European is worth emulating, whereas everything African is heathen, therefore expendable. Rather, he claims that religious and secular alike, Western accomplishments are worth emulating because they are essentially *human* accomplishments, rich with contributions from a variety of sources. And, as a universal religion, Christianity is a crucial part of that cultural wealth of mankind. The difference between the “primitive African” and the “civilized Briton,” to him, is analogous to the difference between the early Briton and the “civilized Roman.” Similarly distant from civilization, yet equally capable of elevating himself, the African is as much a shareholder of the glory of human heritage as the ancestor of his colonizer. Therefore, the question of European superiority over Africans is a temporary one, and that of African cultural heritage is irrelevant at this stage of development. Murray’s paternalist, social evolutionist bias, then, is more than obvious. Yet, while he refuses to acknowledge Africans’ own right to pick and choose to construct their own histories and identities, he also argues against a spurious notion of cultural authenticity (which we encounter in Ulrich Middeldorf’s remarks about modern African art), and at least upholds the historical fact of cross-cultural discourses.

However, it was the view that Murray opposed that was far more influential in British colonial circles. Grounded in the theory of “dual mandate” forged by Frederick Lugard and manifested in the British colonial policy of indirect rule, it came to be known among educators and policy-makers of the early decades of the twentieth century as “adaptation theory.” The following sentence from the lengthy memorandum of the Advisory Committee of Native Education in British Tropical Africa, produced in 1925, summarizes it well:

Education should be adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various peoples, conserving as far as possible all sound and healthy elements in the fabric of their social life; adapting them where necessary to changed circumstances and progressive ideas, as an agent of natural growth and evolution.¹³

It is tempting to believe that the memo highly values the particularisms of African cultures – to borrow Laclau’s terms – as opposed to Murray’s view, which, stemming from the colonial notion of universalism, openly justifies colonization. Yet a careful reading confirms the power dynamic underlying adaptation theory that equally endorses colonial domination by playing on the rhetoric of difference. Take, for instance, G. C. Latham’s view of “educated Africans.” “For their part,” Latham argues:

educated Africans must realize that if they wish to enjoy a greater share in the administration of their own affairs they must fit themselves for such responsibility, and that what they need is not so much a matter of book knowledge as of character. They have to learn self-criticism, reliability, self-control, and a genuine sense of responsibility before they can be entrusted with a considerable share in the direction of the destinies of their own race.¹⁴

Also instructive in this context is the opinion of Donald Cameron, an avid champion of indirect rule and Governor of Tanganyika in the 1920s. “Native Administration must be educated to meet changing conditions,” says Cameron when discussing the efficacy of adaptation theory. “And in East Africa the cultural poverty of the native tribes makes it inevitable that they must get their culture from the West.”¹⁵ The blatant condescension of both men leaves no doubt that, equally convinced of their own superiority, they are loyal executors of Lord Lugard’s plan for indirect rule. Fundamentally rooted – as Laclau reminds us – in the “universal civilizing function,” the two apparently incompatible approaches, then, turn out to be two sides of the same coin. While the imperialist gesture of Murray’s universalism dismisses all specificities of African cultures, the cautiously worded adaptation theory cunningly uses the “African mentality” argument to sufficiently distance Africans as exotic Others in order to ensure subjugation to British rule.

Debates on Makerere Campus

This earlier colonial discourse served as the foundation for the complex debates over the education system and cultural identity in anglophone Africa during the early phase of self-rule in the 1960s. The difference, however, was that now Africans had a voice in those conversations. While the 1925 memorandum and its apologists had always

argued for vocational training over a general university education for Africans, educators like Murray had confidently asserted the need for total exposure to the latter. As Makerere evolved into an international institution of higher learning on the eve of Uganda's independence in 1962, its pedagogy and social training came under intense scrutiny. On the one hand, European teachers like M. M. Carlin of the English department, who dismissed any effort to introduce materials on Africa into the curriculum as "relativist claptrap," insisted on European-style university training.¹⁶ And ironically, his view was popular among many Africans, for whom university credentials represented power and social status in independent Africa.

On the other hand was noticeable resistance to what was seen as the "Oxbridge" (a fusion of Oxford and Cambridge) mode, evident in everything from Makerere's curriculum and instruction to life in residence halls. Makerere and other African colleges were seen as institutions that not only provided education, but also shaped identities of their students, and this made Africanization of the curriculum and campus life a priority for many African as well as European instructors. For most committed nationalists in anglophone Africa, the colonial rhetoric of "African mentality" became "African Personality," a back-to-the-roots Pan-Africanist call that often held any European presence in African education as highly suspect. Such urgency even led to the proposal in West Africa to remove Jane Austen, even Shakespeare, from the literature curriculum.¹⁷ Makerere's education report of 1963 regretted that the existing university education was "more concerned to educate an elite than produce a large number of graduates and diplomats suitably trained for East Africa's present needs."¹⁸ At a symposium held on campus, the exiled Malawian novelist David Rubadiri, who was also Makerere's deputy registrar and a lecturer of English, drew further attention to this question. "The student comes to Makerere," Rubadiri observed, "and feels that he would like to have a new identity, a shedding off, so to speak, of his old identity which he wants to forget."¹⁹ Such discussions suggest that the dilemma of negotiating one's cultural identity between the universalist and particularist extremes intensified in this period. A quick look at the ideological maneuvers of some of the young writers who had a key role in these debates will illuminate the art school's position in the cultural climate of the era.

African Literature or Literature from Africa?

The exiled South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele²⁰ wrote on the nature and role of literature:

"Give us some words of wisdom," you ask the tortoise. "Tell us about life." "What life?" Tortoise says. "I have my own, you have yours." "But you eat the same food we do, drink the same thing, I mean figuratively." "Yes, but I mind my own business." In one of those desperate moments when you need reassurances from this strange thing called literature, it keeps its head in for self-protection. You can kick it around, throw it over on its back. *Inside there is another system of life with its own rules, covered with a shell that yields no answers.* You will have to smash the damn thing with a huge rock or pickaxe if you are really desperate to know. But that will be the death of the creature. On the other hand, *as long as it is alive, it will feed on the very reality against which it compels us to evaluate it.*²¹ (my emphases)

Though written in 1974, Mphahlele's imagined conversation with the metaphorical creature alludes to a major debate among African writers in the 1960s. Literature's potential as an ideological tool (the service of the tortoise as a window on reality) came into conflict with a writer's allegiance to the peculiar demands of the discipline (the creature's stubbornness against any compromise of its autonomy to extrinsic obligations).

In the 1960s, there was urgency among some writers to define the parameters of a literature that would stand apart as an *African* enterprise in its language, form, and content, in its sincere portrayal of a contemporary *African* reality. Yet as Mphahlele observes, the tortoise would rather die than surrender to such servitude. Translated into the vocabulary of the identity debates of the time, writers were faced with the task of negotiating their identity at a precarious position on the scale between the universal and the particular: for Mphahlele and others like him, to be a *modern* writer was, on the one hand, to recognize one's postcolonial African identity, while avoiding the pitfall of essentialism; on the other hand, to negotiate with the global character of this creative enterprise, while denying the overarching colonial rhetoric of universalism. Collectives of creative individuals provided platforms for public discussions on this issue, and *Transition*, a literary magazine first published in Kampala in 1961 by a Ugandan of Indian origin named Rajat Neogy, became the most popular periodical in East Africa for voicing a variety of opinions.²²

This discourse of cultural identity made its impact in other anglophone countries across the continent. For instance, funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Mbari Writers' and Artists' Clubs were founded in the Nigerian cities of Ibadan and Oshogbo in July 1961, and in Enugu in February 1963.²³ With rising Nigerians as its founding members, such as writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Christopher Okigbo, and artists like Duro Ladipo, Uche Okeke, and Demos Nwoko, the organization made seminal attempts to bring intellectuals throughout anglophone Africa under its banner; the Sudanese artist Ibrahim el Salahi, the African-American artist Jacob Lawrence, the German critic Ulli Beier, and Mphahlele himself, were among the non-Nigerian members. In June 1962, Mbari organized the First Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere to determine the parameters of African literature. Opposing the notion of "African Personality," the delegates searched for a broader scope of contemporary African writing. Mphahlele later explained the goal in simple terms: "African literature should be treated as part of the world literature," he said, "and not as something especially African; that there is in reality only good and bad and mediocre writing, whether African, Chinese, Mexican and so on . . ."²⁴ Disagreements on such platforms were common, and young writers often changed their positions. For example, at the same conference, the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo underscored the need for a literary work to be rooted in African soil; yet in 1966, shortly before he was killed in the Biafran war (1967–1970), he refused an award offered him for his poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. He justified his reluctance to this recognition by saying, "There is no such thing as Negro art."²⁵

Chemchemi Cultural Centre, a sister to Mbari Club, was founded in Nairobi in 1963 under Mphahlele's leadership. Simply put, the organization aimed at encouraging public initiatives in cultural activities and making intellectuals aware of the contemporary African public. "With a thing like Chemchemi," remarked Mphahlele during a newspaper interview in early 1965, "I have felt all along that to inject ideas into people one has to start publishing things and writing things and talking about

things, and have a place where people can come for a chat, advice, or to look at paintings.”²⁶ With frequent drama and writing workshops, art classes, and symposia, Chemchemi became a local cultural platform in Nairobi for both writers and visual artists, albeit a short-lived one.

Since these writers were anxious to identify with their peers from the rest of the world because they saw Africa as an emerging force on the global scene, they inevitably confronted the controversial question of language. While acknowledging the need to develop literary enterprises in vernacular languages, they recognized the indispensability of English in reaching a larger public. “How does an African writer face up to the problem of translating into a foreign language thoughts and feelings that originally operate in his mother-tongue?” asked Mphahlele when speaking about the Makerere conference, “ . . . we concluded that the richness of English goes a long way to compensate for any difficulties. But a writer should not fear to do violence to standard English if he finds it cumbersome.”²⁷ His position sharply differed from that of the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who aggressively insisted on the indispensability of the vernacular for African writers. This debate flared up in 1963, when an Igbo scholar named Obiajunwa Wali wrote an essay in *Transition*, harshly criticizing the use of the colonial language by African writers and arguing the need to write in local languages.²⁸ The multiple – and passionate – responses to this article demonstrate the integral role of language in the writers’ debates over identity.²⁹ For Mphahlele or Soyinka, for instance, to insist on the use of the vernacular and on the distinction of literary subjects that were deemed “African” was to betray the tortoise, so to speak, in favor of the colonial identity trap of the “neo-primitive.” To someone like Ngũgĩ or Wali, on the other hand, to hold literature’s disciplinary identity above cultural particularisms and to see the language of colonial domination as its vehicle was to buy into the illusion of equality professed by Victor Murray and M. M. Carlin.

Art: Debate on the Margin

Written language had not only represented educational status in Africa since the era of missionary schooling, but was also integral to the project of nation-building in the postcolonial era.³⁰ Literature, therefore, was understandably an intensely politicized enterprise central to the identity debates of the 1960s. In contrast, art at Makerere had always had a peripheral status. Since Makerere’s infancy, art had been ornamental rather than integral to the institution’s educational project. When the institution became a University College in 1949 under special relation with the University of London, no one had any clear idea how art would fit into a curriculum primarily geared toward training future civil servants. In fact, it was proposed that art education be terminated altogether. It survived primarily due to the commitment and perseverance of Margaret Trowell.³¹ Even in the 1960s, when the art school had a structured curriculum and a much greater visibility on campus, its position within the university often seemed equivocal. Jonathan Kingdon, for instance, recalls occasional confrontations with academics in other departments, when he and his colleagues had to defend – often adamantly – the importance of their discipline in higher education.³² Unlike the literary front, where identity debates revolved around specific and complex issues of language, subjectivity, and educational benefit, discussions and critiques of art were much less nuanced and more polarized.

The one common concern about art education in the 1960s was that the training was misguiding young artists. Faculty and students of other departments often alleged that the art school was inculcating derivative means of artistic expression, eventually creating identity crisis for artists. The target of this allegation was the European-derived instructional model practiced at the art school. The alternative, however, was not clear, as there seemed to have been various notions of what constituted serious art; it was generally understood as a kind of art that would effectively articulate the artists' cultural identity. The complaint about the ineffectiveness of the art training is evident in the comment of David Rubadiri, who noted at Makerere's arts faculty conference of 1965 that several art school graduates had completely stopped their artistic pursuits after leaving the school.³³ This concern about the school was voiced more directly in various Kampala publications, such as the *Uganda Argus* and the campus journal *Makererean*, and invited responses from the school's instructors and students.³⁴ Sometimes the question of elitism came to the fore. For instance, the printmaker and painter Michael Adams once took art critics to task in an essay published in *Transition*. He sarcastically complained that able critics were actually frustrated artists, who, in the name of good taste and knowledge, only trivialized serious art. Adams stressed the value of artistic talent, and argued that truly able artists could speak for themselves without intervention from critics.³⁵ Consider, on the other hand, Cecil Todd's remarks made in 1970. "I have found myself in circumstances," Todd observed:

Whereby I have largely tended to abandon the painting of pictures and have devoted myself to those aspects of the visual arts which are associated with our everyday environment and to which all people have access simply "because they are there" . . .³⁶

Todd's interest in public art suggests that, unlike the much younger Adams, he had little interest in making the distinction between "high" and "low" art, which leads us to conclude that Adams' view was his own. Nonetheless, there was an impression on campus that the school was responsible for fostering an elite culture unrelated to an African student's needs, and, despite the differences of views among the European instructors, they were most often the indirect targets of such criticism from other quarters, by Europeans and Africans alike. For example, R. G. Harris of the English department remarked in his response to Adams that in trying to isolate themselves, artists were "not [being] very helpful or effective in the business . . . of bridging the gap between themselves and the rest of society."³⁷ On another occasion, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is reported to have reacted with passion to the "bourgeois" nature of the art school's education.³⁸ In light of the art school's commitment to underscore creative potentials of individuals, why, we might wonder, did its critics find such education questionable?

Historically, the negotiations of modernism – and by this I mean a specific art historical period of about a century, from the Realists in France to the Abstract expressionists in America – have always been in the complicated gray zone between sameness and difference. Aggressively projecting its Otherness, the avant-garde in Europe once subverted the value system of an art establishment that was incapable of addressing the priorities and concerns of a new century. It is this claim of difference, of particularism, which gave the avant-garde project its revolutionary edge. Yet paradoxically, ignoring all the differences and inequities of colonial domination (which almost

precisely coincided with the rise of modernism), the utopia that lay at the core of most modernist movements eventually also claimed to speak for a homogeneous humanity.³⁹ The myth of a primitivist universalism (the we-are-all-same-under-the-skin rhetoric) so obscured the specificity of the modern artist (white, male, heterosexual) as a subject that the marginalization of “other” artists (nonwhite, women, gay) was easily overlooked. Examined in the postcolonial context, this culture of exclusion appears especially problematic. Thoroughly institutionalized by the mid-twentieth century, with no subversive potential left, the modernist discourse categorically refused to acknowledge the modern creative enterprises of the former colonies; the three powerful institutions of modern art – the scholarship, the gallery, and the market – consistently denied modern artists from Asia, Africa, and Latin America a place in the canon. And curiously, such rejection was conveniently explained with an excuse of difference that sharply contrasted modernism’s universalist rhetoric of freedom and originality: the modern artist from a non-Western culture was regarded as an exotic Other with an identity crisis, trying hopelessly to emulate the Western model of art practice. Even on the rare occasion when any such artists gained partial entry into the canon (such as the Cuban Wilfredo Lam), they were evaluated with a thorough essentialist bias.⁴⁰

For the postcolonial artist, then, modernism is largely an art discourse concealing a power relation rooted in the legacy of colonialism.⁴¹ And from this perspective, perhaps it is not too difficult to see why the modernist thrust of Makerere’s art teaching in the 1960s, with several Europeans in leadership positions, would be held suspect by some in Makerere’s highly charged cultural climate. Since modernism in the Western world had already become an official, elite culture, the art school’s critics saw its imported version at Makerere not only as irrelevant to the intellectual development of the students, but as a possible instrument of cultural hegemony. And notwithstanding Cecil Todd’s interest in public art, this impression persisted through the decade. Such criticism was voiced in a variety of venues, and in it two of Margaret Trowell’s former students had a significant role: the Tanzanian-born Elimo Njau and Sam Ntiro.

Elimo Njau

In 1962, Elimo Njau delivered a speech at the International Congress of Africanists in Ghana. Speaking about the current role of the visual arts and artists in Africa, he made it quite clear at the outset that his presentation was more a theological rhetoric than a critical analysis of the subject. “By true Africanists,” he clarified, “I mean African artists embracing the ideology of the living God and His creative power through the mind, souls and bodies of real people in present Africa.”⁴² An observer later surmised the basic premise of Njau’s speech. “This was no scholarly address but an impassioned declaration of faith,” he wrote. “It was obvious that when he [Njau] said ‘God’ he meant ‘God’: that his painting was an act of communion.”⁴³ Njau held the value of academic knowledge acquired from history as secondary to a vision achieved through inspiration, and suggested that inspiration was impossible without faith:

For want of a common faith to reunite the new tribe [of detribalized, schooled African artists] they seek and believe in slogans and transient art movements. They are afraid of reconstructing their new God because superficially they believe that new scientific knowledge has displaced their God of fear and unity.⁴⁴

It leaves little doubt that this is a veiled criticism (belief in “slogans and transient art movements”) of the art school’s model of training as well as its graduates. Njau then delivered his final sermon: “Do not copy,” he advised. “Copying puts God to Sleep.”⁴⁵ There is no question that the speech betrays his allegiance to Margaret Trowell’s philosophy on the one hand, and strong disapproval of the art school’s new model of training on the other. As with Trowell, art and faith were intimately related in Njau’s mind. While the first sentence addresses a pedagogical question, the second one is purely symbolic, implying that copying would destroy one’s originality, distancing the artist from God. Needless to say, this position was diametrically opposed to the secular views of Trowell’s successors at the art school.

A few years later, Njau’s comments about one of his own enterprises further illuminate his notion of cultural identity articulated in the Ghana speech. On a piece of land donated by his father at Marangu, his birthplace in the Moshi district of Tanzania, Njau founded Kibo Art Gallery in 1964. He explains the aims and ideals of this establishment in a poem. “It is like a mango tree,” he writes:

Too slow in growth to compete with ephemeral fashions of the art world; but with roots too deep in the soil to be uprooted by any shallow wind of “civilization.”

Its roots sink deep into the earth to reach out for the bones of our ancestry and sap that is our heritage from God.

Its trunk powerful and round like true communal life in unity and harmony.

Its branches open up into a generosity of leaves, flowers and colourful fruits to feed the world and inspire humanity with spiritual health, joy, love, peace and humility in eternal wonder . . .⁴⁶

If modernism marginalized the postcolonial artist, Njau celebrates that Otherness by attempting to forge a cultural identity grounded in the notion of an authentic Africanness. The similes and metaphors here are meant to evoke a spiritual image stronger than the one felt by his audience in Ghana. It is tempting to see him in the same camp as someone like Obiajunwa Wali, who argued for the primacy of the vernacular in African literature, but the problem is that, unlike Wali’s concrete examples and more focused analysis, Njau’s rhetoric relies almost entirely on emotion, nostalgia, and faith, for which the medium of poetry serves as an appropriate vehicle. His suspicion of the art school’s educational model, articulated in phrases like “ephemeral fashions of the art world,” fails to propose a concrete alternative.⁴⁷

In fact, a large part of Njau’s opposition to the leadership of the art school seems to have been motivated by personality issues. After his graduation from the school in 1957, he taught at an elementary school on Makerere campus for several years, but was never offered a teaching job at his alma mater. Several former students from that era believe that he was not on good terms with the expatriate faculty of the school.⁴⁸ Though Njau himself has been reluctant to discuss this question explicitly after so many years, neither has he tried to hide his feelings entirely. “There was always a tendency among young people to think about progress and modernity as a sign of advancement,” he recalls, and then adds:

Todd was one of the few teachers who also practiced what he taught. He initiated the idea that Africa is a blank slate on which to create something. So he started from ground zero. I differed from him when he wrote off that whole tradition, that nothing existed before. Todd was blanketing our history, which was not his duty.⁴⁹

I have discussed Cecil Todd's work elsewhere to argue that Njau's allegations against him do not hold up⁵⁰; thus I propose here that his remarks have more to do with the identity politics of the time than with a critical evaluation of art. In short, Todd's racial origin was fundamental to Njau's unwillingness to accept his leadership role at the school. Njau also believes that Jonathan Kingdon's ideas of social consciousness were limited to the urban milieu. "It was really a part of the Western package of urbanization, painting night clubs, prostitutes . . ." he says.⁵¹ Again, from his description of what he saw as the limitation of Kingdon's art, it becomes obvious that even though Kingdon was born in East Africa and spent a significant part of his life there, Njau is still determined to categorize him as a European.

Sam Ntiro

A Chagga student from the Kilimanjaro region of Tanganyika, Sam Ntiro eventually became the most successful painter from the school in capturing an international market for his work. He never learned to draw from nature, and developed a signature style that Elimo Njau interprets as a kind of naive approach to painting – as if he was "somebody learning how to talk when one is already mature."⁵² Unlike Njau, Ntiro went to the Slade School and the University of London in the 1950s for further study, yet he remained steadfast in his pictorial strategies. As Trowell later proudly recalled: "Neither I nor all the powers of the Slade could have taught him to draw in the conventional European manner if we had struggled throughout all eternity."⁵³ There is no question, therefore, that Ntiro's work closely followed Trowell's vision of modern African art as essentially different from its Western counterpart. Indeed, its positive reception in England was firmly rooted in a condescending, "late primitivist" view of African cultures that echoed the basic premise of adaptation theory. Phrases like "gaiety, sense of color, and a quite obvious native talent for drawing,"⁵⁴ and "a living modern art deeply rooted in tradition,"⁵⁵ leave no doubt that Ntiro's was the kind of art that prompted Ulrich Middeldorf to write the ecstatic letter of gratitude to Makerere in 1950. In summary, then, not only did Sam Ntiro come to epitomize an East African cultural authenticity desired by his largely Western audience, but he seems to have accepted his audience's constructed image of an authentic Africa as his own view of his race and culture.

It is thus logical to assume that Ntiro would have serious misgivings about the art school's pedagogy. He left his position as the head of the school in 1961 because he was chosen by the independent government of Tanzania to be the first Tanzanian ambassador to Britain. But his differences with the new faculty at the school over the goals and methods of training may have contributed to his resignation. Nonetheless, he remained active in the East African cultural scene through the 1960s; for example, he participated in a conference on East Africa's cultural heritage held in Nairobi in December 1965. The following year, the 16 papers presented at that meeting from all over East Africa on various issues in linguistics, music, literature, and art were published as a book.⁵⁶ Ntiro, who at that time was working for Tanzania's ministry of culture, examined the current problems of the visual arts in his paper "The Future of East African Art." Instead of using a religious rhetoric, as Njau had done in Ghana, Ntiro argued his case by combining some of Trowell's views of indigenous arts with his own socialist political ideals. He proposed such

reforms as government regulation of outside influences, such as the import of foreign art teachers, and state control over the production and dissemination of artifacts. His paper met with an adverse reaction from Jonathan Kingdon, who reviewed this publication in *Transition*. While Kingdon praised one of Ntiro's paintings illustrated in the book, he sarcastically characterized Ntiro as someone subscribing to a totalitarian ideology.⁵⁷

Public platforms like the Chemchemi Cultural Centre in Nairobi accommodated intellectuals of very different persuasions, including Njau and Mphahlele; in fact, tensions generated by such differences is one reason the organization did not exist for long. A vital part of Chemchemi, Njau organized art workshops and shows at the centre with young Makerere artists, and organized discussions on issues of contemporary art in a changing society. It was here that the Community of East African Artists was born, which held its first group exhibition at Njau's Kibo Art Gallery in 1964. At a Chemchemi workshop in the same year, a Makerere graduate from Tanzania named Winifred Obed delivered a paper titled "The Attitude and Transition of East African Art." Because Obed worked for the ministry of culture in Tanzania, it is quite possible that he was influenced by Sam Ntiro's view on the current state of the art school. He took the instructors of the art school to task with open contempt:

Between the African student of art today and that African past are dazzling colours of European art history. The recipe is served for four years at Makerere Art School without a single mention of East African artistic past. You are told that your generation is the one to lay the foundation for the first artistic trends in East Africa.⁵⁸

Obed's criticism is especially revealing for its precise attack on the art school's training. He sarcastically uses the word "recipe" to suggest that the school's goal of encouraging artistic individualism was not only formulaic, but it also had a hegemonic gesture, since, according to him, the art school's universalist approach ignored local cultural specificities. This is particularly apparent in the last sentence. It is probably true that European and Asian arts were emphasized in the school's art history classes at the expense of African – especially East African – art.⁵⁹ And if we add to this the school's tacit dismissal of Trowell's achievements in the 1960s and its nurturing of a modernist individualism with primary allegiance to art, then we are indeed faced with the universalizing tendency of an imported version of modernist ideals. In light of Obed's criticism in the larger context of identity politics in the East African cultural scene, it is also likely that he would accept an artist's individuality, if it came with a clearly discernible mark of the artist's cultural identity; something, we can assume, he would recognize in Sam Ntiro's work.

Despite such active dialogs in the art milieu, however, the exchange clearly lacked the intensity and complexity of the debates on the literary front. While each side generally dismissed the other as identifying with an extreme position on the identity scale, we hardly find any evidence of critical attention to art and identity. Even with arguments presented through metaphors, Mphahlele's fictive conversation with the tortoise appears far less sentimental and more analytical – yet no less introspective – than Njau's glorification of the mango tree. The only exception to this was the Kenyan sculptor Gregory Maloba. Despite being one of Trowell's earliest and most favorite students, Maloba did not side with his former peers.

Gregory Maloba

Maloba began his teaching career at the art school in the 1940s, during Margaret Trowell's presence, and continued to head the sculpture department under the new leadership until 1966, when he left for the University of Nairobi. There is no evidence that he had any major differences with the European instructors. Consider, for instance, part of Maloba's speech at the Art and Craft Conference held in Kampala in 1965, discussing the role of tradition in contemporary African life. "[W]hen the word *tradition* is used," said Maloba:

then one wonders! Many of us East Africans, born and grown on East African soil, feel fully qualified to state frankly that this clamour after a traditional East African culture could do much more harm than good; for the simple reason that it is a clamour which is superficial, it is a clamour which disrupts and confuses.

He observed later in the same speech, "Are coffee trees and the radio not existing happily side by side with *matoke* [green banana] just now?"⁶⁰ While Maloba aggressively rejects the particularist position on the question of one's identity as a modern African artist, he does not resort to a universalist rhetoric (overlooking real differences for the sake of an imagined sameness) in his response. Instead, such metaphors as coffee trees, radio, and *matoke* demonstrate his awareness of the importance of an open-ended approach to the problem; and in that respect, he sounds very similar to writers like Ezekiel Mphahlele. What is more, the somewhat lighthearted nature of the metaphors – compared to, say, Njau's mango tree – convey the message with an air of levity, without compromising the gravity of the issue. We could even observe that what Maloba sees as dialogic coexistence – between the old and the new, the African and the Western, tradition and modernity – comes very close to what would be identified today as hybridity.

Between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, Maloba, like Sam Ntiro, was trained at several British institutions, in Wiltshire, Bristol, and London. Unlike Ntiro's, however, his experience abroad shaped his awareness of a changing Africa and his ability to intellectually process outside influences. It is relevant to quote here at length his comments on teaching:

A number of times we have had visitors to the Makerere School of Fine Art, and heard "This is very much like the European Moderns isn't it?" or "Look at that – have your students seen some Picasso's or those Henry Moore's?" Of course, if I wished to please this sort of visitor, I would answer "No, they see only examples of West African and Congolese Art"; a lie of course. *The truth being that students ought to look at work by artists of every race and generation if possible.* (my emphasis)⁶¹

These remarks leave no doubt that, despite his deep respect for Margaret Trowell, Maloba did not subscribe to her idea of artistic originality or her notion of a pristine African spirit. It is also obvious that Elimo Njau's lamentation of the African artist's belief in the "slogans and transient art movements" was precisely Maloba's advice to students – "to look at work by artists of every race and generation," and Njau's definition of a "true Africanist" was, to him, not only a "clamour," but a "disrupting" and "confusing" one. One of Maloba's largest public commissions, Uganda's Independence



FIGURE 13.1 Gregory Maloba. *Kampala's Independence Monument*, 1962. Concrete. Photograph by Sunanda K. Sanyal.

Monument (Figure 13.1), located at Kampala's city center, remains a testimony to his flexible approach to art and identity. It pays homage to a newborn African nation, while acknowledging Maloba's debt to Jacob Epstein, the English sculptor he so admired.⁶²

A Twofold Task

No matter how unequivocal and resolute its mission, criticism from within and outside Makerere caused the art school to struggle with its modernist self-image. As Carol Sicherman notes, even Jonathan Kingdon admitted to having occasional doubts about the efficacy of the school's training, especially the danger of blind emulation of Western standards.⁶³ Indeed, forging itself into an institution of modern art in a young nation was difficult for the school, as it was never destined to be an art academy. It had always had to identify itself as a part of Makerere, not only because of its location and the history of its birth, but also because the region did not provide adequate means

for the livelihood of full-time artists. Realizing the economic factor early on, Margaret Trowell had focused on producing art teachers; yet, at the same time, she had to assert the independence of art as a discipline in order to keep the art school from becoming a misfit in Makerere's special relation with the University of London. This duality of the school's struggle continued in the 1960s, when the artists, on the one hand, were ever more conscious about their disciplinary uniqueness, while, on the other hand, they were eager to be a part of the higher education system that would ensure their status as intellectuals, as opposed to craftspeople. In other words, it was a twofold task of survival. Thus it was necessary for the school to maintain a public profile through individual as well as group efforts. Artists regularly contributed visual images and essays to *Transition*, and two issues of a journal called *Roho* ("heart" in Kiswahili) were published from the school in 1961–1962. Despite its short life, the visual and literary contributions from teachers, current and former students, and outsiders made this publication a concrete testimony to the artists' communal efforts. Artists also often collaborated with other disciplines, producing plays with the theater group at the English Department and designing literary journals with writers. *Dhana*, which came out in 1970 with designs by printmaker Tag Ahmed, was such a journal. In this same period, the school also designed the heraldic coat of arms for the nation, which further enhanced its image.

The most forceful attempts by the artists to command public attention, however, were through exhibitions and public commissions of art on campus, in the city, and in distant parts of the country. Apart from the art school's own gallery, which opened in 1969 with funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation, a private establishment, the Nommo Gallery, was the most popular venue for solo and group shows in Kampala.⁶⁴ Furthermore, public art like murals and sculptures – both collaborative and individual projects – drew attention both to the art school's presence within Makerere and to the expertise and vision of the artists as gifted individuals.

All these alliances and oppositions through the 1960s demonstrate that the question of cultural identity was much more complicated than the simple choice of either a purely universalist or a particularist position. As always, such negotiations were never resolved on collective levels, and the surviving texts of the discussions and debates enhance our understanding of the cultural politics of that vibrant era. While the exchanges on the art front were not as politicized as those in the literary milieu, due to the relatively marginal status of art within Makerere's educational structure, the debates among artists nonetheless remain crucial, for, despite what we might identify as their flaws and limitations, all the positions illuminate the problems of discussing art and identity against the complicated background of a modernist approach to art training in the postcolonial scenario.

Following its fourth and final transition, Makerere became an autonomous university in 1970. This was a radically new decade in Uganda's history, one of violence and instability that would challenge the expectations and optimism of the previous era. All the European instructors would leave, and a new generation of artists would emerge with different values, identities, and creative strategies.⁶⁵ But to survive the crisis, this progeny would build on the legacy of the heady days of the 1960s in multiple ways. Makerere's art school today remains a living testimony to that struggle.

Notes

- 1 Middeldorf (1950).
- 2 Trowell (1957, 123–124).
- 3 For references to Margaret Trowell's teaching, see Sanyal (2002, 2004, 2006).
- 4 Kiure Francis Msangi, personal interview, Nairobi, April 8, 1998.
- 5 Pilkington Ssengendo, personal interview, Kampala, August 19, 1997.
- 6 Jonathan Kingdon, personal interview, Duke University, North Carolina, March 12, 1999.
- 7 Trowell (n.d., 13).
- 8 Laclau (1992, 86).
- 9 Murray (1929, 5).
- 10 Murray (1929, 320–325).
- 11 Murray (1929, 323).
- 12 Murray (1929, 326–327).
- 13 Advisory Committee of Native Education in British Tropical Africa (1925).
- 14 Latham (1934, 427).
- 15 Latham (1934, 424), quoting Donald Cameron's speech.
- 16 For more on this discussion, see Sanyal (2006, 51–52).
- 17 This proposal came up at the writers' conference at Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone, in April 1963. See Moore and Stuart (1963).
- 18 Education Commission, Uganda (1963, item 6, 2; item 85, 29).
- 19 Rubadiri (1965).
- 20 Ezekiel Mphahlele has since changed his first name to the African version "Es'kia." To avoid confusion I use "Ezekiel," the form used in literary references used in this text.
- 21 Mphahlele (1974, 48).
- 22 With the increasing uncertainty and threat of the Amin years in Uganda, publication of *Transition* moved to Ghana in 1975. Only two issues were produced in the following year, the first under the name *Transition/Chindaba*, and the second *Chindaba*. The journal then moved again in 1991, to the DuBois Institute of Harvard University, where it is still published by Indiana University Press.
- 23 The Congress for Cultural Freedom was allegedly a CIA front organization that underwrote cultural projects. It even funded *Transition*, which raised a controversy in the late 1960s; see Neogy (1967).
- 24 Mphahlele (1962, 16).
- 25 "Death of Christopher Okigbo" (1967).
- 26 [Mphahlele in] *East African Standard*, January 29, 1965.
- 27 Mphahlele (1962, 17).
- 28 Wali (1963).
- 29 For more on the responses to Obiajunwa Wali's article, see Sanyal (2006, 53).
- 30 See Mazrui (1972).
- 31 Trowell (1957, 108–109); Macpherson (1964, 49, 57).
- 32 Jonathan Kingdon, interview, Duke University, North Carolina, March 12, 1999.
- 33 "Makerere Revisited" (1965). In keeping with the general trend of the conversation at that meeting, his observation implied the possibility of a problem with the art education, as with education in other disciplines.
- 34 Noor (1966).
- 35 Adams (1962, 35).
- 36 In Kakooza (1970, 55–56).
- 37 "Critics and Creators" (1963).

- 38 Sicherman (1995, 30).
- 39 While it is true that certain modernist groups, such as the surrealists, were aggressive opponents of colonial domination, such protests were never effective enough to affect either the course of colonialism or the Eurocentric underpinnings of modernism. What is more, it can be argued that the primitivist impulses of the surrealists themselves (Man Ray's photos of white women juxtaposed with African masks, for instance) served largely to undermine their political radicalism.
- 40 See Yau (1990).
- 41 See Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson (1995); Hassan and Dadi (2001).
- 42 Njau (1963, 15).
- 43 Welbourn (1963, 92).
- 44 Njau (1963, 16).
- 45 Njau (1963, 17).
- 46 Kariara (1965, 147–148).
- 47 Interestingly, despite protests from some members in the audience in Ghana that Njau was not being academic, many liked his presentation and wanted him to go on (Welbourn 1963, 92). This perhaps suggests that many of those who subscribed to the notion of African Personality in that period were unsure whether the idea could at all be expressed in objective terms.
- 48 Kiure Francis Msangi, interview, Nairobi, April 8, 1998; Francis Musango, interview, Kampala, March 26, 1998; Norbert Kaggwa, interview, Kampala, November 17, 1997; Mazinga Kalyankolo, interview, Kampala, March 12, 1998.
- 49 Elimo Njau, personal interview, Nairobi, April 10, 1998.
- 50 See Sanyal (2006, 56–59).
- 51 Elimo Njau, personal interview, Nairobi, April 10, 1998.
- 52 Elimo Njau, personal interview, Nairobi, April 10, 1998.
- 53 Trowell (1957, 125).
- 54 *Manchester Guardian* (n.d.).
- 55 *Uganda Herald* (1946).
- 56 See East African Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs (1966).
- 57 Kingdon (1967, 45–47).
- 58 (1964).
- 59 Musango, interview, Kampala, March 26, 1998.
- 60 In Kakooza (1970, 214).
- 61 Maloba (1962, 34).
- 62 For an elaborate discussion of this sculpture, see Sanyal (2003). Also see Sanyal (2000, chapter 3).
- 63 Sicherman (2005, 183).
- 64 For a report on the second show at the Nommo Gallery, see Kwanai (1965). For an early report on the school's gallery, see Daler (1970, 50–52).
- 65 See Kasfir, chapter 26 this volume.

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The École des Arts and Exhibitionary Platforms in Postindependence Senegal

Joanna Grabski

Modern Senegalese art took shape as a category of visual production in the years following Senegal's independence from France in 1960. The visual production of Senegal's pioneer modern artists encompasses colorful, semiabstract depictions of recognizably African subjects rendered in oil paint, gouache, China ink, and tapestry. Referred to as the École de Dakar, the work of these artists is often associated with the patronage of the postindependence government and the Négritude philosophy of the nation's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor. An important body of scholarship has addressed the relationship between state patronage and modern art in Senegal's postindependence years.¹

This chapter expands the dominant narrative advanced in previous scholarship by focusing on two sets of individuals and institutions as integral to the production of modern art in Senegal. The first includes instructors and students at Senegal's national art school, the École des Arts du Sénégal. The second involves the international exhibition of these artworks within the mediating frame of Négritude and national art. By focusing on the art school as an arena for visual production and state sponsored exhibitions as the discursive frame for consolidating the so called École de Dakar, this essay explores the dynamic interplay of individuals and institutions responsible for producing and mediating artistic expression in these early years of modern Senegalese art. My essay makes use of interviews with pioneer modern artists as well as archival documents to examine how artists and other cultural mediators made modern Senegalese art, thus teasing out the complex range of engagements with modernist art practice and Négritude ideology.

Making Modern Art at the École des Arts du Sénégal

Central to the development of modern art in Senegal was the vision and patronage of Léopold Sédar Senghor, the nation's first president from 1960 to 1980. Senghor was a poet and philosopher whose writings about Négritude provided an ideological

platform for Senegal's cultural and economic development in the postindependence years.² Developed by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Gontran Damas, Négritude is understood primarily as a literary and ideological movement given shape by African and diasporic intellectuals residing in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s. It valorized the contribution of Pan-African cultural heritage and creativity to what Senghor termed the "universal civilization."³ While Négritude has been critiqued as an essentialist and primitivist discourse on racial identity, it offered powerful political prospects in the context of Senegal's independence from France in 1960. In the independence era, Négritude acted as an instrument of liberation and provided "the social capital upon which the idea of the nation was based."⁴ Given that artistic and cultural projects were positioned as fundamental to the new nation's identity and future, Senghor's administration devoted 25 percent of the state's annual budget to the arts. In the first years of his presidency, Senghor established a number of cultural institutions including the Théâtre National, Manufacture Nationale de Tapisseries, Musée Dynamique, and École des Arts du Sénégal. His administration also supported the professionalization of art school-trained artists by purchasing their work, providing travel scholarships, and creating exhibition opportunities.

Intending to establish an art school that would accommodate "the situation as an independent country," Senghor founded the École des Arts du Sénégal in 1960.⁵ Prior to independence, Dakar had no formal institution dedicated to artistic education except the Maison des Arts, a modestly sized, private center catering primarily to a population of French expatriates. The École des Arts du Sénégal consisted of two visual art departments: the Section Arts Plastiques, directed by Senegalese artist Iba Ndiaye, and the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres, which was co-headed by Papa Ibra Tall, a Senegalese artist, and Pierre Lods, a French expatriate and the founder of the Poto-Poto School of Painting in Brazzaville, Congo.

The school's divisions reflected the distinct pedagogical approach, dominant mode of artistic practice, and objectives of each department. The Section Arts Plastiques led by Iba Ndiaye, who studied art and architecture in France, offered a curriculum based on French art education. Students in this department studied drawing, anatomy, color application, laws of perspective, and art history. Former students, such as Pape Mballo Kebe, recall that Ndiaye's department was considered the "classical" or "academic" section because it "functioned in the same manner as an art school anywhere else in the world."⁶ Although Ndiaye is considered a central figure of the École de Dakar and one of the most prominent modern artists of twentieth-century Africa, he is better known for his work as a professional artist rather than as an educator. In fact, both his tenure at the school and professional activity in Dakar were relatively brief. He left the school in 1966, returning to Paris the following year, where he lived until his death in 2008. The place he holds in discussions of modern African art is attributable largely to his proficiency in engaging the formal elements of modernism to interpret subjects inspired by Africa and the African Diaspora. With its expressionistic brushstrokes, intense colors, and themes relating to Islam in Senegal, his oil on canvas painting, *Tabaski – La ronde à qui le tour?* (1970) demonstrates his skillful use of modernist formal language to render a subject relating to religious practice in Senegal.

In contrast to the Section Arts Plastiques, students in the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres were not offered formal or classical academic training. Artists who studied in this department (including Ibou Diouf, Modou Niang, Ousmane Faye, and Amadou Ba) emphasized that this space was designated for "artistic research" and

creative exploration rather than the deliberate acquisition of skills associated with European academic practice. Variously described as the “free” or “independent” section, this department’s objective was to provide a setting for research and development of a distinctive new artform – modern Senegalese art. In distinction to the Section Arts Plastiques where fewer artists trained, dozens of artists trained at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres from 1960 to 1980. Many of them enrolled formally while others frequented the space without formal inscription.

As the heads of the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres, Papa Ibra Tall and Pierre Lods shared a common vision about the training of artists as well as what would constitute modern Senegalese art. Both viewed modern art as translating the formal and aesthetic qualities of classical African art, yet their perspectives were informed by distinctive experiences.⁷ The convictions held by Papa Ibra Tall were shaped mainly by the years he spent studying in Paris where he was involved in Négritude discussions. According to art historian Elizabeth Harney, Tall’s

artistic career began as early as 1947, when he worked informally in oil paints under the tutelage of several French amateur artists residing in Dakar. However, it was architecture that he went to study in Paris in 1955 at the École Spéciale d’Architecture. In 1959, Senghor saw some of Tall’s drawings on exhibit in Paris and encouraged him to pursue fine arts instead. Senghor helped the young Tall obtain a grant to attend the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris and pursue further instruction in Sèvres, where he studied painting, serigraphy, tapestry, mosaics, and pedagogy.⁸

In Paris, Tall was inspired further by reading the works of Négritude writers and participated in the 1959 Deuxième Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs à Rome (Second Black Writers and Artists Congress in Rome) where papers dealing with the Négritude movement were presented.

In keeping with his belief that the modern African artist was “to translate African philosophy, sensibilities and values into his art,” Tall’s energetic work celebrates Pan-African themes and represents the visual interpretation of Senghor’s writings on Négritude.⁹ As both a practicing artist and art professor, Tall became the figurehead for the École de Dakar and his work was hailed as the hallmark of postindependence visual arts in Senegal. In contrast to the other artists working at the school, Tall’s engagement with the textual, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of Négritude was quite exceptional, for he both read Négritude literature and sought to interpret its tenets in his paintings and tapestries. Tall’s works are characterized by epic themes relating to Pan-African culture and formal qualities elaborated in Senghor’s writings on Négritude. *Woi Benneel (First Song)* (1963), and *La semeuse d’étoiles (Sower of Stars)* (1960s), are exemplary of Tall’s early work.¹⁰ For instance, *Woi Benneel* evokes the genesis of African civilization whereby a curvaceous, larger than life female figure appears to emerge from the earth in swirling currents of power. Tall’s skilled draftsmanship is evidenced by the meticulously detailed patterns animating the composition. *La semeuse d’étoiles* depicts an energetic and fluid female figure scattering stars that fall around her. The figure’s costume is richly patterned, making use of Pan-African imagery such as cowrie shells, seen on her upper right arm.

With the well-delineated formal features of his complex compositions, Tall’s drawings and paintings were ideal for adaptation to the colorful tapestries produced at the Manufacture Nationale de Tapisseries in Thiès, Senegal. Tall left the art school in

1965 to become director of this new tapestry workshop that was modeled upon a similar tapestry-making institution in Aubusson, France. Much like the hybrid fusion of European modernist and Pan-African elements discernible in works produced at the École des Arts, the tapestries depicted identifiably Pan-African themes rendered with materials and techniques imported from France. For Senghor, modern Senegalese art thus represented the “symbiosis” of traditional and modernist orientations by combining “imported technical knowledge and traditional culture felt from within.”¹¹ The majority of these works were purchased by the Senegalese government, which later offered them as state gifts or displayed them as hallmarks of national identity in its many ministries and embassies abroad. The fact that a great number of Tall’s designs were produced as tapestries during the institution’s early years contributed to positioning him and his work as emblematic of the École de Dakar. Indeed, as Kojo Fosu notes, what is called the École de Dakar is primarily the work of Tall.¹²

Although several art writers describe Tall’s work as representative of this period, his work was, in fact, exceptional in its elaborate style and technical skill as well as its overt commitment to visualizing themes and qualities associated with Négritude’s tenets. Indeed, while scholars often attribute Senghor’s writings and rhetoric on Négritude as the inspiration for artistic production of this period, the degree to which the artists identified with Négritude philosophy varied greatly, as did their claims to this source as a subject for their artwork. A few artists characterize the relationship between Négritude philosophy and the visual production of the École de Dakar as a general and somewhat imprecise “spirit of the times,”¹³ even when their work appears formally and conceptually resonant with Négritude philosophy, as in Ibou Diouf’s 1974 tapestry, *Les trois épouses (The Three Wives)*. This work depicts three female figures wearing detailed robes composed of vividly colored, compartmentalized designs that serve to create a sense of balance, harmony, and dynamism.¹⁴ Diouf’s tapestry makes reference to several Pan-African motifs including masks, pipes, and (ancient Egyptian) headwear.

Whereas Papa Ibra Tall read and interpreted Négritude literature, and Ibou Diouf summarized the relationship between visual production and Négritude in generalized terms, for the most part artists of this generation oppose the assertion that they were influenced by Senghor’s writings or that the ideological tenets of Négritude philosophy drove their work. Rather, they attributed their artistic proclivities and production to their training, especially the pedagogy at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres, where art making was considered “liberated” from the paradigm of classical European art education. For instance, artist Katta Diallo emphasized, “in the beginning, Senegalese artists were an independent group, we never met Senghor . . . we did not read Senghor . . . no, the artists were in Lods’ atelier working independently and just being artists.”¹⁵ For many artists, the link between Négritude philosophy and artistic production was articulated by Senghor and other art writers in the narrative framework for their exhibitions, the most impressive of which was the 1966 Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (First World Festival of Black Arts) discussed below.

Scholarship dealing with the École des Arts has emphasized the role and influence of Senegalese artists Tall and Ndiaye as instructors, eliding the fact that both held relatively brief tenures at the school. When Ndiaye and Tall left their positions at the school in the mid-1960s, Lods continued working with artists at both the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres and his home atelier until his death in 1988. Many artists thus consider Lods as the school’s main pedagogical presence for more than two

decades. Compared to Ndiaye and Tall, who had few students and were remembered mainly as figureheads, Lods is remembered affectionately by many artists as “*mon professeur*,” whose greatest contribution was his steadfast encouragement and belief in their individual expression and creative ability.

Lods arrived in Dakar in 1961 at the invitation of President Senghor. They met at the Deuxième Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs in Rome in 1959, where Senghor spoke with Lods about the Poto-Poto School of Painting in Brazzaville, Congo.¹⁶ It is unsurprising that Lods’ work in Brazzaville was of interest to Senghor; their convictions about the creativity of African artists and the value of African expressive projects overlapped significantly. In his presentation at the Rome conference, Lods explained how he established the Poto-Poto School in 1951 after stumbling upon his cook, Ossali, using his paints and brushes. As Lods recalled, Ossali painted “with all the superb purity and simplicity of line found in African art.”¹⁷ Lods’ apparent “discovery” of Ossali’s innate and unbridled creativity inspired him to dedicate his work to “saving the essential spirit of this art and helping it adapt to modern African life.”¹⁸ According to Ibou Diouf, who studied with Lods in Dakar, Lods’ intention involved a desire to “preserve something . . . he never denatured the spirit of the artist . . . he wanted to preserve the essence of the African.”¹⁹ For Lods, modern African art was to “transpose in paint the character of great traditional masks.”²⁰ He believed that artists should look to their artistic heritage and cultural knowledge for inspiration and subject matter.²¹

In Dakar, Lods adapted the philosophical and pedagogical approach that characterized his work in Brazzaville to his new position at the École des Arts. Lods’ former students describe his pedagogical approach as nonacademic and laissez-faire. Amadou Seck, an artist trained in this department, explained, “we were given the materials, the supplies and left entirely free to express ourselves.”²² Because Lods believed that the artists’ inherent creative capacity would sufficiently drive their production, the artists received little formal academic instruction or technical guidance.²³ Rather, they were provided with paper, canvas, brushes, and paint and left to create freely, intuitively, and spontaneously.

Artistic practice in the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres was premised on the notion that being an artist involved what many artists called a “state of being” rather than a mastery of materials or techniques. That is, artists were born rather than made at art school. The art school provided the dedicated setting for artists to explore their creativity. For the artists working in Lods’ department, making art was more a question of feeling intuitively and expressing an internal vision than depicting the contemporary world or elucidating an intellectual discourse. The pretext for production was to “bring out what they have inside” – a sort of internal vision – for it was this that would direct their productions.²⁴ Artist Modou Niang explained, “I am driven by instinct. I paint spontaneously in front of the paper. I cannot describe to you what I am going to do. I paint and the work practically draws itself.”²⁵ Expression was spontaneous under the right circumstances of inspiration and neither intellectual premeditation nor formal sketches were expected.²⁶

As indicated by the artists’ recollections about their working process, art making at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres engaged with a cluster of modernist notions about creativity, spontaneity, freedom of expression, and artistic intuition.²⁷ Indeed, the context facilitated by Lods aligns with modernist valuations about artistic expression and primitivist assumptions about African artists. Despite a lack of specific

details about Lods' own artistic training and exhibition history in France that might orient his pedagogical disposition, other moments in his biography do reveal his positioning of Africa as a terrain for individual discovery, freedom, and creativity. Lods journeyed to Africa not as a teaching *coopérant* or diplomat, but as an artist-explorer accompanying Noel Ballif's ethnographic and film expedition to the remote Sangha region of northern Congo in 1946. Rather than return to Paris with the expedition, Lods choose to remain in Brazzaville, where he taught math and made art while living as the only French expatriate in the Poto-Poto neighborhood.²⁸ His choice reflects his personal desire to live outside the expectations of contemporary, metropolitan social life in France. That it was possible for him to do so is indicative of the power differential girding relationships between France and the colonies. Given his contacts among ethnographers, filmmakers, writers, and artists in Paris, he was likely well versed in contemporary conversations about modernism and African art.²⁹ His contacts among Paris' artistic community included Jean Lods, his uncle, who was a well-known filmmaker; Max-Pol Fouchet, an influential critic and writer, and the Galerie Palmes in Paris where the exhibition *Ecole de peinture de Poto-Poto* was mounted in 1953.³⁰ The ideas Lods embraced and cultivated were not unique to the art schools in Brazzaville and Dakar. As several scholars have discussed, practices in art schools founded by other expatriates such as Romain-Defossés, McEwen, Beier, and Trowell were necessarily enmeshed in modernist dispositions toward African art and colonialist attitudes toward Africa.³¹

And yet, the scope and complexity of engagements between artistic projects in Africa and modernist frameworks are remarkable. In the case of Senegal, artists produced expressive works that were simultaneously modern and African, expressive works that nod to both modernist dispositions and the ideological landscape of Négritude projects. In doing so, artists created what Bakhtin terms a “genre” or a particular mode of conceptualization and representation.³² The artists’ engagement with modernist artistic practices is further complicated by their insistence on the avoidance of “Western” influences in the making of a distinctively modern African artform. A common theme emerging in interviews with many artists working in the immediate postindependence period was the strategic rejection of European influences in the formulation of modern Senegalese art, a form that was conceptualized as emphatically and visibly African just as it was “independent” from European paradigms. The obvious irony is that artists created an original and “independent” form of expression using the instruments, vocabularies, and strategies associated with European modernism. Given this, the artforms constituting this genre and the terms in which they were situated might be construed as discrepant or derivative.³³ However, to dismiss them as such would overlook not just the relevance of this work to the political landscape, it would also deny the great agency artists exercised in creating a new genre of modern Senegalese art that simultaneously capitalized on modernist notions and disavowed them. Conceptualized as “original and authentic” as well as “independent and free,” modern Senegalese art encompassed “purely African subjects” inspired by “the most original African forms.”³⁴ The artists aspired to create an original form of artistic expression that asserted independence from the conventions and associations of academic European painting and thus emblematically of France.

The space in which these works were conceptualized and produced – the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres – was disassociated with European art academism which was considered an “external influence” that could block the artists’ internal vision and

a constraint which could hinder the artists' creativity. To preserve the "purity" of their expression, students were not exposed to the work of other contemporary artists. Even the walls of their classroom are remembered as completely devoid of images. Lods never showed students his own work or the works of his former students at the Poto-Poto School. Despite the premise that artists not be influenced by non-African artworks, they were undoubtedly exposed to a variety of contemporary artforms by way of book illustrations, travelling exhibitions, and the contemporary visual landscape of Dakar. That artists were indeed familiar with other visual landscapes and artistic currents is exemplified by artist Cherif Thiam's comments. When asked about his familiarity with other artists and movements, he explained that he frequently visited the libraries of Dakar's international cultural centers to browse art books.³⁵ Several artists also mentioned that they knew of other African artists working contemporaneously, such as the Nigerian painter Twins Seven-Seven and Ivorian sculptor Christian Lattier, who had been awarded the Grand Prize at the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in 1966. Many Senegalese artists recall meeting their international colleagues, including a group of Congolese artists from the Poto-Poto School of Painting, at this Pan-African festival.

Artistic output of the postindependence period was tied to the conventions of art making practiced at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres. Art making in this department was inscribed by a particular vision of creativity and the assumption that an essential African quality would direct the artists' works. Some artists, such as Boubacar Coulibaly, depicted mask-like forms from West Africa while other artists such as Amadou Seck, Phillippe Sène, and Cherif Thiam drew upon subjects related to Senegalese culture and folklore. For instance, Seck often depicted wrestlers, a subject intimately linked to Senegalese culture; Thiam frequently painted the baobab, a tree of legendary significance in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa; and Sène portrayed images of pangolins, shape-changing animals of mythological importance.³⁶ In the case of references to art objects from other parts of West Africa, it is likely that artists gained familiarity with specific artforms by visiting the collections housed in the museum of the Institut Fondamental Afrique Noire in Dakar where they saw sculptures and masks amassed from francophone African colonies. Artists were encouraged "to visit the museum and look at the objects to be impregnated with inspiration."³⁷

Not only did the artists position themselves as "independent" from European subject matter, they considered themselves the inheritors of Senegalese and Pan-African expressive traditions. In their paint and canvas works, the artists reinterpreted the formal qualities associated with "the great African sculptures and masks on display in museums around the world."³⁸ In this respect, modern Senegalese art was proposed not only as an outgrowth of the artist's internal vision; it also represented the natural progression of African artistic practice, beginning with sculptures and masks and culminating with modern painting. African art was a resource for the artists and they made use of this resource inventively. At times, they incorporated forms referring to specific masks or sculptures, at other times, they invented a visual language alluding to elements deriving from a wide range of African artforms and motifs.

In *Rencontre des masques* (1976), Boubacar Coulibaly portrays a large mask in profile amid smaller mask-like forms and a range of other decorative motifs.³⁹ The large mask, featured prominently in the center of his composition, is further embellished with stylized motifs, some of which represent cowrie shells. By combining vivid colors, mostly tones of blue, red, and yellow, with detailed patterns, the artist creates a highly

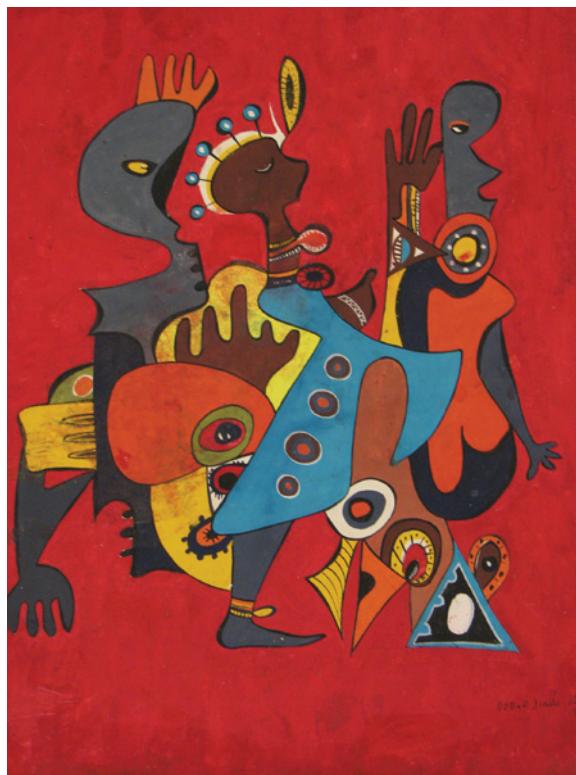


FIGURE 14.1 Katta Diallo. *La jeune mariée* (*The Young Bride*), 1977. Acrylic on canvas, 65 × 50 cm. Collection Chaitou. Photograph by Joanna Grabski.

textured, animated canvas. The composition reveals a certain *horror vacui*, for virtually every inch of the canvas is taken up with decorative geometric shapes. Little distinction is made between foreground and background, rather the individual shapes seem to interlock and flatten on the surface plane. In many works of this period, the African subject matter is positioned centrally among various decorative motifs, investing it with an almost iconic presence. Likewise, Seck's treatment of a specifically Senegalese theme, *Le lutteur* (*The Wrestler*) (1973), features a solitary figure of immense physical presence occupying the compositional space.⁴⁰ The wrestler's powerful, muscular physique is suggested by angular forms and his aggressive stance. His face is mask-like while his body is enlivened by decorative lines and concentric circles. In discussing the images, artists often associate the visual qualities of their works with those of classical African art. For instance, Amadou Seck proposed that his paint and sand renderings of Senegalese wrestlers convey the “same allegory and irony as African sculpture.”⁴¹

The tendency toward figurative abstraction that predominates in the work of the École de Dakar can be interpreted in relationship to the pedagogical conventions and objectives of the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres. Regardless of medium, many works by this generation of artists exemplify a dedicated concern for representing abstract or stylized forms and decorative, ornamental patterning (Figure 14.1). In keeping with the conceptualization of modern Senegalese art as free, independent,



FIGURE 14.2 Diatta Seck. *M'bootay (Women Carrying Children)*, 1971. Collage and mixed media, 122 × 244 cm. Collection Chaitou. Photograph by Joanna Grabski.

and expressive, formal qualities and techniques associated with naturalistic and realistic representation were almost entirely absent from the artists' works.⁴² Little attention is paid to depicting conventional linear perspective, depth, volume, or anatomical accuracy. An example is offered by Diatta Seck's *M'Bootaaay (Women Carrying Children)* (1971) (Figure 14.2). Here, the artist refers to a familiar subject from daily life in Senegal – women transporting children on their backs. Rather than depicting the figures realistically, the artist portrays their faces as mask-like and their bodies with generalized patterns. Using earth-tone paints combined with sand, the faces and limbs are rendered without dimension or volume. The artist endows the composition with a sense of movement by combining profile and frontal faces. He sidesteps anatomical accuracy to focus on the forms' decorative effects.

As the previous examples show, a diversity of formal expression exists within the genre of modern Senegalese art. Formally, the painting and tapestry of this period is unified by its subject matter and abstract, decorative tendency, yet it is significant that a variety of individualized expressions or styles exist within the genre of modern Senegalese art. In fact, the variety of formal expression not only points to the aesthetic choices of the individual artists, it also reveals the premium placed on authoring a highly individualized corpus of themes, an oeuvre. Artist Katta Diallo suggested, "Being a good artist is not a question of being a good draftsperson. Being a good artist is a matter of having your own ideas, ideas that make Ibou different from Cherif, and Cherif different from Katta" (see Figure 14.1).⁴³ According to several artists, their "training" in Lods' department involved a conscious effort to cultivate a distinctive oeuvre or a recognizable body of work in a personal style.

Although Lods did not offer the formal instruction associated with a classical art education, he did encourage artists to develop an oeuvre by authoring a specialized pictorial vocabulary and a well-affirmed artistic personality. He was known to employ a subtle pedagogy in which students identified and expanded upon a specific visual element in their work in order to develop their oeuvre. As Diatta Seck recalled, "Lods used to have me identify one formal element in a painting, a detail, pull it out and use

it as the foundation in my next canvas.”⁴⁴ According to the artists, each of them mastered a cohesive body of works consisting of the subjects and the style that he had authored. The oeuvre was to be diverse yet unified and recognizable, but not repetitious or mass produced. Above all, every artist’s oeuvre was to be original. The premium on originality is related to the notion that artists were authoring specialized themes drawn from their unique internal vision. Thus, authorship and ownership of subjects and styles are conceptualized together. As the expression of an internal vision, art was something the artists carried with them, something that they discovered spontaneously and that belonged to them alone as individuals. Artists insist that each individual is known for a certain pictorial vocabulary and artistic personality. Cherif Thiam explained,

Everyone has his own artistic personality. You see a Cherif and you say this is Cherif’s work, he is the one who paints *baobabs*. When you see a Modou Niang, you see that he is the one who makes birds; he is a specialist in that. You see a pangolin and it is Phillippe Sène.⁴⁵

In many respects, being an artist meant originating a style based on a highly personal vision. Like the genre of modern Senegalese art, the persona of the modern artist was significantly informed by artistic practice at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres and its connection to modernist ideologies. The modern Senegalese artist was a free, expressive individual who needed neither academic training nor familiarity with other artistic currents to practice his trade. Even though artists were developing their oeuvre with the deliberate process of isolating and selecting motifs, they also participated in and expounded ideas about their own spontaneous creativity as a natural state of being and inherent capacity for being a modern artist. It was assumed that the artists had a particular vision to express and would transfer it to paint and canvas. The personas constructed by these artists also reveal an emphasis on modernist notions of individuality, originality, authenticity, and inner vision that were forged in the experience of the national art school. While it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of these assumptions or attribute a specific route in their transmission to Dakar (whether they took shape because of Lods, Tall, Ndiaye, or Senghor), it is certain that artists’ experiences in the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres engaged with and produced an artistic genre that was both modern and African.

New Art and Artists for a New Nation

The genre of modern art produced at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres answered Senghor’s call for a national art to represent the newly independent nation. Thematically and stylistically, the artworks of this period rendered visual the tenets of Négritude, Senegal’s national narrative and the charter of the nation’s soul. Considering art as a tool to bring about change and artists as instruments in the nation’s advancement, Senghor put both to use in cultural, political, and economic development plans. In a 1966 address, Senghor stated,

Negro art sustains us in our effort toward economic and social development, in our determination to live . . . the Senegalese artists of today, help us to live . . . a better, more abundant life . . . to live better in order to resolve the concrete problems that have a bearing on our future.⁴⁶

Based on this ideology, art and artists were assigned well-defined roles in the nation's development. A 1967 journal article celebrating modern Senegalese art declared, "art for art's sake is an unknown notion here . . . Art has a mission."⁴⁷ Regarding art's mission in this period, artist Alpha Wallid Diallo elaborated, "as head of a black nation, Senghor wanted to show to the Western world that we also had our own cultural philosophy and our own painting based on our own culture."⁴⁸

According to Senghor, national art should incorporate the same qualities that were foundational to Senegal's development. National art stood for, as he stated, "the Negro African conception of modern social life" and emblematised collective African creativity.⁴⁹ The themes of cultural hybridity and symbiosis so emphasized by Senghor in his writings were epitomized by modern Senegalese art. More profoundly, national art represented both literally and figuratively the promise and possibility of the young nation's development. Like his vision for the young nation, national art was built on a great heritage and changed with the times, taking in the best of what the world had to offer. Senghor anticipated that the same paradigm – progress built on a traditional foundation – would usher his nation into the first decade of its independence.

Positioned as ambassadors and *griots* (bards) singing of their nation's culture, the artists' professional activities were well supported by the Senegalese government. Senghor pronounced,

the natural corollary of freedom of creation in so far as the development of the arts is concerned is undoubtedly the aid and support which the State would like or is in a position to give to creative work in the intellectual and artistic spheres. In a country where there are virtually none of the wealthy patrons to be found in the Western countries, only the governmental authorities can provide the necessary moral and financial support.⁵⁰

In addition to establishing the Théâtre National, Manufacture Nationale de Tapisseries, Musée Dynamique, and the École des Arts du Sénégal, Senghor's administration created a variety of civil servant positions for artists, provided sizable travel scholarships and studios, and regularly collected the artists' work for the state collection. The state's wide-reaching role in supporting the arts is well exemplified by the Manufacture Nationale de Tapisseries. Several artists, including Ibou Diouf, Ousmane Faye, and Modou Niang, benefited from employment as *cartooniers* at this tapestry-producing institution.

Senghor made being an artist a sustainable career by creating an extensive infrastructure to support the arts. Because the professional category of modern painter and artist was hitherto unknown in Dakar, this action was especially significant for the young artists and their families. Referring to the new role of the artist, Ibou Diouf explained,

When one is in an artistic milieu in an African country and you are a painter, first off, your family does not understand. The people you want to understand do not understand. It was not normal in a family. It was something else all together. After all, what was a painter?⁵¹

The local public's misunderstanding of what constituted an art school-trained painter was mirrored by a general lack of understanding of the notion of fine arts and modern art in general. The gap in local understanding of this form of artistic practice

was further widened by the fact that the artists played their role on a largely international stage. Although they were implicated in the national development project, their works were destined for an international public who were considered “capable of understanding and valorizing them.”⁵² In this respect, the notions of modern art and the modern artist were fashioned with a certain elitism. Similarly, the infrastructure created by Senghor not only legitimized the profession of artist, it also created an elite and pampered group of government employees whose profession was tied, somewhat inextricably, to the state.

Modern Art in the Narrative Frame of Négritude

Modern Senegalese art was exhibited to an international audience for the first time at the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres. Organized by Senghor’s administration, the month-long festival was held in Dakar in April 1966. The artists who exhibited at the festival, such as Ibou Diouf, Modou Niang, and Ousmane Faye, remember it as a groundbreaking moment for Senegalese art and artists. The festival provided an important discursive frame for both the artists and their works. It was a site for expounding the national narrative of Négritude, and as such sought to represent the work of African artists and writers in order to illustrate and affirm their contribution to “universal civilization.” The festival featured several platforms of artistic expression including musical and theatrical performances along with exhibitions of traditional and modern art. The largest exhibition displayed 800 traditional African objects “of great value” from across the continent.⁵³ Opening at Dakar’s newly inaugurated Musée Dynamique, the traditional objects were heralded as testaments to Africa’s glorious past and “treasures for humanity.”⁵⁴ In the shadow of this exhibition, modern Senegalese art made its debut in the exhibition *Tendances et confrontations*, which was held in various halls of Dakar’s superior court building (*Palais de justice*). The works comprising the exhibition were submitted by artists from across the continent and selected by a jury from France appointed by Iba Ndiaye, head of the Section Arts Plastiques. Critical appreciation of the exhibition paled in comparison to the exhibition of traditional art.⁵⁵

Within the discursive frame of the festival, Senghor accorded value to modern Senegalese art, along with art from other African nations, as a distinctive and sustained contribution to “universal civilization.” Even the exhibition’s title, by referring to *tendances* or trends, posited modern Senegalese art as an extension of the African creativity witnessed in the other domains of the festival. As the title suggests, the merit of modern art invokes the premise that modern art from Africa retained its traditional roots and fundamental character. According to Senghor, Senegalese painting “has spontaneously given, as task to express itself, in a plastic art form, the dreams in which our people are nourished: the old mythological and legendary foundations that have always interpreted Negro art.”⁵⁶ Like the music, dance, and traditional arts celebrated at the festival, modern African art was interpreted as exemplifying the essential virtues and fundamental characteristics of Négritude. Not only did the subjects of this modern genre refer to the cultural heritage of many African societies, their “visual character” was described as “perfectly expressing the same “elegant nobility” characterizing earlier forms of African art.”⁵⁷ The expressive features so admired in precedent forms of African

art and the characteristics of Négritude literature were further attributed to the paintings and tapestries exhibited at the festival. In the context of the festival, modern art was celebrated as decorative, abstract, emotive, rhythmical, and melodious.

The modern art exhibited at the festival was collectively referred to as the École de Dakar. According to several artists, this term was spoken into existence when the French minister of cultural affairs André Malraux proclaimed, “just as one cannot deny the Renaissance, the masters of the Middle Ages, Cubism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Neoclassicism, one cannot deny the École de Dakar.”⁵⁸ Not only did the label École de Dakar suggest that the artists constituted an art movement similar to other significant art movements. This appellation also valorized their work as a legitimate peer to European and American art movements while underscoring that the qualitative measuring of modern Senegalese art relied heavily on the standards, practices, and vocabularies of Western modernism. To this end, Alpha Wallid Diallo, for instance, suggested that the festival’s organizers seemingly wanted to have great art and artists in Senegal with “the same merit as Picasso, Dali, or Chagall.”⁵⁹

For the artists circumscribed by the term École de Dakar, the notion of a “school” offered a strategy to promote the ideology of Négritude by unifying the visual arts of this period and positioning their group work as the collective expression of Senegal’s national identity. Significantly, among the artists associated with the École de Dakar, not one of them discussed identification with this group on the basis of shared style or ideological point of departure. Rather than asserting that they worked within the conceptual or stylistic framework of a unified movement or *école*, each artist narrated an artistic trajectory by way of practice-oriented issues such as personal inspiration, artistic vision, and the development of an individual style. It is here that the tension between personal and collective, national narratives comes to the fore.⁶⁰ Moreover, even when asked pointedly about the interplay of their individual work with that of the collective École de Dakar, artists emphasized the differences among their styles and specializations while invoking a constellation of modernist notions about creative vision, originality, and the artist’s hand.

Although the artists’ works can be read as supporting Senghor’s project to advance state ideology, artists view their role as one in which they demonstrated tremendous agency. By orienting people to the value of African cultures and visual expression, the artists were central agents in constructing a national narrative of Négritude and thus shaping the independent nation’s identity. Like Senghor himself, who wrote the lyrics for his country’s national hymn, the artists of this period articulated a song of nationhood. They were “ambassadors who exported their own culture like *griots* transmitting a message.”⁶¹ Nowhere was this role more striking than in a series of travelling group exhibitions sponsored and organized by the Senegalese government.

Following the festival, Senghor established a special commission to administer state sponsored group exhibitions of the École de Dakar.⁶² As travelling exhibitions destined for venues in Europe, the United States, and South America, they were an ideal means to promote an image of Senegal as a new nation on an international stage. The first major travelling exhibition of modern Senegalese art was *Art Sénégalaïs d’aujourd’hui* which opened at Paris’ Grand Palais in 1974. Many artists consider it a landmark exhibition that carved a niche for Senegalese art on the world stage and gave it international recognition. Representing the state’s collection of modern art amassed during the preceding decade, the exhibition comprised over 100 paintings,

tapestries, and sculptures.⁶³ After opening in Paris, the exhibition traveled in various forms to several venues in Europe, North America, and South America until the mid-1980s.⁶⁴ Between venues, the exhibition returned to Dakar, where the commission incorporated more recent acquisitions so as to keep the viewing public apprised of the latest developments in Senegalese artistic expression.

As with the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, the exhibition *Art Sénégalaïs d'aujourd'hui* acted as a discursive space for narrating postindependence visual production as premised on the collective spirit and national ideology of Négritude. The exhibition's illustrated catalogue was accompanied by an introductory text in which Assane Seck, former minister of culture, spoke authoritatively about the artists and their work. The exhibited works were posited as the result of an artistic renaissance fostered concomitantly by the country's independence and Senghor's policies supporting the arts. The exhibition text opened with the following quote:

The spiritual forces which animate a people may have to lie dormant in silent catacombs for centuries; then, with millenial vigour, as it were, they suddenly surge forth in the new and different forms of the modern era.⁶⁵

The artists were seen as tapping into the depths of their "collective unconscious" to recast cultural memories using the strategies and media of modernism.⁶⁶

On the international stage, the exhibitions reified the École de Dakar as a coherent school of artists who expressed the collective spirit of the new nation. The École de Dakar came to be equated not just with Pan-African images and folklore rendered in a highly decorative style but also with African modernism. Among the artist's community in Dakar, the École de Dakar came to connote much more than national art propounding a thematic and aesthetic canon. It was likened by some to an official art produced by a national army of government sponsored artists. From the perspective of their younger colleagues, the artist's creative output was limited by two key factors: their economic dependence on the state and their training at the Section de Recherches Plastiques Nègres.⁶⁷ Although these artists are considered pioneers, who laid the foundation for an art scene in Dakar, they are also criticized for having situated modern Senegalese art on the periphery of broader discussions about global art production. Many younger artists contend that the styles, themes, and mode of practice of the École de Dakar artists inscribed modern Senegalese art with an undeniable expectation that their work should be recognizably African or deal with expressly African subject matter – an expectation that they must still contend with today. By announcing itself as original, independent, and distinct from other contemporaneous art movements, the artists marginalized themselves and their expression from other artistic currents and created an obstacle for the following generations to overcome. Today, decades after what is remembered as the belle époque of state support, some of the artists associated with the École de Dakar continue to produce, exhibit, and sell their works, no longer to the Senegalese government, but to an audience of local and international art collectors and occasional buyers. Interestingly, although governmental support has waxed and waned over the years and the discursive framing of Négritude has fallen away, many of the École de Dakar artists produce the same themes and styles as they did decades ago.

Notes

- 1 Diouf (1999); Harney (2004); Kasfir (1999); Kennedy (1992); Snipe (1998); Sylla (1998).
- 2 M'Bengue (1973) and Senghor (1996a, 224).
- 3 Senghor (1963).
- 4 Renan (1990, 19).
- 5 M'Bengue (1973, 33).
- 6 Pape Mballo Kebe, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, October 12, 1998.
- 7 Hossman (1967, 36).
- 8 Harney (2004, 56).
- 9 "Tapisseries" (1970, 63).
- 10 *Wōi Bennel (First Song)* (1963) is illustrated in Grabski (2006, 41) and *La semeuse d'étoiles* is illustrated in Ebong (1991, 204).
- 11 Senghor (1996b, 58).
- 12 Fosu (1993, 132–133).
- 13 Ibou Diouf, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, September 14, 1998.
- 14 This work is illustrated in Grabski (2006, 41).
- 15 Katta Diallo, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, February 19, 1999.
- 16 Lods (1959).
- 17 In Mount (1973, 84).
- 18 Tati-Loutard (1978, 26).
- 19 Ibou Diouf, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, 14 September 1998.
- 20 Hossman (1967, 36).
- 21 Grabski (2001).
- 22 Amadou Seck, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, August 27, 1998.
- 23 Hossman (1967, 38).
- 24 This phrase was invoked often by artists of this generation.
- 25 Modou Niang, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, November 13, 1998.
- 26 Ibou Diouf, Cherif Thiam, Katta Diallo, and Modou Niang, interview by author, tape recording, Dakar, February 19, 1999.
- 27 Krauss (1985); Kuspit (1993).
- 28 Roger Frey, personal correspondence, April 16, 1997.
- 29 Pascal Letellier, e-mail correspondence, March 19, 2006.
- 30 Kofi Antuban also exhibited in this gallery; see Kwami, chapter 11 this volume.
- 31 Kasfir (1999); Mount (1972); Mudimbe (1994). For further discussion of these expatriates see (this volume) Jewsiewicki, chapter 17 on Romain-Defossés; Morton, chapter 12 on McEwen; Probst, chapter 15 on Beier; and Sanyal, chapter 13 and Kasfir, chapter 26 on Trowell.
- 32 Bakhtin (1986). The use of the term genre is especially fitting here because it refers to the manner in which the artists conceptualized this art (as expressive and free) as well as the approach (*laissez-faire*) and the representation of formal properties and subjects associated with African art.
- 33 Mercer (2006).
- 34 Artists frequently used these terms and phrases.
- 35 Thiam, interview with author, Dakar, September 18, 1998.
- 36 For an illustration of Seck's *Le lutteur*, see Kultur Forum der Stadt Bonn and Saarland Museum, Saarbrücken, Moderne Galerie (1976). Wrestling, or *la lutte*, is a popular

sport in Senegal. Its practice dates back several generations. For an illustration of Cherif Thiam's *Gouye Birame Coumba* (1973) (ink on paper), which depicts a baobab tree, see Grabski (2006, 44). For an illustration of Philipe Sène's gouache on paper *Pangol I* (1970s) see Grabski (2006, 45).

- 37 Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, September 14, 1998.
- 38 Amadou Seck, interview with author, Dakar, August 27, 1998.
- 39 This image is illustrated in Harney (2004, 47).
- 40 This work is illustrated in the exhibition catalogue *Kunst aus dem Senegal* (Kultur Forum der Stadt Bonn and Saarland Museum, Saarbrücken, Moderne Galerie 1976).
- 41 Amadou Seck, interview with author, Dakar, August 27, 1998.
- 42 For discussion of an exception to this orientation, see the work of Alpha Wallid Diallo discussed in Grabski (2006).
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- 58 Diallo, Diouf, Seck, and Thiam, interviews with author, Dakar, 19 February 1999.
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- 62 For more on the commission's objectives and accomplishments, see Axt and Sy (1989, 83).
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From Iconoclasm to Heritage

The Osogbo Art Movement and the Dynamics of Modernism in Nigeria

Peter Probst

Introduction

Heritage is not something one would commonly associate with iconoclasm. It is about acknowledging the past and the preservation (and at times the construction) of images depicting it, not the “breaking” of images – the traditional meaning of iconoclasm. And, yet, the notion of heritage is rooted in iconoclasm, including the iconoclasm of modernism. The story of the Osogbo art movement is a case in point.¹

Situated in the southwest of Nigeria, 240 km north of Lagos, Osogbo is both a Yoruba city kingdom of 700,000 people and an important chapter in the history of modern African art. In the 1960s Osogbo witnessed a series of artistic activities ranging from painting and sculpture to music and theatre.² The results attracted international attention and lent Osogbo the reputation as “Nigeria’s left bank,” thus paralleling Osogbo’s artistic status in Nigeria with that of Paris in France. Since then Osogbo art has become a trademark, signifying the richness and vitality of Yoruba art and culture most impressively expressed by the annual festival of Osogbo’s guardian deity, the Yoruba river goddess Osun. Every year in August, tens of thousands of tourists from Nigeria and abroad travel to Osogbo to see and participate in the festival. It is a carnival-like event attended by all levels of society and promoted by the Nigerian state as one of Nigeria’s prime tourist events.

Encounters with the rich and vibrant artistic production of the city are many during these days. Two different groups of works can be distinguished. First, there are the paintings, sculptures, beads, and textiles sold in the local galleries and in small makeshift stands erected along the main way to the Osun grove where the festival culminates and ends. Depictions of Yoruba deities and festival motifs (like the carrying of the sacrifice to the Osun river) prevail. Prices range from twenty to several thousand dollars, excluding shipping. Then there is the second group of works. Nonportable and not for sale, these works stand inside Osun’s forested homestead.

Made of cement and stone, they represent the various deities believed to belong to Osun's domain. Some are small, others huge and imposing. Together they transform the Osun grove into a peculiar, hybrid place. It is at once an artistic sculpture garden, an active ritual site, and a national monument, as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Given the vitality of Yoruba forms of artistic expression, it is hard to imagine that a good deal of what is praised and celebrated today as a genuine and quintessential form of Yoruba heritage is actually rather new and rooted in acts of willful destruction. And yet, that is exactly what happened in Osogbo. As much as iconoclasm destroyed old images, it also triggered the creation of new ones. Images, which were aimed at recapturing the present past in new ways, catapulted Osogbo first into the international art scene and subsequently into the global heritage world. The narrative explaining this trajectory is a story of modernity and modernism, of ignorance and guilt, affection and resentment, heritage and value. It starts in the late 1950s at the dawn of Nigerian independence and ends in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the celebrations associated with the 50th anniversary of Nigerian independence.

To structure the diverse and complex issues characterizing the Osogbo art movement, this chapter is organized into three parts. The first part deals with different forms of colonial iconoclasm. The second part focuses on attempts to replenish the artistic void caused by colonial iconoclasm with the intentional creation of "new images." The third and final part considers the effect of these images in terms of the emergence of a viable heritage industry that has turned the Osun grove and festival into one of Nigeria's biggest tourist attractions. As much as this development has prompted concerns about the commercialization and commodification of Yoruba art and religion, one should be careful, however, not to jump to modernist conclusions and reject Osogbo art as a kind of heritage kitsch. As this chapter argues, heritage is part of the story of African modernism and should not be viewed as evidence of the failure of modernism.³

When Even Statues Die: Revitalizing African Art

The history of the Osogbo art movement consists of many stories. One of them begins in the year 1950 in southwest Nigeria. The economy was flourishing and so were fears that the new wealth might be connected to witchcraft or, to be precise, with witchcraft having gone rampant and out of control. In the Yoruba context witchcraft was considered to be a primarily female art, which could be used in both bad and good ways. Fields for the constructive use of witchcraft were, for example, the realm of healing or the world of trading or the accumulation of wealth. Too much success in such fields, though, was thought to be suspicious, implying the effects of the negative and destructive uses of witchcraft, that is, the killing of people and the consumption of the body. Traditionally, masked male performances called *gelede* aimed to placate women and keep witchcraft under control.⁴ However, with the cocoa boom in the late 1940s and early 1950s these local control mechanisms seemed to have reached their limits. With more and more successful women merchants emerging from the cocoa trade, emotions were running high, and apprehension was great. An anti-witchcraft movement, which had originated in southern Ghana in the 1940s, swept through what is now Benin in 1947, and finally reached western Yoruba towns in the

early 1950s, eventually provided an outlet of the frictions. The leaders of the movement were usually young men who claimed to act on behalf of a powerful special foreign spirit, *atinga*, which, so it was said, was able to detect witchcraft and kill witches.⁵ Those who invited the men to cleanse a city from witchcraft were mostly members of the commercial elite, many of them educated. Once called, the young men started to distribute a special medicine and organized a public dance during which the participants became possessed by the *atinga* spirit and started to identify witches. The accused had to undergo an ordeal and, if found guilty, had to pay a cleansing fee, surrender all objects used for practicing witchcraft, and consume the medicine the leaders had prepared. Having taken the medicine, so it was said, any attempt to use witchcraft by the accused would lead to immediate death. Since witchcraft was thought to be a practice sanctioned by Yoruba deities (*orisha*) all artifacts relating to these deities had to be destroyed as well. The following description of such iconoclasm stems from M. C. Atkinson, a former colonial official, who witnessed the arrival of *atinga* in Ilaro, about 200 km southwest of Osogbo:

Many families were induced to throw out the *orisha* figures which had been kept in the innermost room of their compound for generations. In several towns great piles of carved wooden figures – Sango axes, Ifa divining boards, Ibeji twins – and beaded Gelede masks were to be seen in the streets. In Ilaro . . . the locals attacked them with hatchets, hacked the figures to pieces, and threw the pieces into nearby rivers.⁶

The same year the *atinga* members were destroying religious images in Yorubaland, two young French filmmakers, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, made a film on another form of iconoclasm, this time committed by the French colonial government and its educational practices and institutions.⁷ Entitled *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Even Statues Die*) and shot in the Africa exhibition halls of the Musée de l'Homme at the Trocadero, Paris the film accused colonialism of having stigmatized, banned, and eradicated local African religions on the grounds of being a hindrance to progress and civilization. What was once the very life force of African art and culture thus ended up as in showcases displayed as art. “When men have died they enter history. When statues have died they enter art. This botany of death is what we call culture,” the opening line stated.⁸ Through a rapid montage of zooms, pans, and cuts, the film, actually more a visual essay, argued that colonialism had eradicated the living memory once embodied in ritual objects. Entombed in a museum, the remainders might still be appreciated by art connoisseurs, but this sort of appropriation is just another form of murder; murder by ignorance and disrespect:

We are the Martians of Africa. We arrive from our planet with our ways of seeing, our white magic, our machines. We will cure the black of his illnesses, that is certain; and he will catch ours, that is certain too. Whether he loses or gains from the change, his art will not survive.⁹

As it happened, the film became enmeshed in a series of delays. First there were problems with the production company, then, when the film was finally finished, the French censorship board demanded changes and refused to release it. The first public screening eventually took place 15 years later during the Cannes Film Festival. By then, the context had changed radically. Not only had independence superseded

colonialism but a new art scene had emerged. In fact, in 1964, only a year before the final release of Marker and Resnais' angry documentary about the death of African art, Frank Speed and Ulli Beier produced a film on its resurrection, as it were.¹⁰

Under the title *New Images – Art in Changing African Society*, this film documented the manifold artistic activities taking place in the Nigerian city of Osogbo.¹¹ The title can be seen both as a manifesto and as a response to Marker and Resnais' diagnosis of the death of African art. While the aim of the two French filmmakers was to visualize absence, the activities happening in Osogbo were aimed at filling the void with "new images," images that would express the fluid, open, and still undetermined phase postindependence society was believed to be going through. Surely, the modernist understanding of art as a powerful means to counter the effects of (colonial or capitalist) modernity was a critical feature.¹² And, yet, there was no master plan which guided and framed this artistic enterprise. A moment of contingency clearly prevailed. Perhaps if the Nigerian teacher and composer Duro Ladipo had never met the German university lecturer Ulli Beier, or if Beier had never met the Austrian artist Susanne Wenger, things might have taken a different course.

In 1950, the same year the *atinga* movement swept through southwest Nigeria and Marker and Resnais shot their film in Paris, Beier and Wenger, then just freshly married, left Europe to travel to Nigeria where Beier was about to start teaching English at the University of Ibadan. As Wenger recalled in an interview some four decades later, both lacked any political awareness of what was ahead: "We didn't have the slightest idea about the colonial situation in Nigeria. The only briefing we got was a piece of paper telling us what to bring with us."¹³ Upon arriving in Ibadan, they quickly realized, however, what they had become involved in.¹⁴ The secluded university campus at the margins of the city, the colonial curriculum with its exclusive focus on Western history and culture, as well as the lack of interaction between Nigerians and the British faculty, confronted them with the very reality of the colonial "Martians" that Marker and Resnais had attacked in their film. Beier and Wenger each responded to the experience differently. They went separate ways: Wenger as an artist, *olorisa* (devotee to Yoruba deities), and as wife to a local drummer (whom she soon divorced); Beier as a curator-critic organizing exhibitions and writing about Nigerian art and literature and as husband to Georgina Beier (born Bretts), a British artist who joined forces with him in 1963. In fact, until 1966, when Ulli and Georgina Beier left Nigeria, all three lived together in the same house, a liaison held together not the least by their shared modernist creed that the prime task of art lies in advancing society and commenting on its evils.

A seminal influence in this context was the reception of the primitivist notion of "raw art" (*art brut*) developed by the French artist Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and extended into a general cultural critique in the 1950s.¹⁵ Whereas, in postwar Europe, the notion of "rawness" was taken to be a critique of the moral corruption of the artistic and political establishment, in preindependence Africa, critical expatriates understood *art brut* as a protest against a colonial regime that had raped, suffocated, and oppressed the sources of local creativity and self-esteem. In fact, Dubuffet's call for a "mass hara-kiri" of the learned, his ridicule of "our bespectacled professors," and his focus on authenticity and creativity became something like a blueprint for the wave of alternative art schools and art workshops, founded by Western expatriates, which began to emerge in Africa from the 1940s onwards. Thus in 1946, Pierre Romain Desfossés established L'Académie de l'Art Populaire Congolais in

Elizabethville (now Lubumbashi); in 1951, Pierre Lods started the Poto Poto School in Brazzaville, Congo;¹⁶ in the late 1950s, Frank McEwen began his Central African workshops in what was then still Rhodesia;¹⁷ and, in the early 1960s, as we have seen, Ulli Beier and Susanne Wenger (later joined by Beier's second wife Georgina Beier) started to organize "experimental art schools" in Osogbo. Indeed, the modernist stances differed. The spectrum ranged from McEwen's sentimental call for a "return to origins"¹⁸ to Beier's and Wenger's iconoclastic efforts to combat colonial ideas of authenticity and an uncontaminated cultural purity.¹⁹ What united the divergent viewpoints and drove the agenda was the belief that it was incumbent upon art to leave the walls of the museum, to go out into the public realm, and to become integrated into everyday life. In view of the widespread opinion that African art was on the verge of collapse, the aim was to reunite art and culture in order to effectively counter the alienating effects of both colonialism and capitalism on African society.

Newness and Rupture: The Osogbo Art School

In 1959, the year Wenger and Beier relocated to Osogbo in order to realize their plans, the city was an important trading center with a population ranging around 150,000 people. A considerable number had made a fortune in cocoa farming, trade, and the transport business. Though *atinga*, the anti-witchcraft movement mentioned above, had never reached the city, the cultural climate had turned away from the *orisha* and the tradition of the past. There were a handful of hotels and a cinema showing Western and Indian films as well as few bars where local bands played *juju* and *abalabi*. The patrons' social milieu was mixed, ranging from members of the new, mostly white-collar Christian middle class to farmers and craftsmen. A common feature though was the distinct interest in progress and modernization. Surely, progress meant primarily economic progress. A critical cultural intelligentsia was missing. Modern art, as it was explored and discussed in Ibadan or Lagos, was not on the agenda of the public. And yet the arrival of Beier and Wenger met with local actors pushing for change and development.

First, there was Osogbo's ruler, Samuel Adeleye Adenle I. As an openminded schoolteacher with a keen interest in boosting the city's status vis-à-vis the other Yoruba city kingdoms, Adenle actively supported Wenger and Beier's religious art project just as he backed Beier's more secular initiatives. In Ibadan, Beier had already become involved in running an art and culture club where authors gave readings, musicians performed with their bands and artists exhibited their work. For Osogbo, Beier's idea was to do something similar, but this time directed more towards the local population and not for the critical, mostly Western-influenced audience in Ibadan.

Second, there were the priests and priestesses of Osogbo's state religion, the worship of the river goddess Osun. Having heard of Wenger's interest in Yoruba religion, members of the Osun cult met with the artist and invited her to move to Osogbo to help them fight against declining interest in the Osun grove. Over the years the shrines had fallen into disrepair and the forest, though by tradition protected from farming and hunting, was threatened by the encroachment of farms and the timber industry. Wenger accepted the invitation and promised to help. The first act consisted of restoring the main Osun temple in the Osun grove. Soon after, however, the work turned into a general reshaping of the grove. Together with local artisans, notably Adebisi

Akanji and Gbadamosi Buraimoh, Wenger began erecting walls and sculptures made of stone and cement.

The third agent of change, as it were, was Duro Ladipo, a young teacher, composer, and playwright Beier used to visit in Ladipo's Popular Bar, a small drinking spot Ladipo ran at night in his own compound. Ladipo persuaded Beier to turn his bar into an art club similar to what Beier had done in Ibadan. Beier agreed. In January 1962, the legendary Mbari Mbayo (*When We See It We Shall Be Happy*) club opened up with a performance of Ladipo's play *Oba Moro* and an exhibition of linocuts and batiks by Susanne Wenger, who had also made the wooden cutout screens at the entrance of the club. Six months later, in the summer of 1962, the first "experimental art school" was established. The three-week-long workshop was a success and in the following two years two other schools followed. The atmosphere was that of an open house party. Men and women, children and the elderly popped in, looked around, sat down, began to draw with the material supplied to them, and left again. Those whom Beier and his guests considered to be particularly gifted were given further training in painting techniques, batiks, woodcuts, linocuts, etching, and so on. Over the course of time, a core group of artists emerged, all young, all male with little formal education, and practically all members of Duro Ladipo's theater troupe.

Beier's role in this constellation was primarily that of patron and mediator. Untiringly, he secured grants, hired expatriates and visiting artists as instructors for the summer schools, organized exhibition venues for the artists and their works, and, most importantly, provided models of interpretation for the interested public. A retrospective article from 1965, in which he reported about Osogbo's art experiment provides a telling example:

The potential student of Osogbo was the odd young man who would drift into the art school because he had nothing better to do – or because he hoped that the thing might turn out to be entertaining, or even make profit at the end . . . There was obviously no routine and no convention to break. The students did not suffer from having seen too much art – they had in fact seen nothing at all. Having no concept of what an artist is or what a picture should be they were completely uninhibited. There was no point in confusing the students with weird materials and it could have served no purpose at all to have made them self-conscious at that stage. The aim of the school was to let them put on paper the rich and unusual images with which their minds were literally bubbling over.²⁰

The text was written for an educated and primarily white audience, who sympathized with the primitivist notion of the artists' simplicity and naïveté. The reality, however, differed from Beier's account in that the art making at the school was much less spontaneous than it seemed. Writing about the first summer school, Jacob Afolabi recalled:

I was an attendant at the Popular Bar, the bar of Duro Ladipo. There was nothing for me to do after modern school, so I came to Duro Ladipo and he employed me as a bar attendant. Then in 1962, Denis Williams and Ulli Beier organised an experimental art workshop here in Osogbo and Duro's bar was the venue. Paints and paper were bought. Duro Ladipo encouraged me to join and I did. I had never thought of myself as an artist because I did little or no paintings and drawings at school. But Denis

Williams and Baba Beier would look at my scrawlings and dabblings and say: "this is very nice," and so on. It all puzzled me, of course, and after a while, I lost interest. When Duro Ladipo saw me sitting down instead of being at the workshop, he asked what was the matter. I told him I didn't know what to draw – that I had no subjects! He said I should use my imagination, I should think about what was going on around me, and depict them. He said I should paint what nobody has ever painted before! Well, I said that was easy so I went back and started painting all kinds of weird figures. I let my imagination run wide and wild. And surprisingly, Baba Ulli and Denis Williams were thrilled! This was also a new and wonderful experience for me, and I was greatly energized. That was how the one-week workshop flew past, at the end of which they said there would be an exhibition. All my works were framed and hung for the exhibition. After it, Baba Ulli and Denis Williams felt that something should be done for those of us who had shown some talent, so they asked us to be coming to Ulli's house to practice. I went there regularly to do more paintings, but not on a daily basis. In the following year, Rufus Ogundele came to join me. He had been my junior in the modern school, so when he too came to Osogbo, he naturally sought me out. When Denis Williams organized another one in 1963, Rufus participated in it. But it was the one organized and conducted by Georgina Beier in 1964 that Twins Seven-Seven, Bisi Fabunmi, Muraina Oyelami, and Jimoh Buraimoh participated in.²¹

The focus on the theatre troupe was guided to some extent by economic deliberations. Once trained in art, the members of the group could produce their own props, costumes, and backdrops, thus cutting down their costs. But correlation between the theatre troupe and the art school existed not only on the level of participants but also on the level of content and action. Just as Duro Ladipo's plays drew upon certain features of Yoruba history and religion – in the case of *Oba Koso*, the story of the king of Oyo deified as Sango – the actors, dancers, and musicians who received training from Georgina Beier were told to choose their motifs from the world of tradition. The rationale behind this was the attempt to provide Yoruba society with renewed self-esteem and a positive attitude towards its own past religious practices and beliefs. The Osogbo artists were, therefore, asked to go out and actually study the very subjects they depicted. In other words, after more than half a century of colonialism, for Beier heritage was not thought of as something given, but rather as something that had to be sought out and actively reacquired.

The search for heritage led to new and exciting ways of seeing and turning the seen into art. With the technical help of Georgina Beier, artists around Duro Ladipo created images that quickly attracted the attention of the Western art world. A common style did not exist, as some works were abstract, others figurative, some black and white, others explorations of color. As time went on, the individuality of the artists became visible and distinguishable. Twins Seven Seven's work, for example, was easily identifiable by the dense, fish scale-like web of lines that covered every single space of the picture plane (Figure 15.1). Rufus Ogundele preferred bold colors whereas Muraina Oyelami used a more subdued color palette. Adebisi Fabunmi excelled in linocuts, Jimoh Buraimoh experimented with colored beads and mosaics. Relatively consistent, however, was the question of subject matter. Themes of Yoruba ritual and religion dominated. As such the works depicted mostly sacrifices, deities, or festivals. Relatively rare were references to modern life such as automobiles, airplanes, or industrial plants.



FIGURE 15.1 Prince Twins Seven Seven (Taiwo Olaniyi). *Untitled (Devil Dog)*, 1964. Gouache on paper, 73.5×113.8 cm. Collection Iwalewa-Haus, Universität Bayreuth. Photograph courtesy Iwalewa-Haus.

Just as the artists of Duro Ladipo's theatre troupe went out to rediscover and depict their cultural heritage, so did the artists collaborating with Wenger in the reshaping of the Osun grove. Traditionally, the grove had been largely devoid of lasting architecture. Those structures which did exist consisted of plain and unobtrusive earthen buildings with no open visual reference to the cosmological motifs or ideas they housed. The new works differed both in terms of form and place. Compared to the serenity and controlled expression of the traditional Yoruba sculpture and temple architecture, the new structures marked a strong and provocative contrast. Instead of wood and mud, cement was the primary media artists used. While traditional Yoruba art had a clear sense of symmetry, the design of these new sculptural forms was often bold and monumental and showed no regard for formal order. With each new site, the structures became larger and more imposing. The materiality of cement also enabled individuals whom Wenger had recruited to help her in the project to express themselves. In fact, the cement walls and architectures functioned as a kind of canvas upon which the artists inscribed their presence and visualized their own ideas. A good example is the cement representation of *Iya Mapo*, a deity associated with indigo dyeing and pottery (Figure 15.2). The structure is the result of a collaboration between Wenger and her close associate, Adebisi Akanji. In an interview from 2002 Akanji explained the working process as follows:

We heard of *Iya Mapo* that she has two hands, but when we saw her in the dream we discovered that she had more than two hands that we human beings have. She uses one hand to produce palm oil, another to make pots and another to spin cotton



FIGURE 15.2 Susanne Wenger and Adebisi Akanji. *Iya Mapo*, 1960s. Cement sculpture. Osun grove, Oshogbo, Nigeria. Photograph by Peter Probst, 2008.

wool. That is why we made her to have many hands. We just felt that at this place it is okay for it . . . if she [Wenger] has any dream and tells me. I am the one who will tell her the myth in Yoruba worldview and we will blend it together in our representations in images.²²

This quote exemplifies the urge to provide new images for narratives concerning such agents of the divine. The fact that the result would deviate from standard representations of these stories and agents was not only calculated, but deemed necessary. In a 1977 publication on the Osun reshaping project Wenger explains the rationale clearly:

Impatient and self-willed emancipation of the individual mind is the criterion of modern man. While the past's trust lay explicitly with the collective involvements into the transcendent forms of life, the modern individual is averse to ready-made recipes as to how to embark on the mystical adventure. Thus the Shrines, in which dwell Òrísà, who himself dwells in man, have to be new and original in their concept of the enduringly divine. If not they are falsely affecting the spiritual flow. Their symbolism cannot persist to glorification of out-lived ideals, but must encourage new interpretation, individual spontaneity and spiritual independence, which modern man needs to experience with his gods . . . Loyalty to traditional authenticity need not oppose the genius' trend towards new acquisitions and a new focus on its inner ethic. We are modern and different, but we walk the ancient grounds.²³

The aesthetic rupture was thus aimed at reflecting the disjunctions intrinsic to the experience of modernity. In both Wenger's and Beier's view, it was this very experience which deemed any return to traditional aesthetics principally and categorically

void. As Beier proclaimed in 1968, the art coming out of Osogbo was contemporary African art, art that was eager to leave behind its colonial legacy, agile, fresh, curious, the art of young, new nations.²⁴

Multiplying the New: Branding Osogbo Art

When Ulli and Georgina Beier left Osogbo in 1966 and moved to England, public response to the Osogbo movement was still mostly positive. From the 1970s onward, however, Osogbo artists saw themselves increasingly confronted with criticism. Nigerian and European or American critics accused them of voluntarily subscribing to a primitivist and neocolonial agenda. The milieu had shifted from a modernist iconoclasm which had no interest in tradition other than the subject matter to a celebration of authenticity to what the French theorist and curator Bruno Latour has called *iconoclash*,²⁵ a feeling of doubt and uncertainty as to the role and meaning of images.²⁶

What had happened? From the late 1950s onwards, voices lamenting the absence of a genuine Nigerian art movement had become louder. Nigerian artists like Ben Enwonwu had pushed for a synthesis of local and foreign styles, but his prominent role in the colonial government impaired his credibility.²⁷ By the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the situation had changed. Under the banner of the New Synthesis, a group of young art students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology at Zaria argued that real Nigerian art would come into existence only if Nigerian artists first freed themselves from the grip of colonial dominance and instead drew directly on indigenous art forms.²⁸ Having a firm knowledge and mastery of its own artistic traditions was the only way Nigerian art would be able to fruitfully and effectively assimilate the foreign models and perspectives of Western art. As Uche Okeke, one of the founders of Zaria art group, noted in 1960:

Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past . . . This is our renaissance era! In our quest for truth we must be firm, confident and joyful because of our newly won freedom. We must not allow others to think for us in our artistic life, because art is life itself and our physical and spiritual experiences of the world. It is our work as artists to select and render in pictorial and plastic media our reactions to objects and events . . . The key work is synthesis, and I am often tempted to describe it as natural synthesis, for it should be unconscious and not forced.²⁹

The conceptual approach of the young Zaria artists contrasted strongly with the seemingly spontaneous, explicitly anti-academic work of their Osogbo counterparts. Yet despite the differences, in the early 1960s the latter still profited from the experimental aura of the summer art school as an essentially anticolonial exercise. In addition, Beier was a staunch supporter of the young Zaria artists. In 1962, for instance, he invited Bruce Onoprakpeya, one of the founding members of Zaria Art Group, to participate in the second art school. At first criticism towards the Osogbo artists remained cautious. More than a decade later, however, things changed. The center of art activities had shifted from the north and southwest of the county to the southeast. Instead of producing "authentic" Nigerian art, Osogbo artists were now seen as

producing “export art,” as Uche Okeke put it.³⁰ Some writers even questioned the authorship of the works,³¹ arguing that far from having developed freely, unencumbered by external influences, Osogbo artists were actually moulded by the interests and desires of the expatriate patrons who sponsored them.

In Osogbo itself the critique was met by bewilderment and lack of comprehension. After all, the initial success of the “new images” had generated new transnational artscapes that linked Europe, Africa, and North America, and it had also allowed the creators of the images to travel widely within these scapes. Given these positive effects, Osogbo artists asked back: Why should economic success pose a problem? Is contemporary Nigerian art only art produced by college graduates? What is wrong with an artistic production which is not rooted in academia? For Osogbo artists the real problems lay elsewhere. The more successful the works of individual Osogbo artists became, the more the artists saw themselves confronted with the issue of copying. Referring to the 1970s, Muraina Oyelami recalled:

With the success came copyists. Some people came and copied our paintings line by line, colour by colour. They went to Lagos to sell their works and they called themselves “Oshogbo artists.” Sometimes they would even try to impersonate us. I know of one man. He is very clever. He would copy me, copy Jimoh Buraimoh, copy anybody. And at one stage many people began to copy Twins.³²

As much as copying was perceived as a violation of artistic individuality and, quite simply, a loss of revenue, it also gave Osogbo art a visual face, as it were, a recognizable style or brand that allowed Osogbo artists to survive. From the mid-1970s onwards the demand for “Osogbo art” in Europe and the USA declined and the market shifted. With this change of Western interest, Osogbo artists disappeared from the radar of Western art critics, yet managed to remain in business by turning the once new into an established and marketable form of expression.

In fact, judging from the works for sale in Osogbo’s galleries today, what dominates are allusions to the rhythmic lyricism of Twins Seven-Seven, the bold colors of Rufus Ogundele, or the masked heads of Jimoh Buraimoh, all artists representing the first generation of Osogbo artists. Visual citations are more the norm than the exception. Seriality and reproducibility dominate over individuality and originality. Novelty and innovation, once a characteristic feature of the work of the first generation of the Osogbo artists, has not triggered a Western modernist practice of continuously challenging visual traditions. On the contrary, working in a style that has found public approval and has proven to be profitable is seen as something respectful. It does not degrade the original but rather honors it.³³ Accordingly, the “masters” themselves do not mind. As long as the work is not signed with their names, they do indeed favor such citations. The historical success and continuity of these styles has enabled Osogbo to remain present in the Nigerian media. Thus in 2006 Nigeria’s leading newspaper *The Guardian* reported this about Osogbo art:

Osogbo art is not just the way of life it is the major means of livelihood. Along with such high-level fine art forms as painting and wood carving, artistic endeavours like crafts, live performances, cloth dying, weaving, bead work, divination and other formats of presentation of creativity make art a big industry in the sober capital city of Osun State . . . Given that almost every artist in Osogbo is widely travelled or

hopes to travel widely, the majority of the city's art people tend to know how to deal with strangers. And almost every street in the town has an art studio or gallery. Shuttling from trade fairs to art fiestas and exhibitions around the world is a general passion of Osogbo artists.³⁴

A qualifier is needed, however. While Osogbo art is still a "major means of livelihood," the globetrotting by artists that the article claims to have come as a result is largely a fantasy. Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, the number of Osogbo artists today who are able to support themselves by producing art is minimal.³⁵ Existing models of self-help were viewed with suspicion. Younger artists no longer saw the oldest artist association in town, the Confederation of Professional Artists (COPA), as a viable option. Founded in the early 1980s by Nike Okundaye, Jimoh Buraimoh, and Muraina Oyelami, the younger artists perceived COPA as run by "old guys" only interested in their own work. For them, so the argument went, what mattered is the visibility of Osogbo art as a label. As a result, many of the young artists have decided to go their own way. The alliances and cooperations they form are fluid and usually don't last long. What is a flourishing enterprise today can be dead and outdated tomorrow. For artists without an established group of clients, the primary mode of selling today is through local galleries or traveling down to Lagos to find a merchant in the Lekki market. Exhibitions are rare and the few lucrative ones are mostly manned by senior artists and their children and relatives. For those who have neither a gallery nor a family connection, what remains are temporary roadside stands erected at the occasion of the Osun Osogbo Festival.

Reframing the New: Heritage

Nowhere have Osogbo's "new images" become more successful than in the Osun grove. In the course of the past four decades they have turned the grove first into a national monument (1965), then into home of the Osogbo museum (1993), and since 2005 into a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As such, tens of thousands of visitors flock to the city every August to attend the festival and drink from the sacred waters of the Osun River, thus making the Osun Festival one of Nigeria's biggest tourist attractions; it is sponsored by companies such as MTN (Mobile Telecommunications Network), Coca Cola, or Seaman's Schnapps.

Considering the festival's genuine mixture of cult and carnival it is tempting to see these features as results of the joint forces of commodification and secularization. And yet, even though the presence of money is undeniable, the festival has not become devoid of religious meaning. On the contrary, the Osun grove and festival have given rise to diverse reactions from various religious groups. Some of them, like certain Christian and Muslim groups, oppose the festival as an expression of paganism while others, such as the ultranationalist Yoruba party, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), celebrate and cherish it as a genuine embodiment of Yoruba culture.

The designation of the Osun grove and festival as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005 has certainly provided a climax to this development.³⁶ Not only did this recognition reflect a changing attitude towards the grove on behalf of the Nigerian government, which had nominated the grove to the UNESCO authorities in Paris, it also triggered a constantly increasing number of heritage tourists who come to

Osogbo in search of their religious and cultural roots. As a result, Osogbo itself has become incorporated into a third, supranational regime of heritage. In view of the international embrace and recognition of the Osun grove and festival as symbols of the vitality and global extension of postcolonial Yoruba religion, the reframing works for (almost) all parties involved. For the palace it increases its status vis-à-vis the other Yoruba kingdoms and consolidates its hegemony within. For the devotees it validates their importance and provides them with a new sense of self-esteem. For the artists it provides a steady supply of clients.

But how important is innovation and the role of tradition? Do contemporary Osogbo artists perceive the knowledge of the success of their predecessors as a burden? Does the weight of tradition trigger angst, apprehension, and uneasiness, as Harold Bloom has so famously argued?³⁷ The answer is no, rather the other way around. As noted above, the logic of creation is not via an iconoclastic rejection of the past but through adding and modification. Surely, the initial blast has dispersed, but one needs to be careful not to fall into the modernist trap of separating art and craft, culture and commerce, with distinctly different audiences, curatorial practices, and visual ideologies. It was, and still is, precisely the basic interconnectedness of commerce, art, and festivity in Yoruba culture that saved Osogbo artists from oblivion and enabled the city to reinvent itself as a heritage site.

Conclusion

As I have shown, as much as colonial ideology and anti-witchcraft movements joined forces to destroy objects representing the pagan past, the modernist response to these forms of destruction was equally radical. It too rejected the past and focused on the present instead. With the world of tradition seen as doomed and the world of the modern seen as constituting the root of all problems, the only appropriate solution was the creation of new art forms expressing the fluid, open, and still undetermined phase society was believed to be going through.

It is easy to dismiss the effects of the art resulting from this agenda as a sort of failed modernism. As we have seen, what has happened in Osogbo is conceptually at odds with the modernist valorization of a perpetually antagonistic relationship with the past. The iconoclasm out of which the Osogbo art movement evolved did not turn into a practice of constantly overcoming old and creating new images. On the contrary, over the course of the last four decades, the “new images” have become themselves a symbol of that very tradition their creators once wanted to leave behind. To dismiss the art as heritage kitsch, however, would mean to validate Western modernism as the sole lens for seeing and understanding Osogbo art. Surely, Osogbo artists have long disappeared from the radar of art critics. Their works are not discussed in *Nka* or *Third Text* and, consequently, not shown in contemporary art exhibitions (or vice versa).

But does the fact that Osogbo art has become invisible in the so-called “global art world” make the works less relevant, less important? Important for whom, one may ask in return? African art history faces the danger of becoming trapped in the logic of the temporal categories its mother discipline invented.³⁸ Everything which is repeated after the period in which it was first created is doomed to be labelled negatively, at best retro, at worst kitsch. The binary at once echoes and conceals its modernist origin. What it conceals is the shameful secret that modernism has created or rather

invented heritage. As such, heritage does not represent a past, but a present, which creates the past as heritage. The argument is not new.³⁹ Yet (African) art historical research on heritage has remained scarce. This contribution is thus also a plea not to exclude heritage from the study of African art but rather to accept it as part of the story of the iconoclasm of modernism.

Notes

- 1 For images and a more detailed analysis of the developments discussed in this chapter see Probst (2011).
- 2 Beier (1968); Enwezor (2001); Kasfir (1999); Probst (2011).
- 3 Surely, “modernism” is not a monolithic entity but exists only in various interpretations and experiences (Hassan 2010). What unites the different vectors though and thus informs the use of the terms “modernism” and “modernist” is the (secular) belief in the power of human progress to which art should contribute.
- 4 Drewal and Drewal (1990); Lawal (1997).
- 5 On the *atinga* movement see Morton-Williams (1956); Atkinson (1959, 63–83); Apter (1993); Matory (2005, 79–89).
- 6 Atkinson (1959, 83–84).
- 7 On Marker and Resnais’ film see Lupton (2005, 35–38) and Kämper and Thode (1997, 205–209, 219).
- 8 The analogy is actually indebted to Carl Einstein’s critique of the Trocadero in Paris and the ethnographic museum in Berlin. See Fleckner (2006, 300–310).
- 9 Quoted in Lupton (2005, 36).
- 10 Beier and Speed (1964).
- 11 Beier and Speed (1964).
- 12 On Wenger’s modernist stance towards the evils of modernity see Probst (2009). On the relationship of modernism and (colonial) modernity see Leighton (1990); Gikandi (2003); as well as Greenberg’s (1939) classic article on avant-garde and kitsch.
- 13 Brockmann and Hötter (1994, 16–17).
- 14 See Beier (1993).
- 15 Dubuffet (1987).
- 16 For the later career of Lods, see Grabski, chapter 14 this volume.
- 17 See Morton, chapter 12 this volume.
- 18 McEwen (1968).
- 19 For an overview of the various approaches see Beier (1968); Mount (1973); and Mudimbe (1994, 160ff.).
- 20 Beier (1965, 199).
- 21 In Probst (2011, 42).
- 22 In Probst (2011, 52).
- 23 Wenger (1977, 8, 11).
- 24 Beier (1968).
- 25 Latour (2002).
- 26 For a discussion of the meaning of this concept in the context of the contemporary African heritage industry see Probst (2012).
- 27 Ogbechie (2008). See also Blackmun, chapter 20 this volume.
- 28 Okcke (2010).

- 29 Okeke (1995, 208).
- 30 Okeke (1979, 117).
- 31 Naifeh (1981).
- 32 Oyelami (1993, 57).
- 33 See Drewal and Drewal's (1987) reflection on the aesthetics of seriality and Steiner's (1999) study on its relevance in tourist art.
- 34 Nnabuife (2006, 19).
- 35 Mimra-Rachbauer (2007).
- 36 The official UNESCO explanation reads as follows: "A century ago there were many groves in Yorubaland: every town had one. Most of these groves have now been abandoned or have shrunk to quite small areas. Osun-Osogbo is the largest grove to have survived and one that is still revered. More than that, the restoration by Suzanne Wenger and her fellow artists has given the grove a new importance: it has become a sacred place for the whole of Yorubaland and a symbol for identity for the wider Yoruba Diaspora. The new art installed has also differentiated it from other groves: Osogbo is now unique in having a large component of twentieth century sculpture created to reinforce the links between people and the Yoruba pantheon" (World Heritage Center 2005, 35).
- 37 Bloom (1973).
- 38 See Araeen (2005); Friedman (2006); and the by now classical postcolonial critique of historiography by Chakrabarty (2000).
- 39 Huyssen (1995); Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998); Smith (2006); Probst (2011).

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Modernism and Modernity in African Art

John Picton

This chapter is about words like “modern” and its derivatives, and “contemporary” (a kind of enhanced “modern,” modern “with knobs on” as we might say in Britain), words that we use to signify particular kinds of temporal relationships between things. It is about how these words work, as it were, in documenting and exhibiting works of African art, and thereby about the relationships in art making between past and present, between this and that, and between here and there, relationships that are invariably complex, often obscure, and invariably entailing a fracturing as well as a continuity; relationships that are there to be traced. The following quotations by Atta Kwami and Maurice Lavanoux are pertinent – and note, in particular, the phrase “modern . . . that much-abused word”:

The past is still evident in all kinds of contemporary visual practice, driving a society forward and defining its sense of what it is. It is developed, invented, or represented through exhibitions, revues, festivals and so forth. Locating the history of this art in new contexts guarantees its future.¹

It does seem that all art and architecture, prior to the nineteenth century at any rate, *was modern in its day*, and it was modern in the proper sense of that much-abused word for the simple reason that no one called it so. It was unconsciously modern; it is when we become consciously modern that our troubles begin.²

How do we encapsulate an art history for Africa that deals authoritatively and truthfully with the twentieth century, the period for which we have the best data, and the period also that gives rise to the so-called “modern” or “contemporary” arts? And, do the words we use affect the ways in which we write a history of art? I shall discuss these questions with regard to some of the ways in which we have exhibited twentieth-century African art, the history of *adire*, a Yoruba form of indigo dyeing,

and the work of Bruce Onobrakpeya, the most successful and internationally acclaimed artist to have emerged in the period surrounding independence in Nigeria in 1960.

Exhibiting Africa

In 1961 I was appointed to the Nigerian government department of antiquities, which was responsible for several museums throughout the country. I took up the post of curator of the Nigerian Museum, Lagos, within the first year of independence, having spent about six months assisting William Fagg at the British Museum, and learning about Nigerian art in the process. My professional interests were with archaeological material, classified by site, and with those arts that comprised an inheritance from a more recent past, and generally classified by “tribe” – though not in the exhibitions of the Lagos Museum, as I explain below. K. C. Murray, who founded the department, still lived in a house he had built on the far side of the entrance to the Lagos lagoon. Once an art teacher and personally concerned with an incipient Nigerian modernism in art – Ben Enwonwu³ was his most illustrious pupil – his museum was about preserving the past. Nevertheless, in 1961 one could not live in Nigeria for long with an interest in the arts and not meet up with people like Enwonwu and Murray, with Ulli Beier, Father Kevin Carroll, Lamidi Fakeye, Justus Akeredolu, and, as the 1960s moved along, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Erhabor Emokpae, Festus Idehen, and many others.⁴ I also briefly met Aina Onabolu;⁵ and I allowed Wole Soyinka’s theatre group, “1960 Masks,” to perform in the central courtyard of the museum.

Yet, early in 1961, when I completed the application form for employment in the Nigerian government department of antiquities I noted a box headed “tribe.” I left it blank, but when I arrived in Nigeria later that year it did not take long to realize that tribalism was one of the more pernicious aspects of contemporary Nigerian society, the tendency in any situation in which decisions had to be taken, patronage dispensed, and so forth, for a person in authority to favor those from his or her own “tribe.” What we now know as an ahistorical fiction had acquired a modern reality! For this reason, when K. C. Murray set up the Lagos museum he banned the use of tribal identifications in the labels and other explanatory material relating to the material on display. Works of art were identified by the places from which they came, and there was a map. This was not a problem for Nigerian visitors, though Europeans and Americans were confused; they expected to see things located by “tribe.” Murray had attempted to counter tribalism, and in so doing he was ahead of the game, as it were. We knew that the need to write history into our accounts of social practice and cultural property was all the more obvious as a result of work in places such as Asante, Nupe, and Benin City which already had their own senses of time and history; that as soon as you admit history or, indeed, “the modern world” into the context of art making, ideas about “tribes” and “traditional” societies are rendered incoherent, and that modernist Nigerian art did not fit the rubrics of archaeological site or ethnographic “tribe.”

The first exhibition to show the work of artists from Africa, artists contemporary with the world as it was then, alongside artists from every other part of the world, was *Magiciens de la terre*, in 1989.⁶ Almost 10% of the artists on show were African, an altogether new departure for an international show. There were already many artists with well-established international reputations: Francis Nnaggenda, Ben Enwonwu,

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ibrahim El Salahi, Gerard Sekoto, Iba N'Diaye, among others, and their work was generally well known to scholars of African art. Yet none of them was selected! A show with the word *Magiciens* in its title was presumably looking for evidence of some kind of visual *bricolage* (one thinks immediately of the enduring influence of Lévi-Strauss)⁷ such as one finds in the work of Louise Bourgeois or Tony Cragg, who were in the exhibition, but the curators of the African selection, André Magnin supported by Jean-Hubert Martin, ignored all the well-known artists and went looking for others. They selected a Ga coffin maker, a Kinshasa sign painter, Yoruba and Igbo mask makers and a cement sculptor from Nigeria, a Tanzanian blackwood carver, mural painters from the Benin Republic and South Africa, and so on and so forth. (The curators had not noticed photography, already an African visual practice for more than a hundred years,⁸ but most of us were guilty of that in 1989.) Apart from the blackwood carver, whose work seems to me to stand at the wilder end of the tourist trade, they were all artists whose work was worth looking at – one, indeed, Chéri Samba, the Kinshasa sign painter, is an artist of true genius;⁹ but many of them, far from standing at the “cutting edge” of a new art, were working within well-established traditions inculcated by means of carefully controlled apprenticeships. Whatever the details of their education as artists, the suggestion that they were essentially naive autodidacts free of the constraints of any form of overt educational process was contradicted by their place within those traditions. In effect, the curators of *Magiciens de la terre* had invented an entirely spurious “neoprimitivism” and presented it to the world as the acceptable face of a modern or contemporary African art. The relationships between these artists and the traditions of practice of which they were a part were ignored; identity and history were denied. The otherwise considerable merits of the show were thereby vitiated and *Magiciens* proved itself to be devoid of any useful paradigmatic basis for understanding the present. Nevertheless, due to the patronage of the Swiss photographer, Jean-Christoff Pigozzi, with Magnin as his curator, *Magiciens* spawned a series of troublesome children, all tainted by its neoprimitive aesthetic, its willful misrepresentation of African realities.

The following year, the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, presented its exhibition *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions*.¹⁰ This displayed the work of nine artists, one of whom, Zimbabwean sculptor Henry Munyeradzi, had also been in *Magiciens de la terre*. The Harlem show had not been set up to counteract *Magiciens*, it was simply a different “take,” also based upon firsthand research in Africa. Bruce Onobrakpeya was included, and the show introduced El Anatsui¹¹ to an audience beyond West Africa. The catalogue remains perhaps the most useful survey of African modernisms to that point. Later that year, five of the artists in the Harlem show provided the first exhibition of art from sub-Saharan Africa at the Venice Biennale.

Whilst these two exhibitions were in preparation, a third was planned alongside them and able to take account of their respective insights: Susan Vogel’s *Africa Explores*, at the Center (now Museum) for African Art in New York. There was a deliberate choice made not to show any of the artists in the Harlem show (there were plenty more to choose from), but in regard to *Magiciens*, Susan Vogel wrote as follows:

In some respects this exhibition [*Africa Explores*] is an answer to that one [*Magiciens*], which underscored the importance of placing contemporary African art in the context of African art, history, and culture, *if only by failing to do so*.¹² (my emphasis)

The intention of countering *Magiciens* was deliberate and overt; and *Africa Explores* did so by providing a survey of all the arts practiced across tropical Africa through the twentieth century, with an emphasis on painting, sculpture, and masquerade in the 1980s. It was the first time such a diverse body of material had been brought together in a single show, and photography was included, the first major show to draw attention to this medium.¹³ *Africa Explores* did not attempt to deal with fashion, dress, and textile design, nor did it touch southern or northern Africa, wisely, for these were all complex areas needing specialist treatment. The exhibition was a visual riot,¹⁴ including “contemporary” Dogon masks, the Ga fancy coffin maker, cement funerary statuary, photography, and signage, as well as art school-trained artists: Fode Camara, Iba N’Diaye, Sokari Douglas Camp, Magdalene Odundo, among others. The exhibition was truly pioneering in its scope. For the first time people could see in one exhibition all the sorts of things they might well see in any given location across tropical Africa. *Africa Explores* remains the only major exhibition to have restored to the idea of the “contemporary” the full breadth of current art making. It provided some sense of an African visual context to any of the particular forms and works on show, for the arts we describe as “modern,” modernist, current, or “contemporary” do not, after all, exist in some kind of vacuum, hermetically sealed off from other forms of visual and performance practice. Many artists and critics, African or interested in Africa, or both, came through New York at this time and noted their comments in the book provided for this purpose. Their reactions were not at all what I had expected. I enjoyed the show; they were furious. Artists of the kind excluded from *Magiciens* were now being exhibited alongside sign painters and coffin makers! University-trained painters were shown side-by-side with artisans from inner-city workshops! This was entirely inappropriate (they said); the frustration and annoyance generated by *Magiciens de la terre* had spilled over into *Africa Explores*. By their very exclusion of certain artists the *Magiciens* curators had, wittingly or unwittingly, established a polarity, an antagonism even; *Africa Explores*, by showing them all together, had merely added insult to injury. This controversy ran all through the 1990s, and, as I shall suggest below, it still affects the way we write about African modernist arts.

In many ways the 1995 festival in London and elsewhere in Britain, known as Africa95, was an expanded version of Susan Vogel’s vision as embodied in *Africa Explores* – not that this was the intention of its core exhibition, *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (Royal Academy),¹⁵ initially conceived as a grand “tribal” art show, until its curators were persuaded by Susan Vogel to include the entire continent and its prehistory. Modernist work, however, and all the transformations consequent upon the emergence of photography as an African visual practice were judged unfit for the hallowed rooms of the Academy. A festival was proposed that could showcase material not to be found in the Academy,¹⁶ with a series of exhibitions that included modernist work from seven countries,¹⁷ textile history,¹⁸ metalwork,¹⁹ urban popular art,²⁰ and masquerade as represented by *Play and Display*,²¹ in many ways the most successful of all the Africa95 shows for reasons of its limitation to the Kalabari region of the eastern Niger delta. Mask sculpture from the collections of the British Museum was shown against a double context provided by performance video recordings and the sculpture by Sokari Douglas Camp in which she imagined particular masked figures in the Kalabari repertoire. The great advantage of Africa95 was that we saw more art from Africa than we have seen before, or since, but because it was not all in one place – not that anywhere in London was big enough – the familiar groupings were reiterated:

antiquity and the “traditional,” “craft” (textiles and metalwork), and “modern/contemporary.” Only someone equipped with the relevant knowledge could make the necessary interconnections.

In 1999 London’s Barbican Art Gallery put on an exhibition of African photography drawn from the research pioneered by *Revue Noire*,²² and at the opening, Stuart Hall, the doyen of cultural theorists in this country, said, among other things, “I hope this is the last exhibition we ever see about Africa. What we need are exhibitions about this or that part of it.”²³ If we are to trace the continuities, make sense of the disjunctions, understand the character of the history of an art, we can only achieve this in the manner Stuart Hall suggested and, indeed, as Sokari Douglas Camp demonstrated in *Play and Display*. It seems to me that the failure to grasp this point was the source of the incoherence that characterized the otherwise spectacular Africa05 exhibition, *Africa Remix*, that toured Europe as well as Japan and South Africa.²⁴ There were too many curatorial “voices,” too great a dependence on the neoprimitivist aesthetic of *Magiciens de la terre*, too great a subservience to the still dominant tropes of an “international” (post)modernism. It was, curiously, an exhibition without any sense of a history – or rather any sense of a set of histories and, as such, its resemblance to the “ethnographic present” so typical of much colonial period anthropological writing was disconcerting! It was good to see the material that was there to be seen, but in the end: so what!

When Was Contemporary Art?

When Ulli Beier published his 1968 *Contemporary Art in Africa*,²⁵ he was writing about developments contemporary with the early 1960s, and his use of the word “contemporary” was appropriate. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, the description of works of art from the 1960s as “contemporary” makes no sense. Whatever happened in the 1960s was contemporary with the 1960s – it cannot be “of the same time” as the here and now in which I write. But, you might ask, does it really matter? It should be obvious by now that I think it does, because whatever we might mean by “modern,” “modernist,” “contemporary,” photography is there at the beginning. In the 1960s no one in the fields of African art studies thought photography was worth bothering with. How wrong we were! Photography had been an African visual practice since the 1850s, with no one beginning, no single point of entry,²⁶ and yet it is the art that lies behind other developments. Moreover, the modernist project in Africa was driven by local initiative. Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), the great hero of the inception of developments in Nigeria, was a self-taught painter copying magazine illustrations,²⁷ some of which, at least, must have been reproduced from photographs. The pioneer Nigerian art teacher was the one agitating for the development of art education throughout the colonial system at a time when the servicing of colonial government necessitated the development of grammar school education. Art education, already part of the primary school curriculum, now had to be established throughout the education system, and Kenneth Murray was appointed to Nigeria in 1927.²⁸ Through education it became possible to challenge colonial rule on its own terms, which is why there is almost invariably a link between modernist developments in art and anticolonial politics. European art teachers, intrigued by the mythic account of modernist engagements with “primitivism,” really had no idea what to do about the preexisting traditions of art making: what was their place in a “modern” art education?

Artists in Africa provided the answer, for notwithstanding the frequency of conversion to Islam or Christianity an interest in local forms and practices provided them with an utterly distinctive resource; it was not the only available resource, of course, but it allowed artists to develop their work in ways that celebrated a national identity neither necessarily at odds with ethnicity nor dependent upon colonial rule. Ben Enwonwu's use of masquerade forms in his painting, or the "Natural Synthesis" developed by Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and their associates around Nigerian independence are obvious examples of this. The resources that were drawn upon included myth, masquerade, and folktale, body painting and textile design, village life, chiefly ceremonial, and so forth, a body of material that was as worthy of attention and respect as anything brought in from Europe.

The narratives of change and development across the cities and countries of tropical Africa provide evidence of complex links, breaks, and continuities across tropical Africa that comprise a history that, because it includes photography, takes us back to the 1850s, and this is the "stuff" of the current subdiscipline that has come to be known as "contemporary African art"! But, surely, labelling the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century as "contemporary" stretches its meaning beyond any usefulness! To make matters worse, all too often the "stuff" of "contemporary African art" has the appearance of a self-sufficient narrative in which the works of art themselves have been made by men and women for whom the wider visual, ritual, and social environments are of no consequence, but this is entirely misleading.²⁹ It may or may not be the ongoing legacy of *Magiciens de la terre*, yet there is always more to art making than the university art school, the art gallery, and the art critic. And the field of "contemporary African art" excludes much that is as contemporary as anything that is included. I refer, of course, to things like dress, textile design, masquerade, chiefly ceremonial – all aspects of a contemporary Africa that thrive in virtue of their adjustments to changes elsewhere in local social practice. The exclusion of these forms from any consideration of a "contemporary" art is in my view blinkered and pernicious.³⁰ An intellectual environment has emerged that, ironically, replicates for Africa the narrowly defined field of art considered acceptable within the art gallery system in Europe and the USA. We ought to be insisting upon the recognition of all the diverse fields of current and contemporary visual and performance practice as a means of opening up and deconstructing that narrow definition. If we fail to take account of these things, we fail also to take account of how modernist, current, and contemporary (call it what you will) practice finds its place within a local sense of modernity. In effect, what we have done is to invent just another ahistorical fiction that mimics Europe.

So When Was Modernity?

In Lagos in the 1960s a great many artists were in evidence through their work, their teaching, their participation in lectures and discussions, at exhibition openings (the *Nigeria* magazine exhibition centre, diplomatic cultural departments, and so forth); there were commissions from churches, embassies, hotels, government buildings, and banks; cultural groups from all over Nigeria could be called upon to perform, given the multiethnic mix of the burgeoning city; there were the performances of at least three masquerade forms, *gelede*, *egungun*, and *adamuorisha*, each performed

according to its particular times and seasons; the markets were full of handmade textiles and pottery brought in from elsewhere; and all of these things were part of a flourishing contemporary world. It was a world with different parts, but those parts were not mutually exclusive: rather, one influenced another. For example, Erhabor Emokpae's *Eyo*, a painting done in 1962, shows *adamuorisha* masquerades, a form unique to Lagos Island, the only place he could have seen them. I first saw the painting at an exhibition centre show in Lagos, and then, 38 years later, in the Lagos section of the Tate Modern, London *Century City* exhibition (2001).³¹ Modernity in Lagos, if defined in terms of its visual culture, included all of these things and a great deal more besides, but what does the word mean? I turn to that invaluable guide, Raymond Williams, *Keywords*.³² Here is the relevant passage:

Modern came into English from fw *moderne*, F, *moderne*, IL, from rw *modo*, L – just now. Its earliest English senses were nearer our *contemporary*, in the sense of something existing now, just now. (*Contemporary*, or the equivalent – till mC19 – *co-temporary*, was mainly used, as it is still often used, to mean “of the same period”, including periods in the past, rather than “of our own immediate time”.) . . . **Modernism** and **modernist** have become more specialized, to particular tendencies, notably to the experimental art and writing of c. 1890 – c. 1940 . . .³³

“Modern” derives from the Latin “now” and the modern world, the world of “now,” is where I am right now. It is the only place I can be. The conditions and characteristics at a given time or period and place comprise its modernity, and it is always local to that given time and place, even when those conditions and characteristics include elements from elsewhere, perhaps from the other side of the world. The coming together of elements of local origin with elements from further away is always an engagement local to a given place and time. It cannot be otherwise. The conditions of that here and now are easily described – and the question of how they have come to be, what they move on to become, and the people, things, and events entailed in these processes is what we call history. So “modern” is simply where we are at, and modernity is the descriptive catalogue of its attributes; it is not something that begins in one place and migrates to another; and it is because the attributes of a local modernity are subject to difference and change such that one can confidently assert that modernity here is not the same as modernity there, that modernity now is not the same as modernity then.

Modernism is, however, a different kind of thing, by common convention an art movement of European origin contingent upon the emergence of photography,³⁴ together with all the new technologies of the industrial world, artists’ boredom with art as it was when they were trying to make names for themselves, and the discovery by Europe of the arts of the rest of the world. These elements led to a reshaping, as it were, of art practice, setting off an ongoing process in which little stayed put for long. We do not need to waste our time asking whether the postmodern is a late stage in this, or something different: what matters here is that we grasp the distinction between modernity and modernism, the various aspects of which arrived in Africa through local agency as well as filtered through colonial education. Yet these developments did not take place in some kind of Eurocentric vacuum: artists were encouraged – not by European teachers but by a sense of cultural pride in the context of emerging national identities – to look again at the traditions of their elders, and to draw upon those

traditions as a source of pride and a resource to be used in their work. Indeed, it is both the continuities with the past as well as the novelties of the present that define in a million different ways the local modernities that characterize this or that place.³⁵ Modernism in Africa succeeded because its development contributed to the usefulness of the arts in contesting colonial authority and in the making of national identities, and we now know that the narrative of art in Africa is full of examples wherein new circumstances have enabled artists to produce new kinds of art, which is why one can say that all the developments in visual practice since the advent of photography are merely the later stages of an ongoing history.

Indigo-Dyed Textiles and Yoruba Modernity

The indigo-dyed cloth known as *adire* might look like a quintessential “traditional” textile, yet its history runs alongside the evolution of a modern Yoruba identity; and this was something for which local people in three cities, educated in the European manner, were responsible. The cities were Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan: Lagos founded in the seventeenth century; Abeokuta, a centre of indigo dyeing,³⁶ founded in the 1830s; and Ibadan, also founded in the 1830s, which had both indigo dyers and handloom weavers, the latter coming from elsewhere in what had been the empire of Oyo before its final conquest by the Fulani jihad.³⁷ Indeed, both Abeokuta and Ibadan had been founded as refugee camps for those dispossessed of their homes and occupations by the wars that convulsed the Yoruba-speaking region as a result of the Fulani jihad. Later in the nineteenth century the population of these three cities was enhanced by the return of freed slaves and their descendants from Freetown, Sierra Leone, and from Bahia and elsewhere in Brazil, the latter bringing with them the architecture of provincial Portugal.³⁸

It is impossible to put a date on the origins of indigo dyeing in the Yoruba-speaking region. It seems to have existed in two forms. The first was the dyeing of handspun cotton yarn woven to provide expensive luxury textiles and other clothing. The second was the usefulness of indigo for dyeing old cloth, for example a woman’s wrap-around skirt, to toughen and renew it for continued use, and sometimes a woman might tie in a few sticks and stones to resist the dye and impart simple pattern. It is important to grasp this contrast between these prestige (male) and everyday (female) contexts of the use of indigo. It was inevitable that cities of refugees would have indigo dyers amongst them. The local plants used for preparing the dye were also commonplace in the open woodland that characterizes the region where forest gives way to savanna, the region in which both Abeokuta and Ibadan were located. Moreover each city soon acquired inhabitants who, as repatriates, would have perhaps had some familiarity with the rather different traditions of pattern making that characterized Sierra Leone. In addition, each city, beginning with Abeokuta, became the locus of missionary and colonial activity of Europeans with the strange habit of importing their victuals in zinc-lined wooden boxes, which in addition had words and pictures stenciled all over them; they too had close links with Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Three kinds of development seem to have ensued. One was due to the ready availability of factory-woven cotton cloth, which, because of its finer texture than cloth woven from locally handspun cotton, could allow a more detailed repertoire of design that had hitherto been possible. In the technique known as *adire oniko* (*adire* made

using *iko*, raphia) the fibre was tied or stitched to the cloth and, by resisting the dye, created pattern on the finished cloth.³⁹ With the factory-woven cotton it was possible to elaborate the pattern making possibilities of tying and stitching beyond anything previously possible. It is impossible to know where exactly this happened, as this technique was to be found through many Yoruba towns. But, given the rapid development of dyeing in Abeokuta and its status as a centre of *adire* production, it has to be a likely contender. The second type of development was the use of starch, hence the description of this as *adire eleko* (using starch, *eko*), applied to one face of the cloth to resist the dye, and one way of so doing was the use of stencils cut from the zinc linings of those European boxes. Throughout the history of *adire*, Abeokuta remained the only place where the stencils were cut and used. Some of the patterns clearly imitate raphia-tied designs. Others, however, were more topical, with imagery and lettering referring to recent events, proverbs, and curious new habits and imagery. The third development, also called *adire eleko*, entailed painting the starch freehand on one face of the cloth, perhaps beginning in imitation of the stenciled designs, and the centre for this was Ibadan. Here, the patterning rarely imitates tie-dyeing; lettering and topical imagery provided the subject matter.

These three developments clearly postdate the foundation of Abeokuta and Ibadan, and equally clearly all three represent an engagement between local technologies and aesthetic sensibilities (e.g., the method of using indigo, the delight in pattern, the visualization of proverbs, topical events) and elements imported from Europe (factory-woven cotton, metal stencils, the fascination with written text, advertising), while the possibilities available in factory-woven cotton, as well as the use of starch to resist the dye, may well have been pioneered in the community of freed slaves of Yoruba origin in Freetown, that community which gave West Africa its first literate intellectuals able to play the Europeans at their own game.⁴⁰ The first grammar of the Yoruba language was written by Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a former slave liberated in Freetown, the first black bishop of the Church of England, and published in 1849. The first history of the Yoruba people was written by Samuel Johnson, the son of Sierra Leone repatriates, and also a priest of the Church of England. More than anyone else, these two men were responsible for starting the process of defining a modern Yoruba identity. Before the publication of what was the first textbook of modern standard Yoruba, there was no one name for these peoples. Each region had its own name – the dialects were often mutually unintelligible; they were politically autonomous, and, during the nineteenth century, at war with each other in the succession of rival states that succeeded the fall of the Oyo empire. The need to create this new sense of identity was in effect forced upon the Yoruba by the agents of colonial rule, which thus came to be contested on several grounds; the Yoruba speaking people could easily demonstrate that they had a written language, a literature, a history every bit as exciting as anything in Europe, and so forth; and there was a return to the elite use of local dress forms in furtherance of this newly evolved cultural identity. The evolution of *adire* cloth was another part of a complex process of cultural reinvention by means of which a local modern world came into being.

During the twentieth century, *adire* flourished, with many new designs alongside older but still popular patterns. In the 1960s, for example, an *adire eleko* design called *Oloba* (literally “it has king”) was still in production, stencilled in Abeokuta and freehand painted in Ibadan. At the centre of each half of the cloth there was a medallion with images of King George V and Queen Mary derived from souvenirs of

their Silver Jubilee, the 25th anniversary in 1935 of their coronation. To either side is *Al Buraq*, the horse that carried the Prophet of Islam from Mecca to Jerusalem and up into heaven in the Night Journey. There is, of course, no obvious connection between these two images. The original stencils identified the figures as King George and Queen Mary; but in 1936 the king died and was succeeded by Edward VIII, and new stencils were cut in Abeokuta now identifying the king as *ediwodu*. His coronation did not happen because of his infatuation with a married woman, and he quickly abdicated in favor of his brother Albert, who took the name George at his accession. The original design thus regained its topical relevance and remained popular thereafter, the stenciled version produced in Abeokuta and freehand-painted versions in Ibadan, until the demise of *adire* in response to the popularity of *kampala*. Another well-known pattern was *Ibadandun*, “Ibadan is sweet” (i.e., a happy place). Ibadan, a city ruled by rival war lords until the late nineteenth century, became one of the major centers of administration in colonial Nigeria. This design is identified by the representation of the pillars of the city hall that opened in 1929 as a meeting place for the local nobility. The pillars alternate with the pestles used in preparing pounded yam. Other squares show a Qur'an writing board, an umbrella together with the leaves used in chiefly installation, the tree that marks the market place, talking drums, a sleeping mat, handcuffs, fans, water, and an assortment of birds, reptiles, and insects. These may have proverbs associated with them, although the choice of subject matter is largely a matter of what will make a good design, though sometimes with a topical reference. We have no idea who the artists were who initiated these and other patterns.

However, by the mid-1970s *adire* production went into decline, effectively disappearing (except for stocks of unsold cloth with the market traders) during the following decade. In more recent years, Nike Olaniyi (Okundaye), an internationally known Yoruba textile designer, has revived the *adire* procedures at her Oshogbo workshop while also using a wax-batik process with factory-made indigo. It remains to be seen what the long-term future of this revival might be. In the meantime, there were three reasons for the decline in *adire*. The first was that the use of indigo for a woman's wraparound skirt carried no particular prestige or status (in contrast to the indigo-dyed cotton yarn used in high cost wide-sleeved gowns). It was, no matter how wacky the patterns, only an ordinary cloth for an ordinary woman, derived from the practice of re-dyeing a worn out cloth in indigo, a well-known method of renewing an old cloth for continued use (Figure 16.1). The popularity of *adire* among some Europeans and Americans in the 1960s for shirt-making was not enough to secure its survival in a context in which local elite status was registered in quite other forms of cloth, including the locally woven *aso oke* (which I do not discuss here). *Adire* had no obvious survival value. Then other forms of dyeing became popular during the late 1960s and onwards, using techniques generally known as *kampala* (apparently so named after the publicity given to Idi Amin's offer in 1974 of Kampala as a suitable venue for a peace conference intended to sort out the Northern Ireland conflict, an offer not taken up by the then British government). *Kampala* techniques make use of simpler forms of tied pattern, as well as candle wax, either spattered or printed using specially made stamps, and also of factory-made dyes that can be used without either staining one's hands or the specialist knowledge needed for the preparation of local indigo. The third element in the decline of *adire* must be the popularity of the African print textiles that have their



FIGURE 16.1 Two women wearing *adire*. Igarra, Akoko-Edo, Nigeria. Photograph by Sue Picton, 1969.

origins in Dutch attempts to replicate Indonesian batik.⁴¹ The Yoruba name for these is *ankara*, which is how the capital of Ghana, Accra is pronounced in Yoruba, and it was indeed in the trading cities of the colonial Gold Coast (modern Ghana) that the West African taste for Indonesian-derived patterning was first established, leading to the late nineteenth-century replication of these designs by Dutch and English cotton-printing factories and subsequent developments.

Adire was an art that embodied the creative interests of ordinary women, and its development traced a series of events that included the ending of the intra-Yoruba wars, the foundation of new cities, the political and cultural interests pioneered by Sierra Leonean repatriates, including the emergence and interplay of ethnic and national identities, and the emergence of photography, easel painting, and a modernism that was uniquely Nigerian. *Adire* was part of the visual modernity local to many Nigerian cities, and its forms were among the resources drawn upon by the new generation of artists emerging from the fine art department at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in the early 1960s, including, in particular, Bruce Onobrakpeya.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, Painter and Printmaker

Bruce Onobrakpeya, born August 30, 1932 and still active, is among the most successful artists to have emerged in West Africa during the twentieth century, with a continuing and commanding influence on the generations of artists in Nigeria who have come to maturity in the postcolonial period. Together with Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya first came to public attention for the pavilions they designed and painted as part of the celebrations of independence in 1960.⁴²

At the time they were still students at Nigeria's first tertiary level art college. Onobrakpeya himself would later write:

During the early years of the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology at Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University), a few students came together under the name of the Zaria Art Society. Their mission was to examine how their study of academic art related to their society . . . It is a story of change and continuity, a response to a call to move forward, to explore frontiers with new techniques and ideas, and yet keep faith with the ancestors whose legacy they were reshaping and transforming.⁴³

Uche Okeke described them as “young artists in a new nation, that is what we are!”⁴⁴ and although their society came to an end with graduation in 1962, they were already the leaders of a novel development in a Nigerian modernism. The name given to it by Okeke was Natural Synthesis, an idea that was about the possibilities of bringing together elements of inherited traditions and the novel forms, practices, and technologies of the present time. It was “natural” because they wanted it to be neither forced nor contrived, and a “synthesis” because in the end that is what all art is. They looked to the personal arts, and especially to the youthful body marking that by the 1950s was made obsolescent by dress, and also to textile design, masquerade, and myth and folktale. These resources constituted an extraordinary repository of forms and ideas for an art that addressed the problems and possibilities faced by a newly independent nation-state breaking free of colonial domination. Okeke, Onobrakpeya, and the others in their group may not have known it at the time, but they were in a situation comparable to that faced half a century earlier by the new generation of artists in the modernizing enthusiasm of late prerevolutionary Russia, who reworked the modernisms of France and Germany using a distinctive local art history embodied in icon painting, folk art, Central Asian textiles, popular signage, and so forth. The difference was that these young Nigerian artists faced an art education system imported from the Britain of the 1950s, and, although that system offered new and valuable technical means, it could do nothing for artists intent on forging a sense of Nigerian national identity. The Zaria Art Society was their response to this problem and Natural Synthesis the means to its solution, as exemplified in Onobrakpeya’s description of his 1972 print *Emete Ayuvbi* (*Women Bathers at a Stream*). He writes that the name of this work.

refers to some beautiful women in Urhobo folktale . . . our women exhibit beautiful body patterns like those found on *adire* cloth, carved wooden figures or bronzes. Body marking is a corner-stone in African art.⁴⁵

This is a particularly revealing statement, not just because of the artist’s reference to his decorative sources but also because he suggests an equivalence among engraved surfaces: the body, wood, the wax used as the basis for brasscasting, the printing plate. This quotation also allows us to grasp the subtlety of means whereby Natural Synthesis could provide for the successful reinvention of an art for postcolonial Nigeria. Moreover, it reminds us how the sculptural traditions of the past showed us not the naked human body, but the body as socialized through another and prior art. Onobrakpeya’s art is not only a dominant force in Nigeria’s postindependence

modernity, it also reveals something we might otherwise not have noticed about the past, and about its continuity with the here and now. Onobrakpeya has given us a corpus of paintings, prints, sculptural installations, and collages over a period of more than 50 years, and his choice of subject matter, his formal clarity in the use of the human figure and in richly patterned surfaces, and his command of the printmaking medium are altogether unique and distinctive.

Onobrakpeya emerged from his student days as primarily a painter. His first professional appointment, in 1963, was as the art teacher at St. Gregory's College, Lagos. It was also around this time that he participated in printmaking workshops organized by Ulli Beier, the first in Ibadan in 1963, the second in Oshogbo in 1964, and, although he had learned about printmaking as a student, only now did it begin to take over from painting as his principal field of practice. It suited well the clear-cut forms of his chosen resources (body marking, textile design, and so forth), it encouraged the development of his skills as an illustrator of stories, and it allowed him to experiment and, through a happy coincidence of accidents, to develop his own unique set of techniques. It also enabled him to produce works of art in series, each of which could sell for less than a painting, encouraging the development of a local patronage for the new developments in Nigerian art.

St. Gregory's College was the premier Catholic school for boys in Nigeria, and although Onobrakpeya is not Catholic himself, a series of church commissions followed from his appointment at the college. It was fortuitous that among his fellow

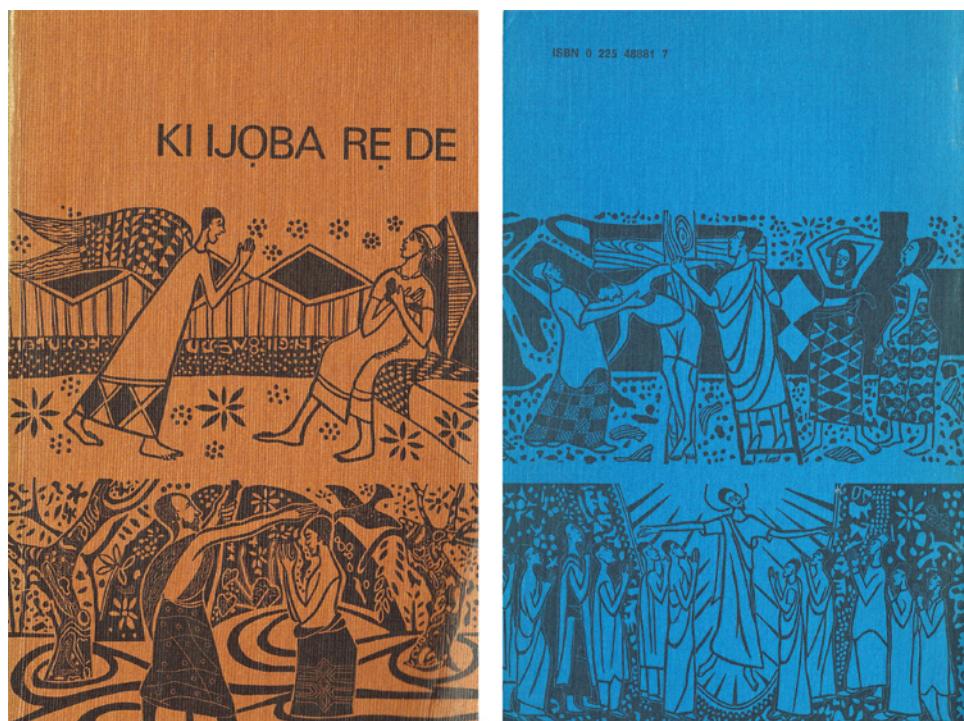


FIGURE 16.2 Bruce Onobrakpeya. *Ki Ijoba Re De* (*May Your Kingdom Come*), 1969. Printed cover for booklet. Collection John and Susan Picton.



FIGURE 16.3 Bruce Onobrakpeya. *Egbene (Talisman)*, about 1985, high relief copper plate used for a series of prints. Collection John and Susan Picton.

teachers was Father Patrick Carroll, brother of Father Kevin, who had initiated the process of “Nigerianizing” the material culture of Catholic Christianity. The first and perhaps most famous of these commissions was the series of 14 Stations of the Cross commissioned by Father Kevin Carroll in 1967 for the church of St. Paul’s in Ebute-Metta, on the Lagos mainland, in which the Passion narrative is set in the final days of colonial Nigeria in a series of paintings, each 3 meters in length by 1.2 meters in height. They are still there, perhaps the most important work of public art to emerge via Natural Synthesis; and they are as magnificent as the day they were painted, though sadly in ever more urgent need of conservation.⁴⁶ At the time they excited considerable controversy, given the then somewhat conservative attitudes of many Nigerian Catholics. Kevin Carroll nevertheless turned again to Onobrakpeya to illustrate a religious education textbook published in Yoruba in 1969 (Figure 16.2). Many other

church commissions followed, including a lectern for the private chapel of the apostolic delegate, the papacy's diplomatic representative in Nigeria (it was only later that this graduated to a nunciature).⁴⁷ Onobrakpeya employed linocut for a series of panels, from each of which he could take a series of prints. Then the panels were put together and sprayed with bronze for delivery to his ecclesiastical patron.

The ways in which Onobrakpeya employed the formal resources at his disposal (drawn from a variety of Nigerian visual repertoires) in painting and printmaking – also developing distinctive techniques of his own – taken together with Catholic church patronage, gave him the reputation, the financial wherewithal, and the confidence to enable him to retire from schoolmastering (Figure 16.3). He was able to maintain his own studio, with its assistants and apprentices; his practice developed taking in installation and collage; and, in recent years, through the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation, he has developed an art centre in his home community, Agbarha-Otor, where he has organized a series of annual workshops enabling groups of artists to work together over a period of four weeks.

In Conclusion

If this discussion had been just about words, it would be fairly sterile. What matters is the capacity of an artist, whether working alone or in collaboration with others, to make use of the resources contemporary with his or her immediate circumstances and thereby develop the tradition of practice of which he or she is a participant. In the cities of Abeokuta and Ibadan through the period of colonial rule, and in 1960s Lagos, this is what was happening. Change was in the air, as it were, and new forms came into being through a process of synthesis in which extant and novel elements were brought together, and “each was modern in its day.” Local modernities are founded in the ways in which elements of diverse origins become domesticated through their engagement in local circumstances, while the “contemporary” should properly be thought of as embracing everything “of the same time”: this is after all no more than its literal meaning! Textiles, dress, and fashion; masquerade; royal, chiefly, and elite ceremonial; public art and installation; photography, whether still or moving; all the practices associated with the art school and gallery system, and a great deal more besides: all of these things are, or may be, contemporary with each other and should be treated within the rubric of a “contemporary” African art. Each can be accounted for in any given location as an interdependent set of practices and art worlds, by which I mean the functionally interrelated institutions of education, patronage, and criticism. None of the forms and practices that characterize a given place and time should be imagined as an entirely self-contained entity sealed off from the modernity of which it is but one element, and the only exhibition that has come close to realizing all this was Susan Vogel’s 1990 *Africa Explores*. It is only by reckoning with all the forms and practices contemporary with a given place and time that we can begin to present (a) a realistic assessment of the achievements of any given artist; (b) an African modernism that is no longer dependent upon or determined by an “international” art world, an art world still shaped by Europe and America; and (c) an African modernism that is not a single enterprise but a complex series of parallel, interdependent, and ever-changing art worlds.

Notes

- 1 Kwami (2003, 319). See also Kwami (2002, 2013). Atta Kwami, also a contributor to the present volume, is an artist, curator, and art historian, whose knowledge and insight have proved invaluable in helping me to sort through some of my own ideas. I am also extremely grateful to Monica Visonà and Gitti Salami for their comments and advice in helping me bring this chapter to its present condition.
- 2 Lavanoux (1956, 9–10).
- 3 Ogbechie (2008).
- 4 Beier (1961).
- 5 Onabolu (1963).
- 6 Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne (1989).
- 7 Lévi-Strauss (1966, 17).
- 8 Haney (2010); also Revue Noire (1999).
- 9 In addition to Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne (1989) and Vogel (1991), see Magnin (2004) and Institute of Contemporary Arts (1991).
- 10 Stanislaus (1990).
- 11 Binder (2010); Kawaguchi (2010).
- 12 Vogel (1991, 12).
- 13 Revue Noire (1991, 1999). It is also worth noting Fall and Pivin (2002), the most comprehensive survey to that date, originally also published by Revue Noire.
- 14 Anyone familiar with a West African city will know what I mean!
- 15 Curated by Tom Phillips RA; see Phillips (1995).
- 16 See Picton (1996).
- 17 Curated by Clementine Deliss and others at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (Deliss 1995).
- 18 Curated by Carol Brown and John Picton at the Barbican Art Gallery (Picton 1995).
- 19 Curated by Magdalene Odundo for the Crafts Council.
- 20 *Big City*, curated by André Magnin and others for the Serpentine Art Gallery.
- 21 At the British Museum (Museum of Mankind; see Camp 1995).
- 22 Revue Noire (1999); see note 13 above.
- 23 I quote from memory so cannot vouchsafe complete accuracy; but the point is obvious enough!
- 24 *Africa Remix* was exhibited at Museum Kunst Palast, Dusseldorf, 2004; Hayward Gallery, London, 2005; Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2005; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2006; Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2007. See Njami (2005).
- 25 Beier (1968).
- 26 See Haney (2010, note 8).
- 27 Onabolu was driven to teach himself painting and drawing by the words of a colonial governor in Lagos, who said he could not understand why no African had ever sculpted a work of art or painted a picture!
- 28 Stevens had been appointed a little earlier to the Gold Coast, and it was knowing about Murray's students that encouraged Margaret Trowell in Uganda to set up an art class at Makerere. From one country to another the story will differ in regard to its details, but more often than not the general point is the same.
- 29 These developments were ignored by scholars until the 1980s so one can understand how we arrived at this position, but I do think the time has come to move on!

- 30 The excluded material falls into the category of the “traditional,” an invented category that is now the “Other” to the “contemporary.”
- 31 See Blazwick (2001, 278), the work is listed but not illustrated in the catalogue. It was loaned by the National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.
- 32 First published 1976, 2nd edition 1983, and reprinted several times since. The quotation here is from the 1988 Fontana reprint, p. 208.
- 33 Fw=immediate forerunner, F=French, IL=late Latin, rw=root word, L=Latin. Not that many accounts of modernism give photography its due place!
- 34 The European fetishization of the “modern” as if it were its exclusive property illustrates a problem contingent upon our making more of the words we use than those words deserve.
- 35 Byfield (2002).
- 36 Watson (2003).
- 37 Picton (2006).
- 38 For descriptions of the processes of preparing the dye and using it see Barbour and Simmonds (1971) and Picton and Mack (1989).
- 39 Peel (2000). I also touched on this in Picton (1994).
- 40 Picton (1995, 2004a).
- 41 See Beier (1961, note 4).
- 42 Bruce Onobrakpeya in Deliss (1995, 195). See also Onobrakpeya (1985, 1988, 1992, 2003). Also Picton (2004b) and Foss (2004) on marking and masking in the art of Bruce Onobrakpeya.
- 43 See Deliss (1995, 208).
- 44 Onobrakpeya (1992, 139).
- 45 They have never been properly photographed, described, or published.
- 46 Fully documented in Onobrakpeya (1992).
- 47 See Carroll (1967, 125) for the door carved by Ben Enwonwu in 1965 for the chapel of what would become the papal nunciature.

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A Century of Painting in the Congo

Image, Memory, Experience, and Knowledge

Bogumil Jewsiewicki

(*Translated from French by
Monica Blackmun Visonà*)

Introduction

The production of shared knowledge requires either the presence or the re-presentation¹ of its objects – as visual or auditory cues – in the time and space where people debate an issue. In stable social situations, events or items that are familiar to most people can be (virtually) brought to mind (remembered) through specific devices such as performances, proverbs, spiritual manipulations (“magic,” divination, etc.), or by stories relating personal experiences. Events that were unusual in rural Congo during the nineteenth century, including encounters with Europeans, could not be made present solely through the stories told by an individual. Since the link between an individual’s experience and the community’s shared knowledge was missing, the story of one person’s experience alone could not make the object of the account “present” for the group. In such situations, from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century, Congolese societies employed the two-dimensional image as device to “re-present” what could not otherwise be witnessed in the space of the village. This virtual or vicarious presence (re-presentation) was necessary to make a personal experience meaningful, as the production of knowledge needs three elements: its object, agency, and human experience.

Before artists painted images of foreign humans, objects, and unusual animals in order to re-present them in a context within which they were generally unknown, the walls of dwellings had been decorated with nonfigurative drawings that were usually ornamental. Some, however, made a spirit present during masquerades and other religious performance.² Those images did not describe nor re-present a spirit, but were devices “inviting” a spirit to visit the place at the time of a specific performance. From an analytic point of view, those drawings were symbolic. The new two-dimensional

images, on the other hand, were realistic. Not only did they “describe” the most important features of unknown items but also archived those items, making them available for future use if new stories would require refreshing the community’s knowledge about them. Making present what is absent, those images re-present items about which, or with which, this knowledge could be produced or updated.³

By the end of the nineteenth century, realistic images were widely used by Westerners “exploring” Central Africa as devices to capture and archive the unknown, and local people were then among the “objects” that were being captured – as well as being witnesses and, sometimes, collaborators in such image making. As Congolese artists became familiar with this type of ethnographic image, their paintings also re-presented people and objects in an image that transports across time (but also space) an item of knowledge. For those who have witnessed an event (such as an encounter with a European), it is an item of remembrance. Stories of the experience of having been an “actor” or observer of such an event can be performed facing the image re-presented in the mural. The realistic two-dimensional image entered the local visual culture as well as the local production of social memory. For at least a century, first in rural and later in urban settings, such images re-presented things and events that were absent, but which needed to be present in order to produce or to update social knowledge. New realistic two-dimensional images made shared encounters of social agency possible, validating new knowledge. An image with a story of experience puts social memory to work and produces shared memory.

In a very bold way, it is possible to say that Congolese people used two-dimensional re-presentations first to “capture” (to make happen then and there) what was absent from their space but belonging to their time (foreign technology, European cultural attitudes, etc.). Later, mainly in urban settings, the captured absence belonged rather to a different time (the past) but happened in the viewer’s own regional or local space. And, finally, more recently, as what had previously been unimaginable became a reality, people needed re-presentation to integrate this into local knowledge. Painters made images re-presenting child soldiers, suicides, newborns smothered by their mothers, and other stories which should not have happened in the viewer’s time or space yet had actually been the experiences of some individuals (Figure 17.1).

Initially drawn on external walls of village houses, the two-dimensional image migrated, by the mid-twentieth century, into the city. There it was painted on a piece of fabric stretched on four pieces of wood, becoming a picture. In a village, exposed to everyone’s view, the image was impossible to move; it could only be erased or replaced. In town, pictures circulated as merchandise, were portable, and were someone’s property, usually the owner of a house where they were hung. To see them, to share the experience of items they re-presented, one needed to be invited into this private space.

In reconstructing the relationships between the production and the reception of two-dimensional images, we must consider the phases of Congolese participation in (and domestication of) modernity. For the lands that are now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and neighboring countries, contacts with the outside world (and the globalization that resulted from these contacts) existed long before they became colonies. Depending upon the region, this first phase began between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries; it involved circulation of material culture but also exchanges of ideas and their representations. Colonial modernity began the second phase, to which the Congolese peoples submitted but from which, even at the outset, they tried to emancipate themselves in various ways. In the postcolonial period, the



FIGURE 17.1 Bwalia, *Rêve adolescent* (*Teenager's Dream*), 2000. Collection of B. Jewsiewicki.

third phase, despite varied degrees of political authoritarianism, new technologies have increased their access and their participation in the culture of the globalized world. Digital images now circulate more widely than paintings, as they more easily avoid bureaucratic barriers or political censorship.

Within these historical contexts, the two-dimensional image took different material forms. I dedicate a section to each in the following order. Figurative drawing on the exterior walls of village houses characterizes the first period.⁴ Next is the painting on canvas (the “*tableau*”) painted on a cloth support.⁵ It was made to be hung in the living room of an urban home, and circulated as merchandise. Then, coming in the wake of the comic strip, the digital technology used for the production of still and animated images was locally appropriated. The first two-dimensional images had been accessible to everyone, but access to recent images produced by digital technology (whether made in the region or imported from elsewhere) has been more restricted given the limited availability of computers. This phase will not be analyzed in the present chapter.

In addition to these three phases in the production of images, two “transversal” technologies were invented with new patterns of circulation. Handpainted advertisements adapted the technology of the wall drawings, the framed picture, and even the comic strip to the exterior walls of commercial establishments. Inviting the spectator to become a consumer, the image transforms an object or an action into merchandise. The portrait of a person showing his or her modern identity comes from photography, an “imported” technology that had been appropriated by African photographers working in Congolese cities by the late nineteenth century.⁶ Throughout the

Congo region, the small black-and-white photographic snapshot made for an identity document was copied and enlarged by a painter so that it could be hung in the living room as a color painting.

All these technologies, and the practices of their reception, arose as Congolese peoples were confronted by two major usages of the two-dimensional image. The first, which served Roman Catholic missionaries in their evangelization activities and in their teaching, was the religious icon, an explicitly artificial image. Expressly made by humans, the icon mediated between the divine and the believer, given that the material presence of the divinity was impossible to see. The image intercedes on behalf of the believer, but does not take the place of the divine; Catholic worshippers should thus abstain from the adoration of the icon itself.

The second, modern form of “practice” of the two-dimensional image was the creation of a scientific “specimen.” Unlike the “artificial” image of Catholic icon, the “natural” image re-presented a being who was absent in space but accessible to human senses because it was visible in the “natural world.” In the last decades of the nineteenth century, “natural history” as a system of knowledge arrived with explorers coming to Congolese territory in order to “discover” the “unknown” world. The activities they practiced, in which Congolese peoples participated, essentially consisted of gathering specimens and then exporting them.⁷ Although entire villages were transported and “reconstituted” in Europe, “collectors” were not able to carry off everyone and everything. The two-dimensional image in general, and photographs in particular, were therefore ways to transport samples through space and conserve them throughout time. Much has been written on how “natives” became “things” in the eyes of those who organized this practice of constituting knowledge, but we must remember that Africans have been observers and participants in these activities as well. When foreigners took “ethnographic” photographs, Congolese people were required to remove clothing, dress in clothing they did not wear every day, take a specific pose, etc. Thus local people were conscious of the artificial nature of such “realistic” re-presentations. Some explorers, for instance Lang and Chapin, showed the developed glass negatives to local people.⁸ In a few shots, one can see locals wearing Western clothing while watching photographs being made of their neighbors as ethnographic objects. The Congolese peoples were thus exposed to the idea and the practice of the “natural” image, one that did not only capture and preserve the real, but one that would make it reappear in another time and location.

For each of the two technologies discussed (murals and paintings on canvas), the material form of the image and the conditions of its reception correspond to an intellectual system that makes sense of the world. Each system of knowledge results from a different, but always dynamic, combination of what some Africanist scholars have labeled the *episteme* and *gnosis*.⁹ The image mediates between individual experience acquired by someone and a body of knowledge shared in a community. If each image comes with a story, the image is not its illustration but a bridge between information acquired by one’s senses, placed by an individual into an organized structure of knowledge (which V. Y. Mudimbe might regard as *epistemic*) and a collective understanding of the world based upon ongoing ways of knowing (characterized by Mudimbe as *gnostic*). As is the case with the written word, the two-dimensional image becomes a medium of production and circulation of knowledge stretched between the two different systems.

Figurative Drawings on the External Walls of Village Houses

Using the photographic or naturalistically drawn image, European explorers captured a world that was “exotic” for them. Items re-presented on images were later organized into knowledge, according to their episteme. The images drawn on walls of houses were inspired by photography, while they also drew upon what the Congolese artists and patrons knew of modernity, and what was “exotic” for them.¹⁰ Yet, unlike photography, understood at that time in the West as objective evidence, these drawings did not pretend to be the nonmediated presence of that which they captured. Rather, as a “vicarious presence,” the re-presentation of the drawing “made present” that which was important about a being, or an object, as related in someone’s experience. The image assumes the role of “witness” in that it testifies to a memory of a past experience that people consider pertinent in the present. It does not only depict what someone’s eye had seen and ear had heard, but it makes the memory of an experience told by one person available to the rest of the community. A figurative image was modern because it made a personal experience of modernity available as a contribution to the shared knowledge of a rural population. Unlike a message sent by spirits or by ancestors, and conveyed by someone’s dream or trance, figurative images on murals were produced for, and received in, a public space where the concerns of the community were debated. In cases of both nonfigurative and figurative drawings,¹¹ the communication that images initiate makes what they re-present, either symbolically,¹² or realistically, “social actors” in a performance. As in a masquerade, the shared viewing gives life to a character, initiates actions,¹³ “makes things happen” as if a spirit or an exotic character (such as a white man) were there. Bringing in contemporary elements is not unique to two-dimensional images, as masked characters from modern life appear in performances of the Pende people.¹⁴

The available documentation permits us to follow the practice of drawing figurative images on the walls of village houses for more than a century (c.1870–c.2010). Although our knowledge of architectural history in the DRC and neighboring countries is very inadequate, it seems that earlier wall decoration was primarily abstract or symbolic, or both, in many regions adapted to buildings made of woven rather than plastered walls. In the colonial era, plastered walls became more widespread. The available documentation suggests that the practice of painting figurative murals was particularly widespread until the 1940s. Later, the commoditization of the rural economy, the growing impact of kinfolk working in urban areas, and wider access to photography, can partially explain changing tastes as villagers emulated urban life. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the external observers just stopped paying attention to them, depriving us of evidence.¹⁵ Very recently, both figurative and geometric drawings on dwellings in the South Katanga, in this case made by women rather than men, were photographed. Anecdotal evidence suggests the practice has been continuous, but one cannot exclude a possible revival related to changes in local gender relations, and new active roles for women in commoditized agriculture.¹⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s, I received information about a new style of images on the exterior walls of village homes. Such “reproductions” of urban paintings referred to city culture and its institutions. On one wall with the large image of a siren, or *mami wata*,¹⁷ the inscription says “Cine [movie theater] Bedong,” but there was no movie theater (and, in fact, no electricity) in the village where it was located (Figure 17.2).¹⁸



FIGURE 17.2 Unknown artist. Drawing on a house of the Kwango region, in the southwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1980. Photograph by Benoît Quersi.

In this volume, another chapter is dedicated to Tshelatendu (or Djilatendo), an artist who transposed his drawings on houses onto paper at the request of a colonial “patron.”¹⁹ I will therefore limit myself to recalling a few basic considerations about figurative images in order to introduce, as an example, my reading of a watercolor on paper from the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren, Belgium, that was created by a Paul Mapinda, in 1933.²⁰ He was one of many draftsmen given art supplies by a “patron” who had been influenced by the success of George Thiry, the colonial official who exported Tshelatendu’s paintings.²¹ Unfortunately, with the exception of Mapinda’s signature and the year, we lack information about the watercolor. As author, Mapinda positioned himself as if he were “photographing” from the outside space, the “photographed” act happening in a European’s space. He opens separate spaces, separate levels of interaction between memory, depiction, and the construction of knowledge. Inserted within an explicit frame, his picture is “modern.” Drawings on wall have no frames, except when a painter depicts a Western framed image such as a photographic portrait of an official.²²

One is struck by the presence, in this image, of a photographer at work, a situation only briefly and infrequently encountered at that time by local people. If one trusts the direction of his camera, the photographer is capturing a type of scene that is characteristic of paintings on the walls of houses. A white woman holds a child by the hand – a behavior peculiar to white people. Colors and styles of dress suggest that the three characters are part of the same family. Mapinda depicts the photographer in the act of doubling the presence of the woman and child. He can suggest that the procurement of their “natural” image is akin to the practice of “natural history”; the photograph which the photographer

is producing will be sent away elsewhere; a practice people were familiar with in the 1920s. In addition to being aware of the ethnographic photographs described above, Mapinda would know that migrants working in towns sent studio photos of themselves home, often with a bicycle or a sewing machine, wearing Western style clothing.

Under the photographer, two other white people are seated at a table, each seated in a chair. A dog is lying at their feet while they share a meal whose utensils (disproportionately large in relationship to the characters) are in evidence. The image permits one to see a zone of intimacy between white people. Unless they were servants, few Congolese people had had this experience in the 1930s. As in murals, the drawing presents that which would only have been seen by a few, a depiction that recalls a recounting of the experience.

Finally, to the lower left of the image, three animals – and a circle that probably represents the sun – are sketched. The drawing is not meant to be specific. Instead, it delivers to social knowledge a rapport with beings with whom communication is possible as long as it is mediated. Like a masquerade or a statue manipulated by an expert, the drawing makes a link available between members of the community and powerful, or even spiritual, beings.

The design of the border (or frame), and the circle of the sun, share the same motif and the same colors. Does this indicate that the composition is placed within a single interpretive framework or is this just an aesthetic choice? Mapinda's work raises questions about the relationship between the artificial image as a witness to an individual's experience of something, and the natural image as the presence of a specimen of the "real" world. He also seems to depict two ways of making social knowledge: one that someone can call "traditional," reconnecting with nonhuman or superhuman beings and the other more recent, connecting someone's experience with the re-presentation of the experienced object.

Pictures on Canvas

The presence of paintings on canvas inside urban homes in what is today the DRC has been documented only for the 1960s and afterwards. As noted above, such pictures appeared only after figurative murals had been painted for a century. The decline of painted murals in villages could be parallel with the expansion of paintings in urban homes, but the data are too scarce to support such an assumption. Of course, there is a close relationship between the local success of an urban house, with a living room as the space under the control of the head of the family (then always a man), and the expansion of the production and circulation of framed paintings.

The technique of oil painting on canvas had been practiced in the Congo region for at least a decade earlier within three ateliers of "decorative" painting organized by Europeans: Pierre Romain-Desfossés in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi, in the DRC), Maurice Alhadeff in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC), and the "school" of Poto-Poto at Brazzaville (now the capital of the Republic of Congo).²³ These were initiations to a new technology of painting as well as lessons on how to adapt one's work to the taste of foreign clients. European "entrepreneurs" expected their Congolese protégés to create "naïve painting," to exteriorize the intimate world of an "authentic" African not yet "corrupted" by the modern world. They were invited to depict the zoological and vegetal imaginary of their "tribe."

Although they were sincere for their era, these promoters seem strikingly naive today. Interviews with painters by Johannes Fabian²⁴ show that, at least in the Katanga region, painters did not come to the Romain-Desfossés atelier because their “natural talent” had been “discovered” by him, but because the artists chose to change pictorial genres, and because they were anxious to get access to a new clientele. Furthermore, the adaptation of artistic and craft production to the needs of a new public and a new market was not a new phenomenon in Central Africa. Jan Vansina has shown that in the 1920s, in the Kuba kingdom, Western missionaries and the king himself commercialized both sculpture and raffia fiber weaving for export to the West.²⁵ Even earlier, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Frobenius had suggested that the artisans of the Kasai region responded to the demand of explorers and collectors by increasing the production of objects adapted to their interests and expectations. During the same period, in the northeast of the country, anthropomorphic decoration on objects sold or offered to Westerners responded to their tastes.²⁶ In the 1930s, mural painters were engaged in a similar process, when, upon the initiative of colonial “patrons,” image makers such as Mapinda became “artists” producing images for the Western market.²⁷ Watercolors on paper inspired by the drawings on village houses became merchandise sent overseas. As the process was set up by the “patron,” the artist’s remuneration did not vary according to the sale price of the painting and he was not in contact with clients.

Apparently it was not until the 1960s that some painters tapped into the Congolese demand for their own version of pictures, serving clients who had imported notions about how to make a living room enjoyable. In the 1950s, colonial propaganda had offered models of a monogamous, man-centered urban family, and of a modern house suitable to such a “modern” social unit. In magazines for Africans, an illustrated living room is shown with its “modern” equipment – including a phonograph and a fan, as well as images on the walls. Those images are framed photos, illustrated calendars, or images cut out of magazines and framed. To my knowledge, the earliest paintings on canvas made locally for African clients – all around 1960 – are either portraits, or images of the Congolese independence ceremonies. One can only speculate that painters from ateliers run by Westerners then began to work on different subjects and for different clients. Following independence, the feeling of political and cultural autonomy could have been responsible for a new demand for living room decorations best adapted to local issues, while the postindependence crises deprived painters of their Western clientele.

A new space of socialization between equals was surely the preamble to the Congolese invention of the object we designate as the “picture,” or “tableau.” In inscribing the image upon a mobile support, artists produced a picture that could be viewed in a setting where the singular object articulated an experience with a vision of the world shared by members of this new urban class of specialized workers, teachers, and small businessmen. A selection mechanism was necessary so that the imagination and skill of each painter could connect with the social memory and aesthetic appreciation of this new group of patrons. The urban market was such a mechanism; paintings circulated as merchandise between the painters and the clients. In a society based upon oral communication (in cities it was a postscriptural orality),²⁸ successful sales expressed clients’ appreciation for the works of entrepreneurs who were in competition with each other. In all my interviews, people talked about asking for the name of a painter, when they liked the painting in someone’s house, in order to obtain the

same picture. Their new painting would not be a true copy of the one they admired, because the new painting was made from visual memory by the painter and adapted to the client's version of social memory; for example, the artist might inquire about the client's home region.

The living room, or "salon," of the single family home explicitly constituted a space that affirmed the authority of the head of the household (or *chef de famille*) as husband and father. The monetary revenues of this man, who received a salary, or who was a businessman or artisan, permitted the family to participate in the global market economy. He had mastered relationships with family members (relations still considered to be "traditional") while also operating within the modern world (one organized around merchandise).²⁹ This man advertised his status by presenting evidence of modernity: radio, gramophone or record player, refrigerator (which was placed in the living room), and pictures on the walls. In a recurring performance, the owner opened the windows of his salon so that the neighbors could appreciate the music of his radio or gramophone (and, later, his television set).³⁰ In the 1970s, the salon increasingly became a site where identity and social knowledge were reproduced around the pictures decorating its walls. When men met there to drink and talk, paintings fed performative exchanges of stories of personal experiences related to what was re-presented by the painting. While, in a village, one image on the wall of a dwelling was sufficient, thousands of pictures were needed in town because each salon was the site of a separate performance. Yet because the painting on canvas circulated as merchandise available to everyone able to pay its price (in 1970s the average price for locals was the equivalent of between three and five bottles of beer), it constituted a link between numerous salons in a town, a region, even the entire country.³¹

During the 1970s, there were hundreds of thousands of living rooms, and tens of thousands of painters produced pictures,³² mainly depicting events of 1960 or the most striking memories of the precolonial and colonial past. Alongside urban music, these images participated in the emergence of national urban culture, a shared commonality. By itself, the picture did nothing other than decorate the living room of its buyer and provide income for the painter. Yet, as was the case for murals, the picture kept available the social space where someone's memory of something or someone could be recounted and recalled. It was the performative interaction between memories and the image that could reproduce beings and objects that were physically absent but nevertheless re-presented in the pictures. Gathered in the salon, men recounted singular histories inspired by a picture in order to bring into the present their experiences of the same act. While facing a painting such as *Colonie Belge* (Belgian Colony; Figure 17.3), their aim is not only to remember the past, but above all to understand how an ordinary person is related to the modern nation-state. The dialectic between the singular and the universal places this image at the heart of the work of memory, which enlightens the present with a past considered to be pertinent to it. But unlike murals, this dialectic also governed the rapport between the image (especially when it re-presents an event, or an important political figure such as Patrice Lumumba) and the painting on canvas itself (which circulates as merchandise because it belongs to a global world). As merchandise, paintings are goods that belong to those who can afford them. Thus the image on a painting opens the virtual space where Congolese events or people (such as Lumumba) connect with the universal, even if Congo history is bounded by lines of race, region, or ethnicity. In this context, the martyred Patrice Lumumba can be painted as a Congolese Christ, savior of all the oppressed on the Earth.³³



FIGURE 17.3 Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. *Belgian Colony*, 1973. Collection of B. Jewsiwicki.

Let us analyze, as an example, the picture called *Colonie Belge* (Belgian Colony) (a genre known in the DRC as “*colonie Belge*”; see Figure 17.3). The image re-presents the administering of punishment – a whipping – to a prisoner stretched on the ground. The scene takes place in front of the regional administration building. In the majority of the pictures, the Belgian flag rather than the flag of the colony flies from a pole. In the background, other prisoners who await their whipping are attached to each other as if they were participating in forced labor. This feature seems to come from another genre known as “slave caravan,” a depiction that goes back to memories of the slave trade. The women who bring food to the prisoners express their suffering by placing their hand against their cheek.³⁴ The Congolese soldier manipulates the whip under the eyes of the white man in uniform, who stands or is seated at a table, the symbol of administrative authority. During the colonial period this punishment was a common experience, and yet it was so painful because the dishonor of being stripped naked in public was added to the physical suffering involved. To some degree, the image represents the relationship of the ordinary person to the state, the slave’s submission to the master. The body of the prisoner is marked by the colors of the Belgian flag (yellow, black, red): to the yellow and black lines of the shirt on the upper body are added the lines of blood traced by the whip on the buttocks. *Colonie Belge* recalls the humiliation that was the central feature of the colonial experience. Whippings were mentioned by the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in a famous speech of June 30, 1960,³⁵ while those who claimed the benefits of modernity for the people of Congo, as did the prophet Simon Kimbangu, were said to have the power to “break the whip.”³⁶

The “*colonie Belge*” seems influenced by cultural memory of some European images depicting the slave trade and its abolition, and was used in the campaign against the

atrocities perpetrated in the time of “red rubber” by King Leopold’s administrators in the Congo Free State, and in appeals to human rights during and after the colonial period.³⁷ For example, a picture by a Belgian painter (*La civilisation au Congo* by Edouard Mandau, 1884)³⁸ depicts the use of the whip during King Leopold’s reign of terror.³⁹ It recalls as well the famous image of the punishment of a slave tied to four stakes (known from an engraving of an 1843 painting by the French artist Marcel Verdier), *Le châtiment de quatre piquets*, which was widely used by abolitionists to influence public opinion in the West. The similarity of these compositions to the iconography of “colonie Belge” is too obvious to be coincidental, even if their relationship is difficult to document. Is it possible that Mandau’s picture was known from an engraving on the cover of an issue of the colonial newsletter, the *Moniteur du Congo*? Social memory holds no trace of this. Without a doubt, reproductions of the *Flagellation of Christ* by the Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesa may also have been seen by Congolese painters, as they illustrated missionary publications. Its visual memory can give legitimacy to the depiction of whipping not as humiliation, but as an elevation of the suffering body stretched on the ground, and, finally, to the symbolic claim for political recognition. Again, one hears here an echo of Lumumba’s speech. Clearly, in addition to speaking to a national experience of colonialism, this Congolese image relates to Christian themes in order to gain global audience.

Let us briefly evoke an image with another form of global currency. This picture depicts a feminine spirit in the body of a fair-skinned woman who procures resources and modern power for a man.⁴⁰ In most of the region she is known as *mami wata*, a name brought by the first employees and soldiers recruited by the colonial state from West Africa (see Figure 17.2), but her name in the Katanga region of DRC, *mamba muntu*, signifies “crocodile/snake person.” Many Congolese people claim that when a man has a personal relationship with a *mami wata*, his success – a beautiful automobile, a modern house, professional promotions, or political power – has a price. He will pay this with the lives of his close relatives, whom he sacrifices to the mermaid, and rumors linked the most powerful of all the *mami wata* in Congo to the rapacious former president of Zaire, Mobutu.⁴¹ The stories of real people’s experiences – brought up by a framed picture of *mami wata* – described the experience of someone else, as no one would admit to having relations with her. In the accounts were embedded social memories of bachelors working in town and their involvement with the *femme libre*, or “free woman,” who loans herself out for domestic services in return for remuneration.⁴² Socially sterile, because no dowry has been paid, the women do not enter into a legitimate marriage, and this arrangement prevents a man from increasing the number of his dependents.⁴³ Probably for that reason, *mami wata* has the features of a black woman only when she is explicitly portrayed as a *femme libre*.

The specific histories attributed to *mami wata* participated in the construction of systems of knowledge and ethics that respond to the tensions between the village and the town, between the community and the individual, between “tradition” and “modernity.” It is no accident that the picture was hung in the salon where such stories were exchanged. A salon was the evidence of a man’s success in the modern world (he must have succeeded in the modern world to have such a house) and his modern identity was displayed here; But if his relatives came in from the village, they were not hosted in the salon.

Let us take a last picture, a generic image of the village or rural landscape. Despite its apparent banality, this was not only addressed to “tourists” as has often been stated.

Certain pictures carry the inscription “my village.” In urban Congo, one does not publicize one’s rural origins, or one’s ethnic affiliation, either by dress, or by the form and organization of the house, because these are modern. However, it is still politically important to have a “home village.” One traces one’s origins to this village, where the last male ancestor of rural origin was born, and it is a place of refuge or a destination for exile in case of political conflicts. Therefore, this picture constituted a political declaration of citizenship by ethnic affiliation. Since it was a “portrait” of national and ethnic identity, the village or rural landscape must be generic. It is the fact of being descended from a man born in the village that matters more than the memory of a specific community of origin. Thus the proximity of these images to airport art is no accident.⁴⁴

In addition to these images, which circulated nationally, there were also those which responded to an experience that occurred locally, but might re-present the event for a national audience. For example, the pictures of the Congolese rebellions of 1963–1965 sit at the intersection of national and regional memory.⁴⁵ During the 1960s, in what was the golden age of urban painting, adults had been marked by the traumatic experiences of those armed conflicts. National memory, largely influenced by the propaganda circulated by Mobutu (who claimed to have legitimized his power by crushing these rebellions), only recalled their extreme violence in generic terms. Regional memory, however, elaborated upon by local events, often retained references to the capacity of specific groups to resist central power. To fulfill a commission, painters needed to know this local memory. If they came from elsewhere, they needed to learn about it. For example, the painter called Londe came to Bunia, in eastern DRC, from Kisangani, a town to the southwest. In Kisangani he had painted an image of the “rebellions” by depicting parachutists jumping into the airport. In Bunia, he mainly painted the battle that was fought over the Tinda Bridge. In the province of Katanga, the experience of the rebellions was represented by the “Balubakat Youth” attacking a train.⁴⁶

After the 1980s, a number of pictures refer to the fact that for the Congolese people, rumor is inseparable from news reported by the modern media. The press is read by few people (newspapers cost too much) but the information it provides is diffused from ear to ear. Painters make an event visible, extracting it from time, for although it is unique, it is potentially charged with information on society and the world. Painters re-present facts considered to be extraordinary; such events include suicides or infanticides, incest, child soldiers (Figure 17.1), or (more prosaically) the poverty that forces a family to transport the mortal remains of a loved one to the burial ground via a bicycle or a cart instead of a hearse. The pictures obviously are only relevant for a short time because the continuing degradation of the socioeconomic situation quickly makes an event initially seen as pathological be regarded later as banal. The rhythm in which the unthinkable situation emerges in the present is only equaled by the speed of its banalization. Painters have not been able to keep up with this rhythm, just as their clients have not been able to permit themselves to ceaselessly replace their pictures. Furthermore, unemployment has dealt a fatal blow to the authority of the head of the family, while urban poverty and the arrival of massive numbers of refugees from the war zones has transformed the salon into a bedroom. The painting on canvas has lost its reason for being. The economic crisis and the pressures of Christian fundamentalist religion are the reasons why bars are closing, so there is no new demand for paintings in those establishments. About the same time painted publicity was no

longer visible because, in the early 1990s, looting had reduced commercial buildings to ruins. Since that time, commercial activities have been too informal and too ephemeral to justify painted advertisements, while the newly emerging commercial structure – the urban supermarket – belongs to a foreign commercial culture. Today the political world rarely calls upon painters, even if political activity (such as demonstrations and other expressions of support for Mobutu's regime) once constituted a market for the fabrication of banners.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, numerous painters have changed occupations in order to survive. Innumerable new Congolese churches are iconoclastic, or at least hostile to secular images. Poverty prohibits all nonessential expenses, while individuals struggle for recognition within the space of religious sociability. Biblical verses rather than religious images appear on cars, as well as on briefcases and on the surfaces of other personal objects. One carries with oneself a new Christian identity and looks to divine protection from the pathologies of the present time: unemployment, sickness, and personal failure.

Fifty years after the fight for independence, memories of those events are no longer visible on paintings. Young people do not attribute the failure of modernization to colonization, or even to Mobutu, but to their fathers. For many of them, the cultural memories of modernity merge with the precolonial epics. According to Central African traditions, kept alive in past centuries through sculpture and masquerades as well as in narratives, the heroic founder of a political community took great risks in leaving his community for the wilderness. Few dared to undertake such adventures, rare were those who returned, and only exceptional beings succeeded in founding a new political order. Early twentieth-century migrants who left their home village to find work are sometimes presented as founders of industrial modernity and forefathers (ancestors) of the young generation.

In the dangerous contemporary world, each Congolese individual has a responsibility to clear a road for himself or herself, to succeed or to perish. The role of images in these struggles is not yet clear. The distant world is present in a cascade of images spilling out of television, the Internet, and the videocassette, which mix the local and global in a kaleidoscope. Even with limited access to the Internet, the visual culture of urban youth today is digital. Young photographers such as Sammy Baloji attempt to go beyond the rupture between generations.

Baloji's photomontaged heroes are ordinary workers who in the early twentieth century were thrown into a colonial industrial world that was barbarous and ultimately violent. Baloji's re-presentation of the postindustrial landscape opens itself up to the return of these migrant workers.⁴⁷ As founding fathers of local modernity, they are called to redress the failing social and political order of the postcolony. In conversation, Baloji often reminds us that in the Congo, as all over the modern world, industrial societies were made by migrants coming from nearby, as well as from far distant places.⁴⁸ Yet Baloji and other visual artists working in the DRC today seem to have had little impact on local culture, as the images they create have very limited local circulation. After a century during which paintings contributed to shared knowledge of Congolese communities, we now must ask, can a society maintain itself without its own visual culture?

Notes

- 1 I use the term “re-present” to denote “making the absent present” while I reserve “represent” to denote “to depict, to make appear.” I thank Jan Vansina and Allen Roberts for their comments on an early version of this chapter.
- 2 Scohy (1955).
- 3 See Förster, chapter 27 this volume.
- 4 Jewsiewicki (1991); also see Langenohl, chapter 8 this volume.
- 5 Fabian (1996); Jewsiewicki (2003a); Verbeek (2008). Verbeek’s collection can be seen on the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale (2010) website.
- 6 See Geary, chapter 4 this volume.
- 7 This quasi-obsession, rather than any Christian teaching, was probably the inspiration for the rumor that whites captured and then “exported” the souls of Congolese people, a rumor that has persisted since the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 8 Schildkrout and Keim (1990).
- 9 I refer the reader to Fabian (1969) who relates Early Christian notions of *gnosis* to those of religious groups in what is now the DRC; then to Mudimbe (1980), who opposes African forms of *gnosis* to European observations that are filtered by an episteme.
- 10 Much earlier than the nineteenth century, Congolese artists sculpted as well as engraved figurative representations of Europeans and objects they brought on ivories. See Bridges, chapter 3 this volume.
- 11 Scohy (1955).
- 12 Faïk-Nzaji (1992).
- 13 Strother (1999).
- 14 Strother (1999).
- 15 I recently asked Leon Verbeek, whose fieldwork has been in the rural area south of Lubumbashi but who is also a student of urban art in Katanga, if he had ever noticed wall drawings in southern Katanga. He replied yes, he had, but that at that time he had paid no attention to them.
- 16 Personal communications of Hubert Maheux, Patrick Mudekereza, and Manon Denoun as well as visual documentation. A French NGO, *African Artists for Development*, is working on an exhibit of drawings transposed on paper, made by women from Makwacha village. A catalogue will be published.
- 17 See Drewal, chapter 2 this volume.
- 18 Benoît Quersin, a musicologist, kindly took a few photos for me in southwestern Congo.
- 19 See Langenohl, chapter 8 this volume, and Jewsiewicki (1991).
- 20 The watercolor is illustrated in Jewsiewicki (2003a, 74).
- 21 See Thiry (1982).
- 22 A photograph of a drawing on a house that includes what appears to be a framed portrait of the Belgian King Albert I is in the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, and is illustrated in Jewsiewicki (2003a, 63).
- 23 See Cornet et al. (1989) and comments on Poto-Poto in Grabski, chapter 14 this volume.
- 24 Personal communication. Some of these interviews are available on the Language and Popular Culture in Africa (n.d.) website.
- 25 Vansina (2010).
- 26 Schildkrout and Keim (1990).

- 27 Sabine Cornelis (2009) rightly remarks that they are folk paintings, in the same way Belgian artists who represented life and people in the Belgian Congo were folk artists.
- 28 Jewsiewicki (2008a).
- 29 See Meier, chapter 5 this volume for a “culture of things.”
- 30 The Congolese initially listened to “modern” music on the loudspeakers installed and controlled by the colonial administration (Jewsiewicki 2003b). Through their “salons,” Congolese men were able to exert a similar authority over their neighbors. On the culture of modern music, see Nadeau-Bernatchez (2012).
- 31 Jewsiewicki and Plankensteiner (2001).
- 32 Verbeek (2008).
- 33 Jewsiewicki (1999).
- 34 The symbolism of this gesture is found in positions taken by mourners today as well as in old statues from the Kongo kingdom. Also see Bridges, chapter 3 this volume.
- 35 Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) and Jewsiewicki (2011b).
- 36 Vellut (2005).
- 37 Hochschild (1998).
- 38 The painting is in the collection of the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale (see Cornelis 2007).
- 39 Evans (2002).
- 40 See Drewal, chapter 2 this volume.
- 41 Jewsiewicki (2008b).
- 42 White (1990).
- 43 Traditionally, wealth was made of dependents (children, slaves, clients, etc.) rather than goods, as is the case for modern wealth.
- 44 Jules-Rosette (1992).
- 45 Verhaegen (1966); Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002).
- 46 Kennes (2009).
- 47 Jewsiewicki (2010b).
- 48 Jewsiewicki (2010a, 2011a).

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Part VI



Perspectives on Arts of the African Diaspora

Visual Expressivity in the Art of the Black Diaspora Conjunctions and Disjunctures

dele jegede

Introduction

Is there any such thing as African art history? If there is, what are its constituents? Who narrates whom into whose history and on whose terms? James Elkins's exploration of what he calls the "westernness of methodologies" triggers further examination of the currency of terms that are continually employed in the discourse of African art historians.¹ How pervasive is the art history/anthropological model, which came into existence when Western scholars first began to study African art forms? How are the terms used in African art history a function of the sociopolitical culture that gave birth to the discipline? I am concerned with the modes of narration established for what I would define as Black Art, which is inclusive of the art produced by artists of African descent, regardless of geographic location. Of equal interest to me are the challenges of setting parameters for a discourse on the multifarious facets of modern and contemporary art in the African Diaspora. Be it traditional, modern, or contemporary, African art came into being on the terms and conditions that were set by Western interests, from scholars to collectors, museums to curators.

African Diaspora is used here to mean the dispersal of Africans to the New World through the Atlantic slave trade. In recent decades, this term has been used to encompass Africans (and their descendants) who migrated to the USA or Europe in pursuit of education or to boost their earning power and improve their standards of living. Of particular interest to me is the exploration of the constellation of factors that have, beginning in the 1990s, propelled the visibility of, and critical reception for, the work of contemporary artists of the African Diaspora. The rise of mega curators of African descent, which is a concomitant of this shift, has attracted critical reactions from diverse constituencies, including those in Africa. More than at any time in the annals of contemporary African art, the last two decades have had the most impact, and

certainly been the most productive, in highlighting the activities and profiles of artists beyond the immediacy of their localities. The age of globalization is upon us.

Within the framework of this paper, globalization relates to the transformative process that occurs when art produced within one geocultural locale is encultured within another regional or continental zone, absorbed into a global archive, and becomes easily accessed. In this, a confluence of factors – economic, scholarly, curatorial, migratory, and ideological among others – is at play. The context that provides the *raison d'être* for artistic production is as essential as the factors that motivate or disincentivize the producers. How are all of these interconnected? This paper historicizes the globalization of contemporary African art by examining the philosophical and theoretical postulates – in the USA and Africa – that created the tension without which the success of the last two decades would not have been possible.

Globalizing the Canon

Perhaps the solution to the problem of constructing an art historical epistemology that is cognizant of the distinctive cultural and socioreligious variables in Africa, one that accommodates the uniqueness of localized aesthetics, does not subsist in grafting it onto a rigidly Western canon. Can art history be global through the deployment of academic models that make North America and Western Europe the sole canonical gateway? James Elkins provides a terse but apt response: “Art history as it currently is practiced is itself an impediment to thinking about worldwide ways of telling art’s history.”² In her analysis of the pervasiveness of the ascription of a primitive ontology to African art and the perpetuation of Otherness in dominant texts on art history, Monni Adams concludes that such observations were spurred by “the widespread, negative notion of sub-Saharan African thought as superstitious practices, lacking the higher values intrinsic to European civilization.”³ In the 1960s, the Other was a primitive, nonliterate savage who had no history, and whose art – child-like and emotive – was not guided by any formalist or aesthetic paradigms. The art was that of “classless societies,” produced by people “who have been oriented toward the use of tools but not machines.”⁴

That was then. Today, we are accustomed to the feigned apologia that often accompanies the use of those worn-out pejoratives; we are familiar with the quaint concessions that are thrown out as a decoy for the deployment of those terms that allow one group to impose the operative terms of engagement on the other. Many scholars have expressed their disavowal of the use of the term “primitive” as a qualifier for African art. Just as the use of this contested term begins to recede, yet another term, “non-Western,” appears to have emerged as a substitute. This new term enjoys widespread usage perhaps because of its beguiling innocuousness. Yet, it is no less presumptuous, arrogant, and imperious. As a term, it essentializes the Eurocentric mindset, which would stop at nothing to assert its hegemony by defining others through the negation of their essence. The “non” in non-Western typifies the audaciousness of the West to diminish the Other by refusing to acknowledge origination and differentness. The term is in accord with the view, which dates back to antiquity, to the effect that Africa is an inhospitable, opprobrious place that was populated by barbarians and savages – precisely a geographical agglomeration that shall remain unknown except through negation. Categorizations like this reify entrenched prejudices and promote mutual suspicion along racial divides.

In the African Diaspora, the tools that are deployed in contesting the architecture of cultural (dis)orientation and engaging hegemonic proclivities have, for quite some time, been dominated by a mélange of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, literature, anthropology, and history. The dominant ideological platform for this contestation, both on the African continent and among Black Americans, is Pan-Africanism. As a doctrinal tool, Pan-Africanism rallied all persons of African descent, within and outside of Africa, in a unified front against forces of imperialism and colonialism. It promoted racial pride and inspired Blacks to assert their individuality and embrace their glorious history and cultural heritage. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the perniciousness of racism in the USA and the advancement of colonialism in Africa led prominent Black American, Caribbean, and African leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Henry Sylvester Williams, and Kwame Nkrumah to work in concert against colonialism and the oppression of the Black race.⁵ The spirit that inspired Pan-Africanism – the urge to assert the African voice in the unending cycles of struggle – would find explication through various disciplines, and articulation by sundry personages. It provided the intellectual inspiration for Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor as they met in the early 1930s in Paris to formulate the literary ideology of Négritude. It was channeled by the revolutionary, theorist, and intellectual, Frantz Fanon, even as he critiqued Négritude and mounted a cerebral attack on the conditions that sustain mental and physical subjugation. In later years, this spirit would inspire Reparation, the postcolonial movement initiated by the wealthy Nigerian politician and global entrepreneur, M. K. O. Abiola, winner of the 1992 Nigerian presidential election, who died in detention in 1998.

In the visual arts, the impact of colonization has been no less visceral. Because of their power as the physical embodiment of fugitive and conceptual ideals, the visual arts bear the scars of those brutal encounters that colonialism perpetrated in Africa. The visual arts also offer ample evidence of the fierce and often gallant resistance that was mounted by Africans against European colonialists, missionaries, and “explorers.” In Benin City, Nigeria, such an encounter culminated in the humiliation of a revered leader, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, who was banished to exile in Calabar in 1897, after the burning of the city, its looting, and the dispersal of its immense creative wealth.⁶ In Ile-Ife, the 1910 visit by the German ethnologist, Leo Frobenius, aroused great controversy, not the least for his disparagement of the creative ingenuity of the Yoruba race. While acknowledging the splendor of the artworks that he encountered in Ife, Frobenius, apparently still possessed of the mindset of European superiority, could not reconcile himself to the reality that he faced; he had to ascribe the works to the lost Greeks of Atlantis, a mythical tribe that he considered superior to the Yoruba at Ife.

Only a few years before Frobenius traveled to the ancient Yoruba city of Ile-Ife, Pablo Picasso and a handful of Parisian avant-garde artists had come under the spell of some African pieces, which were available in shops and at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. The objects, which poured into Paris from various Central and West African peoples, notably the Kota peoples of Gabon and the Baule of Côte d’Ivoire, were expendable booty from European colonial adventures. The successful appropriation of the formal principles that informed these African pieces contributed in no small measure to the evolution of Cubism. Nearly eight decades after Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was unveiled, William Rubin’s major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, revealed, both in the title of the exhibition and its format, a

condescending narrative of Africa's impact upon Europe that was rooted in old preconceptions and stereotypes. The dismissive and supercilious mindset of European primitivism provoked a storm of protest that revealed extant views and prejudices about "tribal" art in influential art corridors. Reviews of Rubin's *Affinity of the Tribal* were largely critical of his premise.⁷

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the arts have responded to the tepid recognition of contemporary African art in Euro-American circuits with a cathectic discourse, the type which challenges us to reconsider what the terms of engagement should be with regard to the way that the arts of Africa are historicized into a global compendium. How do we, as art historians, inflect what V. Y. Mudimbe calls the "process of 'aestheticization,'" which classifies, defines, and narrates African realities into Western epistemological frameworks?⁸ The appropriation of African art, which was initiated by French avant-garde artists at the turn of the twentieth century, was at the beginning of this aestheticization and anaesthetization. By the end of the same century it would be the turn of African artists, especially those in the African Diaspora, to confront the hegemonic paradigm of modernism and begin the process of asserting African subjectivity. There are benefits, it appears, to heeding Araeen's clarion call that nonwhite artists should challenge the nature of modernism – which I interpret as including its conceptualization, definition, and proselytization. Araeen contends that modernism was constructed as a specifically European ideology, and the task of determining its nature was the exclusive preserve of the white artist.⁹ Until the mid-1980s in Britain, for example, the paradigm of exclusivity ensured that Black (and other nonwhite) artists were consigned into an invisible category because acknowledging their work posed a challenge to the Eurocentric dominance of modernism.¹⁰ How then has the task of constructing an inclusive paradigm come about?

There has been no discernible disagreement, in scholarly and professional circles at least, that the last decade of the twentieth century was catalytic in the global attention that the contemporary art of the African Diaspora has attracted. The 1990s was a period when the art world was forced to acknowledge the work of a host of artists of the African Diaspora whose work became narrated into the canon: Yinka Shonibare MBE, Chris Ofili, Sokari Douglas Camp, Oladele Ajiboye Bamgbose, El Anatsui, and a few others. Since the 1990s, curated ensembles at major global art fairs, international biennales, and museum spaces have drawn ceaselessly from this pool. This has in turn generated critical narratives in an assortment of platforms – academic, popular print, and video included. This breakthrough did not come overnight. Its antecedents included the founding of the journal *African Arts* at the University of California in 1967. The founding of the art journal *Third Text* by Rasheed Araeen in Britain in 1987 was significant for facilitating the critical dialogue that became so empowering for the visibility that it accorded contemporary artists in the African Diaspora. In France in 1991, Simon Njami, independent curator and art critic, collaborated with others to found the magazine *Revue Noire*, which was dedicated to asserting African perspectives in the arts. In the USA in 1994, Okwui Enwezor founded *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, with the objective of giving critical impetus and visibility to the contemporary art of Africa and the African Diaspora and actively participating in the very process of selecting and adjudicating the modalities for articulating identity issues in the visual arts at global sites. Of course, it is too early to conclude that the African epistemologies that are currently being constructed will be fully integrated into

the standard (Western) art historical canon. Indeed, should this be the desired goal? Would it not be infinitely more beneficial to hanker after an inclusive global canon?

African Art and History

But let us begin our unpacking of the discourse on contemporary art and the Diaspora by looking at the historiography of African art and the art of the African Diaspora in the USA. When it finally took off as an academic discipline in American universities in the 1960s, African art history was mapped by three pioneers: Roy Sieber (Indiana), Robert Farris Thompson (Yale), and Douglas Fraser (Columbia). The incipient efforts were hobbled by three key constructs. First, there was no enthusiastic acceptance of African and Diasporic art works into mainstream Euro-American art historical canons, in part because of the newness of the field and of the severity of the constraints and obstacles that accompanied the new academic enterprise. Africa, in the estimation of many, remained a primitive outlier continent whose artworks, more apt to be described as curios, objects, and fetishes, were yet to be inscribed into the main textbooks of art history.¹¹

The first wave of the exposure of African art to Western audience occurred under circumstances in which the works were considered odious “curios” produced by “anonymous natives.” Now, in a post-Picasso era, the transition from curios to art – from gathering to collecting – occurred strictly on the terms that were created and managed by Eurocentric interests. Very few of the objects that constitute the core of major personal or museum collections are assigned authorship or exact dating.¹² Although African works continue to receive unending critical scrutiny in superb catalogs and opulent museum spaces, nearly all the artists and craftsmen who made them remain consigned to the margins of history.

The second problem pertained to linguistics, methodology, art history’s reliance on anthropological and ethnological modes of inquiry, and a disdain for theory, all of which, according to Adams, resulted in a convenient academic pastiche that even anthropology found uninspiring.¹³ Of course, Adam’s essay appeared more than two decades ago. Predictably, the field has undergone some changes since then. There are instances when these linguistic and anthropological modes of inquiry have furnished students of African art with insights regarding African concepts, phrases, idioms, and words, or ideas for which there are no exact or tidy English (or other appropriate European) equivalents. But linguistic hurdles in African art history must still be navigated by those – non-Africans and Africans alike – who do not have a sufficient grasp of the primary language in their specific field of research. A mastery of relevant African epistemologies and local systems of thought is an inestimable boon to the field researcher. Apparent deficiencies in the linguistic training of field researchers seem to have given rise to superfluous use of phrases, words, or idioms that add little to, and even detract from, the essence of the narrative. A once-favored anthropological and linguistic research tool now seems to be used, admittedly by only a handful of scholars, primarily as an exhibitionistic display of the acquisition of a smattering of whatever the African language happens to be. What is patently missing, with very few exceptions, is an exegetic concentration on the work as art rather than as object that is mired in rituals. The functionalist approach that conditioned the study of African art at the onset was obviously incompatible with the formalist approach to art history that Clement Greenberg favored.

The third constraint in the development of African art history pertains to the mapping of the field. The arbitrary but convenient creation of a sub-Saharan geocultural field was a delimitation that partitioned Africa anew and reinforced racist notions from which the discipline has yet to fully extricate itself.

Art and the Black Diaspora: The United States

The battle for the integration of African art into a global compendium that raged in the 1960s was replicated by the battle for recognition by African American artists in the USA – but with much greater fierceness and fervor, and more profound political ramifications. Although the 1960s was, in Africa, a period of immense optimism – a concomitant of the wave of independence that swept through the continent – it also represented, for African Americans in particular, a cauldron of pent-up anxiety and political incendiaryism. Canonical works on America's modernism have been remarkable for the paucity of analyses, or even commentaries, on the creative stirrings by African Americans. The primordial outrage that Jim Crow laws provoked in the USA led to the formation of such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) by a group that included William Du Bois in 1909, and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1917. The quest for social justice and the eradication of the institutionalization of racism and human denigration formed the cornerstone of resistance organizations that emerged in the country in the twentieth century. By the late 1950s, this quest had generated the searing sociopolitical turmoil that culminated in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And for much of this time, the art produced by African Americans was consigned to a liminal status.

One of the earliest attempts at narrating visual history from the African American perspective did not begin until the 1920s with the development of three key but interrelated events: the Harlem Renaissance, the rise of Alain Locke as the preeminent philosopher-critic of the emerging art, and the establishment of the Harmon Foundation, which provided incentives for African American artists by sponsoring traveling exhibitions and providing awards for artists whose works were considered distinguished.¹⁴ Locke had argued that African American artists should not feel any compunction in drawing creative inspiration from African art, which is part of their heritage. His passionate advocacy that African American artists should borrow copiously from the classical arts of Africa produced appreciable results as a good number of artists inserted African elements into their work. Locke himself began collecting African art. In this, he followed in the steps of William Sheppard, alumnus of Hampton University, an African American missionary for the Presbyterian Church who lived in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo between 1890 and 1910 and collected Kuba art to show to American audiences.¹⁵ The resultant bandwagon effect of Locke's advocacy enriched African American art, in addition to spurring a keen interest in the affairs of the continent. Many Black Americans, including artists who could not travel to Africa, availed themselves of opportunities to learn about the continent from published sources, which further stimulated interest in the classical arts of Africa.

Weighted down by the shackles of bondage and forbidden from asserting their individuality, African American artists were consigned to the crevices of social and economic history, and were written out of the narratives of American art. Yet, the works

of antebellum African American artists such as Robert S. Duncanson and Edward Mitchell Bannister, both of whom worked in the dominant creative style of their time, argue eloquently about a creative parity that ruptures the standard cant about the Black person's lack of creative sensibility. For example, Duncanson, who operated from my current neighborhood – Cincinnati – and whose mid-nineteenth century landscape paintings were executed in the best tradition of the romantic style championed by the Hudson River School, was also a successful entrepreneur who collaborated with the daguerreotypist James P. Ball, another African American, to incubate a business that enjoyed patronage which spread across racial lines.¹⁶ Further to the north, in Boston, and, later, Providence, Bannister's work had won national prizes and commanded sufficient clout to warrant inclusion in William Wells Brown's 1863 book, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, a compendium of works done by 50 notable African American artists of the time. Towards the end of the century, Henry Ossawa Tanner would complete two landmark paintings: *The Thankful Poor* (1893–1894) and *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), which unleashed Tanner's mastery of color, composition and, above all, familiarity with his subjects. *The Banjo Lesson* was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1894, a success that was further bolstered by the exhibition of his 1896 painting, *The Raising of Lazarus*, which won a prize at the 1897 Paris Salon.

Migration, Transnationalism, and the Black Diaspora

A recurrent theme in the theorization of art pertains to nomadism, exile, and migrations, and the influx of new ideas and practices that are attendant upon diverse and multiple relocations. Migration occurs in reaction to social, emotional, religious, political, economic, or cultural triggers in the affected demographic. Migrations facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas even as they also harbor the potential to provoke resistance among resident populations, or exacerbate notions of entitlements and privileges. Enwezor speaks of the essence of migrations in the reconfiguration of ethnicity, origin, and authenticity, and in the formation of new affiliations and identities.¹⁷ It matters little whether migrations occur within or between geopolitical spaces; at issue is the impact that migrant populations exert on their new locale through the interchange of ideas and creative expressions that they expedite.

In postbellum America, for example, the search for new economic opportunities coupled with the desire to resist the yoke of racial subjugation resulted in massive migration of Blacks from the former Confederacy to other parts of the country.¹⁸ Whether forced, as in the reprehensible example of the Dark Passage, during which millions of Africans were shipped into strange territories without any return visas, or voluntary, as exemplified by recent trends during which artists, driven by the allure of new creative challenges or hounded by a corrosive political and socioeconomic disequilibrium in their respective homelands, opted for new pastures, migrations have become a powerful practical and ideational tool. Immigration facilitates exposure to new locations and concepts and remains a determinant in the empowerment of artists. The mobility of ideas, which often comes with immigration, has proven to be an important factor in the development of new visual vocabularies. The very act of immigration and dislocation is critical to the evolution of a distinctive visual subjectivity, as has been demonstrated in the work of a number of artists, African and African American in the Diaspora alike.

Although there is an abundance of instances documenting the presence of African artists who migrated from their respective homes to foreign countries within and outside of Africa, it is perhaps only in the last two decades or so that such artists have become globally visible. A cursory look at some of the names that can be taken as representative of this group of artists – Magdalene Odundo, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ghada Amer, Obiora Udechukwu, Odili Donald Odita, Wosene Kosrof, Victor Ekpuk, Lalla Essaydi, Ouattara Watts, and Wangechi Mutu – reveals that these artists constitute a new Black Diaspora: they were born in Africa but work in the USA.¹⁹ The global visibility of this group of African artists in the Diaspora should not be misconstrued to imply the absence of any antecedents. Before this group came to the limelight, there had existed a respectable generation of modern African artists who established studios and practiced in Western metropolises: Ben Enwonwu, Ibrahim El Salahi, Gebre Kristos Desta, Uzo Egonu, Dumile Feni, and Skunder Boghossian.

Among African American artists, Mary Edmonia Lewis, who emigrated to Rome in 1864 and built a successful career as a sculptor, remains perhaps the ultimate nomad. Earlier, in 1863 at the start of the American Civil War, Robert Duncanson had taken the decision to go into self-exile in Canada, England, and Scotland, where he continued to pursue his career. There was also the inimitable Henry Ossawa Tanner who, as noted above, was a significant presence in Paris, to which he had migrated in the 1890s and where he lived the rest of his successful professional life until his death in 1937. In the early twentieth century, many Black artists in the USA found creative refuge – and, one might add, social and personal fulfillment – in traveling abroad. Leininger-Miller provides detailed accounts of the sojourn of a sizable number of African Americans, including Elizabeth Prophet, Augusta Savage, Hale Woodruff, Archibald Motley, and Palmer Hayden, who were in Paris at various times at the turn of the twentieth century in search of professional realization.²⁰ At home, the Harlem Renaissance, undoubtedly the dominant creative platform for African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, was exemplary in the extent to which it encapsulated migratory experiences at the same time that it provided a platform for racial pride. In this sense, the Harlem Renaissance was a beneficiary of the influx of artists from the South.

The 1960s were, in the USA, also a time to exude pride in Africanisms. James Brown captured the mood of the time in his searing refrain, “I’m black and proud.” The rapport with Africa was manifested in a variety of ways of which fashion, hair-do, and names were prominent. For artists, traveling to Africa was almost a required pilgrimage. Melvin Edwards, Herman Kofi Bailey, John Biggers, David Driskell, and Jeff Donaldson: these and many others undertook the journey to various African countries, including Ghana and Nigeria. During the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) in Lagos in 1977, there was a strong contingent of African American artists among the 15,000 participants from over 70 countries.²¹ A careful study of the iconology of the work of many of the artists who embraced the notion of a resurgent Africa shows the pervasiveness of Africanism. Lois Mailou Jones, for example, was very eclectic in the way that she celebrated African culture. She borrowed ideas and appropriated images and colors from several African groups. From Mali where she appropriated elements from the Dogon, to Liberia where women’s initiation rites seemed to have excited her, her repertoire pulsates with an expressed affinity with the colors and cultures of Africa (Figure 18.1).



FIGURE 18.1 Loïs Mailou Jones, *Les Fétiches*, 1938. Oil on linen, 53.3 × 64.7 cm. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA. Museum purchase made possible by Mrs. N. H. Green, Dr. R. Harlan, and Francis Musgrave. © the artist.

Transnationalism and Intercontinental Dialogs

Jeff Donaldson was unequivocal about the centrality of African American art to the African American visual experience. Until his death in 2004, Donaldson nursed the desire to leverage his transcontinental connections through the institutionalization of a transAfrican art exhibition that would promote correspondence and interchange amongst artists of the African Diaspora.²² The quest was to forge a Diasporic fraternity in which discrete creative collaboratives in the Black Diaspora would be linked together in a groundswell of creative dialog.²³

Donaldson's AfriCobra was a product of the tumultuous 1960s. His experience with the Organization of Black American Culture proved helpful in facilitating the formation of the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, which became more popularly known by its acronym, AfriCobra.²⁴ The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists clearly used the arts to assert its disenchantment with the white cultural establishment. Donaldson's vision of a globally inclusive Diasporic art was a reification of the principles that Alain Locke had invested so much time and energy in during the Harlem Renaissance. Unsuccessful as Donaldson was in his attempt at forging a Diasporic fraternity, his ideas marked a critical juncture in what had been patently missing with regard to the Black Diaspora: a dialogic resonance. Unfortunately, decades after Donaldson's efforts began, and nearly a century

after Locke's imperative, platforms for the exploration of creative kindredness or other associative and mutually provocative links among Africans and African American artists appear to have dwindled significantly, notwithstanding the allure of the many global biennales that artists patronize.

There are a few exceptions to this scenario. For example, Melvin Edwards, a contemporary of Donaldson has, in his "Lynch Series," internalized the core ideals of transnationalism, which stressed creative collaboration among artist groups of the African Diaspora. He has consistently focused on issues that are germane to a condition that has wide applicability to the African Diaspora: stigmatization, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. Of the generation of African American artists who began their professional career in the 1960s – the decade of independence in Africa – Edwards remains perhaps one of a few who have actualized the transnational mantra. With a second home in Senegal, he and his wife have, since 1998, committed significant financial, intellectual, and human resources to provoking creative activities among contemporary artists in Senegal and raising funds to conduct print workshops for aspiring artists.

Notwithstanding this, the promise of a collaborative, intercontinental, and intellectually stimulating regime of creative dialog appeared to be much more fecund in the 1960s than is currently the practice. Leaders of newly independent Africa seemed to have been buoyed by the promise of a new political dawn to embrace the notion of transnationalism. This, in part, was the spirit that gave birth to the 1966 First Negro World Festival in Dakar, Senegal. Backed with the rigorous intellectualism of a triumvirate – Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal (1906–2001), Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) from Martinique, and Léon-Gontran Damas from Guyana (1912–1978) – the 1966 festival sought to rupture the statutory sophistry that informed relationships among African peoples and their erstwhile colonial oppressors. It was the spirit of forging a Black Diasporic identity that spawned the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) in Lagos, Nigeria. The artificial dichotomies of primitivism that I alluded to above were actually reiterated by these two international world festivals. For, although the festivals were aimed at demonstrating the fertility of the Black artist's mind and the creative splendor of the Black race, neither event was successful at consistently confronting the instruments that sought to continually perpetuate the concept of Africa as the "dark continent."²⁵ Africa's attempt at using these international world festivals as a hedge against subalternity has continued to sputter, given the inordinate gaps between the festivals and the lack of political will to consolidate the platforms. Nearly half a century later, the embers of the quest for a creative forum that unifies the Black Diaspora were stoked in Dakar (again) in 2010, where the Third World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures became yet another feature in the new series of biennales on the continent, all of which strive to reify the notion of a collective identity.

What seems to distinguish these first major festivals is their temporariness. The long spell between the First Negro Festival and FESTAC 77 is perhaps a silent but potent testimony to the convulsive state of the political economy of many African states. The festivals were characterized more by the notion that the arts are an elixir for the relief of drudgery – an escape from challenging political decisions – than for catalyzing concrete action plans that might strengthen the development of independent cultural establishments and practices that are fully entrenched on the African continent. Admittedly, the continent has witnessed an increase in the number of arts festivals and

biennales in the last two decades or so, the most notable being Dak'Art (Senegal)²⁶ and FESPACO (Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou). As yet, the festivals have not developed a robust capacity to mount a concerted effort aimed at countering the endemic patronizing proclivities of curators and a few (but powerful) Euro-American culture czars.

But the question remains: What is the relationship between African American art and African art in this new dispensation? It appears that the rapport that existed among African and African American artists in the 1960s and 1970s – the two decades of Africa's world festival of the arts – has all but dissipated. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the visual arts of Africa and those of African America have trod parallel paths. Cultural, philosophical and sociopolitical shifts in these two arenas have made creative dialog less compelling now than it has ever been. As the political climates have changed and contemporary African artists have earned some recognition in key international forums, a bifurcation has emerged, which tends to render asunder whatever tenuous symbiosis that may have existed among African and African American artists. This contrasts sharply with what obtained in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1962, for example, Jacob Lawrence traveled to Nigeria and had a solo exhibition in Lagos and Ibadan, and returned to Nigeria in 1964, accompanied by his wife, Gwendolyn. Lawrence was so motivated to immerse himself in Nigerian culture and allow his experience to permeate his work that he sold his apartment in New York. Altogether he spent eight months in Nigeria, where he painted and interacted with members of the Society of Nigerian Artists, which was headed by Yusuf Grillo. In 1966, the Harmon Foundation, which was founded in 1922 and went moribund in 1967, published Africa's *Contemporary Art and Artists*, the first critical compendium, which listed hundreds of practicing artists on the African continent. Such gestures have dwindled considerably in subsequent years. By the end of the century, the promise – of renewal, collaboration, and transnationalism – that such gestures foreshadowed had not materialized. We of course must note the emergence of a new category of artists, such as Wangéchi Mutu, Ouattara Watts, Odili Donald Odita, and Julie Mehretu, who were born in Africa but can claim the duality of heritage – as Africans and African Americans.

In the USA, identity politics, issues of race, and perception remain stubbornly alive, and are believed by some to color decisions on how Blacks – Africans in the Diaspora and African Americans – are accorded recognition and visibility, or narrated into the dominant culture. The issue of racism in the arts was the subject of Berger's 1990 article "Are Art Museums Racist?" John Bowles et al. approaches this same issue from a different angle: the privilege that whiteness confers on that demographic. "As the norm, whiteness passes unremarked, perpetuating the canonical conventions and traditions that sustain its privilege."²⁷ Thus, a sizeable number of African American artists and students of culture are understandably distrustful of the cultural establishment, dominated as it were by those whom bell hooks has referred to as imperialist white supremacists. The critical evaluation of the creative production of African Americans by some scholars ghettoizes their works and inflects the values that are ascribed to them. This, in return, provides some privileged curators the imprimatur – if ever any was needed – to elide and exclude. There is the perception among African American artists that many of those who write about their work are Eurocentric, misguided, unsympathetic, or outright patronizing. Many seem incapable of undertaking a critical evaluation of African American art without succumbing to dormant prejudices or allowing their analysis to be clouded by extraneous factors that often

tend to give the impression that, all the talk about inclusiveness and decentering notwithstanding, one culture is superior to the other.

There is the contention that African American art does not lend itself to easy analysis. As Edward Lucie-Smith has revealed in his book *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Art*, African American art is something of a landmine for those of non-African extraction who write about it. Lucie-Smith has identified three factors that make discussions on African American art confusing: political correctness, fixed identity, and communication.²⁸ How do you, a white writer, critique African American art without becoming a prisoner of political correctness? What are the constituents of African American art, given the contradiction posed by the claim to African descent by people in whose veins runs European, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian blood? To whom is African American art addressed? These factors are, in the view of Lucie-Smith, symptomatic of parochialism. An art that constantly hankers after sympathetic nod is parochial.

Interestingly, Lucie-Smith's understanding and analysis of the work produced by some whose aesthetic philosophy does not fall within the comfortable Western zone itself complicates any discussion of these issues. Some of the views espoused in *Race, Sex, and Gender* reveal how Lucie-Smith's critique is symptomatic of the cultural arrogance that African American artists inveigh against. For example, Lois Mailou Jones's *Les Fétiches* of 1938 (Figure 18.1) is, for Lucie-Smith, nothing but a paraphrasing of African art. For all that the author cares, Mailou Jones' work is derivative: it simply could not escape Picasso's influence. Of course, one no longer questions – or, better still, one is no longer permitted to question – Picasso's appropriation of elements from African art. But an African American artist is considered as paraphrasing (and thus unoriginal) because her work dares to suggest a stylistic affinity with Picasso. Furthermore, Lucie-Smith's understanding of the cultural environment that sustained classical African art is disappointing because of its hegemonic voice: "In the pre-colonial era, Africa consisted, not of stable nations or empires in the European or Asiatic sense, but of fluid clusters and groupings of people of the kind we now describe as tribes."²⁹

Transnationalism: Making Space

Such patronizing perspectives are, unfortunately, not the prerogative of a handful of Western scholars. At the level of patronage, it remains fundamental to the operational philosophy that has sustained the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC), which was founded by Jean Pigozzi. An incredibly modest, self-deprecating, but eminently rich patron, Pigozzi has, with the assistance of André Magnin, launched the career of many artists from the African continent and, in the process, brought their art to international prominence. Among these artists are the Madagascar artist Jean-Jacques Efaimbelo, whose funerary steles (or *alaolo*) have become icons of the post-modern temper of his Mahafaly ancestry; Ghanaian Samuel Kane Kwei, who has affirmed his father's innovativeness by expanding his repertoire of contemporary cofins; Emile Guebehi from Côte d'Ivoire, with eroticized, life-size female sculptures that seem to massage the subterraneous desire of the Western European traveler for exotica; and Cheri Samba, who has elevated the status of popular painting in the Congo to near-celestial levels.

At about the same time that Pigozzi began his contemporary African art schema,³⁰ there also emerged on the global space a number of émigré artists, scholars, and curators from Africa who, together with first generation artists of African ancestry in the USA and West European countries, would constitute an arguably complementary, if counterhegemonic block to Pigozzi's art empire. The shift in focus, which this block initiated – from traditional African art to Africa's modern and contemporary art – predated the rise of visibility for artists in the African Diaspora. A concatenation of developments form the screen against which this ascendancy in the global profile of contemporary African art may be considered. First, by the 1970s, a critical mass of scholar-artists had emerged in Western Europe but especially in the USA. Over time, their work, severally or individually, would shape age-long perceptions of and reactions to African art. Of particular significance is the number of African scholars who were trained as artists in their home countries before going into exile in Western Europe or the USA.

What started in trickles in the 1970s when a handful of African students came to the USA to study art history with Roy Sieber had, by the turn of the twenty-first century, become a formidable cohort of scholars. A distinguishing feature of this group is that they received their first degrees in studio art from their respective countries. As they returned to their homeland or alternately were absorbed into the workforce in the USA, they began to lay the foundation for the intellectualization of the modern and contemporary art of Africa. For example, five of the pioneering cohort of art historians of Nigerian origin – Emmanuel Odita, Babatunde Lawal, Cornelius Adepegba, Chike Aniakor, and this author – all studied under Roy Sieber at Indiana University. At Howard University, in Washington DC, another cluster of African students, including Wosene Kosrof, Elisabeth Attnafu, Kebedech Tekleab, and Elizabeth Habte Wold sprouted around perhaps one of the most enigmatic painters of the twenty-first century: the Ethiopian sojourner, Skunder Boghossian, a one-man transnational team whose remarkable career spanned continents – starting in Ethiopia where, in the company of Gebre Kristos Desta, he left indelible creative footprints at the famous Addis Ababa School of Fine Arts in the 1960s (Figure 18.2).

Boghossian was the Diasporic African artist per excellence. Ideologically, he became aligned with tenets that promoted positive racial identity and the universality of human rights and dignity. He studied in Europe – at St. Martin's School of Art, the Central School, and the Slade School of Fine Arts, in England, between 1955 and 1957, and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He then returned to teach in his home country, Ethiopia, in 1966 before emigrating to the USA in 1969 where he became a mentor and major influence on a generation of African artists. In the course of his many travels in Europe, he was able to meet and exchange ideas with seminal Black and African figures. He was captivated by Négritude, the emergent ideological movement of the time, and treasured the opportunity to meet with the movement's protagonists, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Cesairé.³¹ As a mere 22-year-old budding artist, Boghossian was one of three students who were selected to participate in the Second Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Rome in 1959. When he relocated to Atlanta, Georgia in 1969, Boghossian aligned himself with the Black Power Movement and became active in issues that pertained to the emancipation of Black personhood. Boghossian's professional preeminence was secured by the number of breakthroughs that he made on a global scale. In 1963, he became the first African artist whose work was acquired by the Musée d'Art Moderne



FIGURE 18.2 Alexander "Skunder" Boghossian 1937–2003, born Ethiopia. *The End of the Beginning*, 1972–1973. Oil on canvas. H × W: 122.6 × 170.2 cm (48 ¼ × 67 in.). Museum purchase 91-18-2. Photograph by Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA.

in Paris. Two years later, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired his work, making him the first Ethiopian to earn such an honor.

As the first generation of America-trained scholars returned home in the 1970s and early 1980s, their presence and activities inspired a new generation of students to pursue further education abroad. Of course, this was but a part of the factors that motivated emigration. Equally important were the stifling economic regimes that several African nations embraced. In Nigeria, for example, a succession of military dictatorships brutalized the citizenry and initiated widely unpopular policies, including the Structural Adjustment Program, which further pauperized the poor and created roaming bands of young, jobless graduates. The endless cycle of strikes, which the nation's tertiary institutions embarked on, caused standards to plummet, with the attendant effect on the quality of education. Yet on the African continent – in Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria among others – the institutions that were seeded by early European protagonists soon became fully indigenized and began to produce a cadre of scholars and artists whose perspectives and work are often influenced by a desire to address glaring inequities in the way that their own views are narrated into history.

Okwui Enwezor teamed up with Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe as editors of *Nka*. Enwezor, who was born in Nigeria, migrated to the United States in 1982 and graduated from Jersey State City College where he studied political science. With an abiding interest in the arts, especially in poetry, Enwezor became immersed in the New York

environment soon after graduating from college. He re-educated himself and formed “Akadibia” (“Aka” is the Igbo word for hand, while “Dibia” translates loosely to diviner, healer, seer, or intellectual), a think tank that comprised his friends including Ike Ude, Nary Ward, Odili Donald Orita, Olu Oguibe, and Salah Hassan. The founding of *Nka* was a major milestone, considering the paucity of journals devoted to the visual arts of the African Diaspora. Other than *African Arts*, the only other major US-published journal that catered to the art of the African Diaspora in the 1990s was the *International Review of African American Art*, founded in 1976 by Samella Lewis and published by Hampton University Museum. But it was the trio of Enwezor, Oguibe, and Hassan who, working as curators, scholars, and activists, emerged as the new face of Africa at the global arena. Capitalizing on the inroads that had been made by a number of high profile exhibitions, including Grace Stanislaus’s 1991 *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Traditions* and Susan Vogel’s *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, and a fledgling presence of artists and artist-scholars in the African Diaspora, the Enwezor team succeeded in giving contemporary African art a global presence and, in the process, created for themselves opportunities and careers on a scale that was at once novel and remarkable. This is what would become a pattern: the curatorial practice, including the intellectual swagger and global branding of the curator himself or herself, now regularly draws approbative attention, and has become far more crucial than perhaps the work of the artists or – as is now more frequently the case – the concepts being curated.

But that is not the issue. Far more critical is the contention that Enwezor’s curatorial practice has been subsumed within the Western episteme that it set out to critique. Sylvester Ogbechie’s insightful essay on this topic makes a number of valid assertions, including the point that Enwezor’s curatorial practice is exclusionary: it focuses on a coterie of Black artists in the Diaspora whose stock is endlessly recycled in a way that gives the obviously troubling impression that artists whose locale of practice is on the African continent matter but little.³² Rikki Wemega-Kwawu’s critique adopts the same position as Ogbechie’s, with the added dimension that Enwezor’s work, which privileges artists who are resident in Western Europe and the USA, is being replicated by other Western European and US curators.³³ Valid as these positions are, they must be modulated by the context that informs Enwezor’s curatorial philosophy. The reality of the issue is that Enwezor’s approach to curatorship starts at the level of ideas and ideologies, rather than art. The grand narratives that inspired most of his curatorial work tend to conscript art as adjunct, rather than central to, his exhibitions. He had a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish right from the beginning. The goal was to consider the best strategy of intervention in engaging, critiquing, and analyzing critical production that was coming from all artists of African descent. His professional trajectory was “not to curate but to produce an environment of serious reflection and critique. That may be through presentation of exhibitions; it may be through the art of writing.” Within his curatorial goal, Enwezor’s journal thus becomes an essential aspect, for he sees writing as an aspect of visibility, historicization, and inscription. He asserts further:

What I was after was fundamentally an archaeological practice. So my work in that sense took off as a critic, not as a curator. But I was obviously very interested in curating. But I didn’t wait around for somebody to offer me the possibility; I went after it and created the arena.³⁴

What sets Enwezor's work apart is his ability to push the boundaries of curatorial practice: to install the curator as the exemplar powerbroker. Art, in Enwezor's work, is more often a handmaiden of ideas; it serves as collateral texts that elucidate or, at times, merely illustrate, metanarratives that span interdisciplinary boundaries. Enwezor engages his audience on seminal political, historical, and geographic issues, to the detriment, it could be argued, of objecthood of the artworks themselves. It would be fair to aver that Enwezor curates a panoply of ideas and summons art to bear witness to them. This explains, in a way, the format of his catalogs, which often transcend issues of aesthetics, contents, and formalism. It is the totality of Enwezor – the novelty of curatorial practice that he embodies; the attractiveness of the mega ideas that permeate his "platforms"; the boldness and conviction with which he articulates his perspectives; the global appeal of the concepts that he strives to curate; and, let us admit, the diversity that his very presence inscribes, that has made him such a central figure in the discourse. Remarkably, it is these attributes that also explain the umbrage that many, particularly artists who live and practice in Africa and artist-scholars in the African Diaspora, have expressed. Pointedly, these same attributes also compound the conundrum that emerges when Ewenzor's mission is compared with that of Pigozzi. Here, then, are two key actors on the global scene, from diametric ends of the discursive pole, both committed to the promotion of contemporary art of the African Diaspora. To what extent they have succeeded remains contentious, depending on the prevailing prism from which the issues are examined. Given the visibility and output of the two protagonists, contemporary art of the African Diaspora might just be at the beginning of its own renaissance.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the systemic regime that validates art history as a discipline is essentially Euro-American. The modalities, platforms, institutions, methodologies, and the protocol that constitute the art historical epistemology are grounded in Eurocentric ideals. In the last two decades, a pronounced shift has occurred in which the amplification of other voices has taken center stage. The existence of a critical mass of scholars, curators, and artists of African origin in Western Europe and the USA has drawn attention to the centrality of migration in the construction of a global art historical canon, just as it has challenged proprietary postures for historicizing texts that fall outside of the traditional zone. There is no such thing as African art history. Rather, a Diasporic art history is based on a global rather than Euro-American canon, one that is predicated on parity and inclusivity.

Notes

- 1 Elkins (2011, 379).
- 2 Elkins (2011, 278).
- 3 Adams (1989, 59).
- 4 Price (1989, 2); also see Price, chapter 23 this volume.
- 5 See Adeleke (1998); also see Lake (1995). Of interest also is Thompson (2011).
- 6 See Geary, chapter 4 and Blackmun, chapter 20 this volume.

- 7 Among these are essays by Karp (1986/1987) and McEvilley (1984).
- 8 Mudimbe (1986, 3).
- 9 Araeen (2011, 365).
- 10 Araeen (2011, 368).
- 11 For a long time, the notion of African art as a primitive subcategory reigned in American art history textbooks. Surveys of African art that could be used as textbooks – Perani and Smith (1997) and Visonà et al. (2001) – did not appear until the last decade of the twentieth century.
- 12 See Price, chapter 23 this volume.
- 13 Adams (1989) provides a comprehensive overview of the development of African art history up to 1989.
- 14 The Harmon Foundation has been criticized for the lack of quality, which such awards tended to legitimize. Given the paucity of critics or writers with sufficient knowledge or empathy for the visual arts at that time, such criticism, important as it may be, should not vitiate the critical fillip that Harmon Foundation gave to fledgling African American artists.
- 15 Sheppard's collection was acquired by Hampton University (Hampton Institute) in 1911 and formed the nucleus of its museum collection of African art.
- 16 Bearden and Henderson (1993, 19–20).
- 17 Enwezor (1998, 28–49).
- 18 Frehill-Rowe (1993) provides an analysis of Black migration to Kansas and Nebraska in relation to that of whites during this same period.
- 19 jegede (2009).
- 20 Leininger-Miller (2001).
- 21 Nigerian Television Authority and UNESCO (1977).
- 22 Donaldson favored using the prefix “trans” because it infers “across, beyond, throughout and thoroughly changing,” and alludes to the origin, influence, scope, and dynamic nature of the style that he and others worked in.
- 23 In a personal interview with Jeff Donaldson in his studio in Washington, DC, June 23, 1995, he listed the following artists' associations as members of this potential Diasporic group: Koukura in Guadalupe, Fwomaje in Martinique, the group known as Because in the Bahamas, Bogolan Kasabani in Mali, and the Zarianists in Nigeria.
- 24 Among the artists who came together to form AfriCobra were Wadsworth Jarrell, Nelson Stevens, Napoleon Jones-Henderson, and Barbara Jones-Hogu.
- 25 A useful source of the rationale for the creation and perpetuation of the myth of Africa as the “dark continent” is contained in the first two chapters of McCarthy (1983).
- 26 See Katchka, chapter 25 this volume.
- 27 Bowles (2001, 39).
- 28 Lucie-Smith (1994, 9).
- 29 Lucie-Smith (1994, 16).
- 30 See Picton, chapter 16 this volume.
- 31 jegede (2009, 32).
- 32 See the paper that Sylvester Ogbemie presented at the conference The Task of the Curator, University of California, Santa Cruz (Ogbemie 2010).
- 33 This article was formerly available on the African Colours website.
- 34 These quotes are from a personal interview that this author had with Okwui Enwezor in Oxford, Ohio, in March 2008. See jegede (2009, 86).

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Part VII



Syntheses in Art of the Late Twentieth Century

Art and Social Dynamics in Côte d'Ivoire

The Position of Vohou-Vohou

Yacouba Konaté

(*Translated from French by
Monica Blackmun Visonà*)

The movement known as Vohou-Vohou took flight in Abidjan, the principal city of Côte d'Ivoire, at the beginning of the 1970s, before appearing regularly in the news during the 1980s. Nguessan Kra, a founding member of the group, and (in terms of his artistic production) one of its best representatives, drafted its definition: "Vohou is neither a style, nor a school; it is a spirit."¹ One of the questions that underlies this assertion is this: What gives form and consistency to this spirit, to the point that it continues to endure as the school of Abidjan, on a par with the schools of Dakar or Kumasi (or the schools of Poto-Poto and Oshogbo)? And if Vohou-Vohou is a school, it is an art of new intellectual elites who, in a critical reversal, question their education at L'École des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan, that is to say, at the heart of Westernized art systems in Côte d'Ivoire. The present essay takes up this question in light of the following hypothesis: if Vohou-Vohou is a spirit, it is connected to the spirit of the times, that is to say, to the social and cultural dynamics at work in the Côte d'Ivoire during the 1970s and 1980s. The Vohou-Vohou artists wrote a page in the history of art in a nation that was going through a period of cultural ferment. The sign of this spirit would be its contemporaneity, which was incarnated in the substances, or, better yet, in perceptions surrounding the substances and materials that artists took from the African terrain and utilized as art supplies. Adopting their search for their indigenous roots as a leitmotif, the artists developed a critique of a certain type of what one might call "Occidentalism." At the same time, they honored their debts to two teachers: Serges Hélénon, from the Caribbean nation of Martinique, who taught them at L'École des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan,² and the Frenchman Jacques Yankel, their professor at L'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Spirit: The Narrative of Its Origins

Taking as his model the animal that marks its territory and adopts the coloration of its surroundings, Gilles Deleuze defines creative artists as players who take up the colors and framework of a field of action.³ Some 30 artists were labeled Vohou-Vohou, almost all of whom took up painting. Gérard Santoni, a master of abstraction whose brilliant explorations of traditional textiles obviously placed him in proximity to Vohou-Vohou, stayed deliberately on the margins of the movement. These artists were not performing, either together or one after another, the same steps in a bad national ballet. Just as the cubists evolved according to the schemas and strategies of individuals who were questioning the techniques of spatial perspective, so the Vohou-Vohou painters highlighted their media through various methods. The general techniques used to make their work revealed an engagement with materials on the one hand, and with abstraction on the other. In this, Vohou-Vohou developed a close similarity to aesthetics of the milieu surrounding the artist Viyé Diba in Senegal in the 1980s. This aesthetic, which gave rise to Diba's famous "kangaroo style," consisted of integrating elements from the surrounding environment with a "philosophy of the body," the human form as illustrated in traditional African sculpture or in the postures of choreographed ancestral dances. The painter and art historian James Houra, an important figure in the Ivoirian artistic scene, gave this fluid, contextualized definition:

Vohou-Vohou is the expression of a rejection of precious Western painting and academic drawing. This rejection and refusal manifested itself in their works through their use of scavenged local materials (ashes, sand, tapa,⁴ the leaves and bark of trees, cowrie shells, bird feathers), and by the integration of marks taken from certain motifs of traditional art (the diamond, triangle, circle, oval, etc.).⁵

Their quest for material cannot adequately be described as "scavenging." In fact, even if the act of scavenging and recycling is intrinsically tied, as we shall see, to the association of this artistic movement with garbage, or trash, the investigations undertaken by this movement were not limited to scrounging cast-off materials. The tapa used in the majority of the Vohou-Vohou works was not a scavenged material but a cloth formed of tree bark beaten according to ancient techniques, but now fabricated for the needs of these contemporary artists. The kola nuts, whose juice colored these works, were not found in trash cans. The cloth on which the artists painted or used as a base for collage was woven and sewn by hand, and was not a "found object." On the other hand, the first material which the Vohou-Vohou artists invested was always soil. According to the famous formula of Titinga Pacéré, the poet from Burkina Faso, earth is added to earth to make the termite mound, a form and a concept that Mathilde Moreau took for her aesthetic paradigm.⁶ Earthen substances were also found in the dry ochre sand of the paintings by Théodore Koudougnon (Figure 19.1).

Nguessan Kra plastered his paintings as one would a mud wall, while explaining: "laterite, of a brown or ochre color, sand . . . soil inhabits the foundations of my work."⁷ Dirt provides a dense laterite red when added to the brews of plant juices that Youssouf Bath cultivated (Figure 19.2).



FIGURE 19.1 Théodore Koudougnon. *Untitled*. Mixed media, 60 × 58 cm. Collection of Georges Retord. Photograph by Kakaye Madjom.



FIGURE 19.2 Youssouf Bath. *La Porteuse (Woman with a Headload)*, 2011. Mixed media, 119 × 95 cm. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Kakaye Madjom.

Youssouf Bath cared about his materials to the point where he radically recused himself from using the basic media of what has been called Western painting. In effect, he undertook the deconstruction of the model that, since the industrial revolution, has sanctified the framed canvas, the easel, and the tubes of commercial paint. He was entitled to declare: “I abandoned the *surface plane* for an accidental surface composed of elements in scavenged wood, cloth and canvas, of all sorts of textures, in order to have another space for painting and for investigation.”⁸ Preferring plant dyes to tubes of paint that had been manufactured in Europe, Youssouf Bath never painted unless it was on barkcloth, and the rules of composition to which he adhered derived from his studies of classical African statuary. This position imposed specific constraints upon him. Tapa is a spongy material that absorbs paints very quickly, without any way to catch errors. What could he do? Train the hand to be assured. And in order to bring out the hue of paints, diminished by the porous consistency of a support that absorbed highlights, Youssouf Bath encircled his contours with black; this black was charcoal.

Vohou-Vohou did not lay exclusive claim to such techniques.

No member of vohou claimed to have invented the use of local materials. In Europe, as elsewhere, certain painters have used heterogeneous objects on their canvases. But the originality of Vohou-Vohou lies in the origin of those materials, their association with place and the sentiments that they evoke,⁹

said Koudougnon, one of the most resolute representatives of this movement. In effect, this painter had no problems using Western tubes of paint; he relied upon them fairly often when he concocted the explosive homemade cocktails he applied to his paintings. Daubed with stews of clay and cow manure, sprinkled with juices that create permanent stains, Koudougnon’s canvases irresistibly engage a sense of intimacy. For Ibrahim Keita, his colleague, press clippings rather than raw materials were preferred. In his paintings, the printed titles of newspapers can be seen under the surface.

Say that a neighbor finds that the door of the painting studio at L’École des Beaux-arts is open, and he enters without knocking. His eye is caught by an unexpected piece of bric-a-brac, and he asks himself: “What *is* this?” the implication being that it is “trash, nothing whatever!”¹⁰ Next to a kitchen, particularly next to the kitchen of a poor person, there are often many vegetable peels and corn husks: Vohou! The word is Guro, a local language resonating with the indigenous phrases then in vogue in the studio. Easy to remember, it sounded like a slogan, and this exclamation would come to designate a theme in the history of modern art in Côte d’Ivoire.

The students of the studio took control. They threw back the stone but they did not reject the sender. They made the insult into a boomerang.¹¹ This was wise, for the more you protest against an epithet, the more it sticks to you. This reminded my colleague, Monica Visonà, of the conditions of the emergence of Fauvism in France. Certainly, in respect to art, both Vohou-Vohou and Fauvism received a name from an outsider and they used audacity and novelty to free themselves from its usual associations. But as Fauvism was not on the intellectual or artistic horizon for the Vohou-Vohou artists, they may not have seen these similarities. On the other hand, Négritude was part of the themes debated during the period when Vohou-Vohou began. Like Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and other intellectuals who took back

and deactivated the emotional charge of the term “*nègre*” in order to create the positive concept of Négritude,¹² the adherents of Vohou-Vohou turned infamy into a badge of pride. The assumption that the adherents of Vohou-Vohou were connected to Négritude is reinforced by other evidence. In the first place, among those who framed and mentored the movement were Serges Hélénon, Louis Laouchez, and Mathieu Gensin, painters from Martinique who created in Abidjan a “*Nègre-Caraïbe*” (Black-Caribbean) movement. These artists experienced their stay in Africa as an opportunity to gather resources.

Several accounts circulate concerning the circumstances regarding the arrival of garbage in the studio. That of Nguessan Kra stresses the ambience of that period.

In the studio, Monsieur Hélénon let us pick up everything that we found in the hallway in order to make art. A few people went overboard. Everything which had just been swept into the trashcans under the large kola tree in the morning reappeared in our studio at noon. It was thus that the students of the school of fine arts, notably a gentleman, a young man who was studying architecture,¹³ said: “You there, you aren’t making art, you aren’t really students. You are trash.¹⁴

For his part, Youssouf Bath, another protagonist of the movement, traces the origin of Vohou to material hardship:

I returned to the school of fine arts in the 1970s. During that time, the school distributed all of the art supplies necessary for work to the students. But in 1970–71, there was a period of poverty. The students were no longer given supplies and needed to make their own arrangements to paint. To be at the school of fine arts without a scholarship, especially for those of us who were coming from poor families, was really a hardship. It was in this context that [the professor] Serges Hélénon, who had done service in Mali, was assigned to the Ecole des Beaux-arts in Abidjan in 1969–1970. We were his first students. He advised us, as we were not able to obtain supplies from the school, to go out into nature and to scavenge things to take back to our studio, to gather them together to bring out new things, a new culture. When we started to work with sand, with wood, with clay, and with charcoal, this provoked an outcry in the institution. In that period, all of the professors of the school said that it wasn’t art. But Professor Hélénon encouraged us to continue.¹⁵

Dogo Yao,¹⁶ the first director of L’École des Beaux-Arts, contests that version.

In that period, we received all of our supplies from France. It was us above all, Christian Lattier and I,¹⁷ who had wanted to free our teaching from imported techniques and canons, in implicitly encouraging the students who were researching local materials.¹⁸

In effect, the question of “research” is at the heart of the debate, and it crosses over into that of pedagogy. Painting and drawing being privileged over sculpture, three-dimensional models had to be translated into two dimensions. In anglophone countries during the same period, professors based their teaching on African arts in general, and on local artistic traditions in particular. In Ghana and in Nigeria, schools of art developed partnerships with indigenous experts, commissioning sculptors from royal

courts as instructors for students, but in Côte d'Ivoire, the rich national cultural heritage only had an incidental role in pedagogical practices.

Before the coming of Vohou-Vohou, the teaching methods of the school of fine arts consisted in having the students re-copy the methods of Western works; that is to say, one drew plaster casts, one made still lives. There reigned a sort of exaggerated Occidentalism, which put the students on the margins of their own society.¹⁹

It is this Occidentalism which the young painters of the Vohou-Vohou movement called "*Académisme*" or "academic painting" and from which they wanted to emancipate themselves. When the painting studio of Holmes became, in 1963, the first school of fine arts in the country, the training program was revealed to be a copy of that which was in force in France. The school, then located in the Plateau quarter, was placed under the tutelage of the French Académie des Beaux-Arts. Supervised by French examiners, tests and examination subjects came from France and were returned there to be graded. The aim was to allow those who passed to continue their education in France. "*Académisme*" therefore designated the dominant artistic culture in the context of this type of training; a Eurocentric culture focused upon diplomas.

In the last trimester of 1967, L'École des Beaux-Arts left its quarters on the Plateau and joined the national schools of theater and music on a site in the Abidjan suburb of Cocody. Together, they formed L'Institut National des Arts. But success or failure in the examination of the Certificat Aptitude à la Formation Artistique dans le Secondaire (CAFAS) was always decided in France. It was in this regard that those who failed were bitter about what they called "*Académisme*." Joseph Anouma, a painter and printmaker, and a student of fine arts from 1967 to 1970, described the state of mind of the students who contested the system of education prevalent at L'École de Beaux-Arts during that time:

After having failed these examinations in 1969, and as if awoken by the eruption of a geyser, we rejected this classical teaching, having understood that on their part, those who evaluated the tests were inclined to exoticism. With Oliko Djegna, and yours truly, we were at the head of line for a new approach that incited us to introduce local materials into . . . our images (examples: rattan, wood bark, fish scales, sand, laterite, etc.).²⁰

From these eyewitness accounts, it appears that the students of fine arts were caught in the trap of a contradictory double requirement: the demand for classicism by the professors in Côte d'Ivoire, and the expectation of exoticism by the evaluators in France. The African students could give their body and soul to Occidentalism, and their professors could believe in local color, but the graders would always consider themselves to be the guardians of the temple of the rules of art. Some of the French professors in Abidjan still encouraged a rupture with the West. This was the case with a French teacher who may have put Oliko Djegna on the path of (new) materials.

Oliko Dégné [sic], one of the most brilliant students of L'École des Beaux-Arts, failed his examination at the end of the "premier cycle" of studies, the CAFAS. His professor, Mr. Delpêche, encouraged him to turn to researching local materials. In company with his comrades, Anouma Joseph and Assi Ayé Maurice,²¹ young Oliko

went through the undergrowth of the Banco forest (a preserve near Abidjan), the Vridi beaches, and the streets of Abidjan, to gather wood bark, vines, different grades of sand, shells, and fish spines that he would integrate into his compositions. We called him “Oliko the supplies.” The results were stupefying, for the next time he took the examination, he obtained his CAFAS with distinction. From then on, students of the succeeding classes would throw themselves into these found materials, using unexpected substances on diverse surfaces.²²

“Oliko the supplies” and his colleagues thus figure among the precursors of the Vohou-Vohou movement.

Vohou-Vohou is nested within physical substances. But remember the words of Nguesan Kra: Vohou-Vohou is a spirit. In effect, Vohou-Vohou is a spirit in its need for rupture. It is itself a point of no return, from which artists energize their creations with elements of the environment. At the same time, they renounce any tendencies towards figuration in order to become virtuosos of abstraction. Did they understand that it was time to refine their feelings, to dematerialize them, to spiritualize them, to push their work beyond representational art into the realm of conceptual art?²³

Connections and Quarrels

As noted above, the birth of the Vohou-Vohou movement was related to the creation of the Black-Caribbean school the year before, in 1970. At the French cultural center (Centre Culturel Français, or CCF) of Abidjan, in order to help remobilize the strength of their African heritage, three artists from Martinique (Mathieu Gensin, Serge Hélénon, and Louis Laouchez) created a team for reflection and artistic action. These artists wanted to end the clichés that tended to make artistic expression sclerotic, in order to make it relevant for the Antilles.²⁴ Serge Hélénon confirmed this when he explained: “I am oriented towards abstraction in order to draw away from the space of folklore and exoticism fed by the gaze of Westerners on the Antilles or Africa.”²⁵ While claiming an “affect of heritage” joining the Caribbean and Africa, the Black Caribbean School defended the idea of the plurality of roots of world civilizations and positioned itself as an aesthetic of rupture.²⁶ It knew how to transmit to the members of the Vohou-Vohou movement this concern for the search for strength through an exploration of internal heritage.

Like the Black-Caribbean school, Vohou-Vohou turned its back on figuration in order to develop a dialogue on abstraction. If they had not turned away from representation in painting, the Vohou-Vohou painters would not have been able to disengage themselves from naive paintings, whose colorful dialogue was resolutely realistic and social. Just as academically trained artists in the Caribbean scorned naive art from Haiti, the Ivorian students were wary of the Ivorian naive paintings that developed at the Bieth center, which opened in Abengourou, in the east of the country, in 1969.²⁷ Georges Retord, English professor at the University of Abidjan,²⁸ and an art critic, experienced this distrust of the self-taught artist on the part of the students of the school of fine arts.

During the 1970s, on a trip to Haiti, I discovered a form of artistic expression which had been unknown to me, and I brought back to the Côte d'Ivoire several paintings of the “naïve” school of Haitian art. Everyone who saw these pictures in Abidjan

expressed their astonishment and interest for this pictorial form, which was [also] unknown to them. In the course of numerous successive trips to Port-au-Prince I brought back other works and I requested that teachers who were then at the Institut National des Arts display some examples of Haitian art. During the course of a lecture illustrated with numerous slides, I was perplexed when, once I had finished, I asked the students if they had questions to ask me: after a long silence, one asked me “Do you want us to paint like that so that people can make fun of us?”²⁹

This attitude did not prevent the Bieth artistic center from developing a movement of naive art that was valiantly represented by Augustin Kassi, Idrissa Diarra, Camille Kouakou, and others. Unlike the majority of their comrades, these artists knew how to push their abilities in commercial art towards personal investigations that showed their talent and their originality.

At the time there was a tradition that, after Abidjan, the students of L’École des Beaux-Arts continued their studies in France, in Paris, Saint-Etienne, or Nice. At L’École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, they were welcomed into the studio of Jacques Yankel, who became for them a guide and precious source of support. The son of a painter, Jacques Yankel described himself as a “true Jew of the Diaspora”; he considered the Jewish destiny to be in diaspora, and he believed in the value of diasporas to world culture. Yankel also had a life history in Africa, and a love affair with Africa. In the aftermath of World War II, he discovered the great African art on view in Paris. In 1949, he “did Africa” when, on the ferry between Dakar and Gorée, his life was upended because he met Marguerite Gobi, his second wife. In 1950, as a geologist in Gao, in northern Mali, he hosted Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. To complete the picture of this master, this atypical character, to whom foreign students in general, and Africans in particular, were attracted, it is necessary to refer to the context of Paris after May 1968.

In the film which he dedicated to Jacques Yankel, Idriss Diabaté asks him “How did you arrive at the school of fine arts?” The reply is instructive:

I was already exhibiting in several galleries and I had had several prizes for painting. This permitted me to live. Because I was showing in these galleries, young students had undoubtedly seen my work. When the events of May 1968 took place,³⁰ I received a visit from several students from the school who told me, Monsieur, we really like your painting and as our professor has resigned, there is complete anarchy there. We claim the right to choose our own teacher. Would you like to come direct our studio? With what you have told us, and given what you paint, we would be on the same wavelength. So I went to tell them, listen, I’ll stay a few days in order to see if I like the setup. And then I stayed for seventeen years.

It was during those seventeen years that bit by bit, Asians, Africans and South Americans were mixed in with young French students. Among the Africans, the Ivoirians presented the unusual feature of having arrived as a group. They came from the same school in Abidjan and were enrolled together in my studio . . . What fascinated me was when they arrived with tapa, literally a broken tapa. Really, the materials in which they worked, which they had used there, they brought here. There were those who had cowrie shells which they glued onto their pictures; there were those who had sand, sand in several colors. So what fascinated me was that they had such a pragmatic culture that they wanted to transplant here, to our Western countries. I had an extraordinary respect for that.³¹



FIGURE 19.3 Sami Stenka. *La Chevauchée des Esprits* (*The Ride of the Spirits*). 2006. Natural pigments on canvas, 165 × 130 cm. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Kakaye Madjom.

Each of the Ivorian students stayed in France for two to four years. This period constituted for them a wonderful opportunity to gain confidence in themselves. The experience of being outside their home country permitted them to tighten their bonds and to capitalize upon common experiences which were added to those from their basic training in Abidjan, and this spread a certain spirit among them. To measure the strength of the influence of Jacques Yankel on the Vohou-Vohou artists, we should note that Samir Stenka, a member of the movement (Figure 19.3), gave the name “Yankel” to his firstborn son.

“When we needed to go back in 1979, we held a small meeting, in the course of which Monsieur Yankel said, if you are going to Africa and if you want to enhance your careers, join together to work; if you work individually, you will not make yourselves known.”³² Not only did they remember this advice, but they applied it. At the beginning of the 1980s, one after another, those who had studied in the Yankel studio returned home, and they spearheaded their movement in 1983. In the same year, Nguessan Kra presented an individual exhibition at the Galerie Go in Abidjan. The first group exhibition of Vohou-Vohou was mounted in 1985 at the Centre Culturel Français (CCF) in Abidjan under the title *Les Peintres Vohou-vohou*. In the same year, their paintings were presented at the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, which had been Paris’ colonial museum, and which is now France’s immigration museum (the Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration).

In this period, the Côte d’Ivoire could count on few available venues for contemporary art exhibitions. The country’s national museum was already confronting the problem of not having enough cases for its rich collections, and had no mandate for contemporary arts. In fact, only the Galerie Go existed; the Arts Pluriels gallery opened later, on October 17, 1991. In the Côte d’Ivoire, from the 1960s to 2000,

the Centre Culturel Français and the Centre Culturel Jacques Aka in Bouake, its branch in the center of the country, represented the principal cultural operations concerned with contemporary arts. A strong link in the chain of (official) French cultural establishments in several African countries, the CCF exercised a strong institutional presence. In 1984, the CCF exhibited the works of French artist Gérard Fromager, a representative of what has been called “Narrative Figuration,” while in 1986 it hosted Jean-Michel Basquiat, just before he became a world celebrity. Georges Courrèges testified that:

Visual arts have their own life, an intense life, a life that is kept secret from life . . . and the CCF is often the roundtable for it. It is where we discuss, often with passion, the latest work of a certain artist; it is where we would put together exhibition projects . . . The demonstrations organized after 1984 by the CCF were a real point of departure for this awareness and this affirmation of the artists’ need to “live.”³³

The CCF supported naive painting and new forms of expression as well. Unlike the few commercial venues that were available, the CCF hosted and promoted them without charging fees. Georges Courrèges, the media-savvy director, believed in the Vohou-Vohou movement and showed this through his actions on the ground and on the level of national television. We can speak here of patronage in the sense that Sydney Littlefield Kasfir has defined it;³⁴ a person or an institution, whose consistent presence brings or gives influential support.

The first group exhibition of Vohou-Vohou artists in 1985 gave place to debates on television, on the radio, and in the press. The members of Vohou-Vohou, notably Théodore Koudougnon, Nguessan Kra, and Youssouf Bath, argued with James Houra, Monné Bou, and Samir Zarour, masters of figurative painting who suspected that their juniors hid their inability to draw under the cover of their abstraction. Was this a quarrel between generations? James Houra has given his version of this history:

I am not in agreement when they present me as a detractor of Vohou. What is Vohou? It is the common denominator for Ivorian artists; the refusal of “Académisme,” the search for a certain Africanité. Vohou, it is similar to what one can call the School of Dakar or Poto-Poto. The problem was that, in that particular time, we were raising the question of whether certain artists knew how to draw or not. I have given my viewpoint on that. It has happened that those who were facing me were sometimes practicing Vohou, and sometimes not at all.³⁵

Believing that the remarks were aimed at them, Théodore Koudougnon, Nguessan Kra, and Yacouba Touré gave a reply.³⁶ According to Koudougnon,

Vohou has never worked from a sketch . . . figurative art and abstract art can only be called “artistic” because of their emotional power. And that, Vohou understood very early. It is the specialists who are being taught how to work here. They make art and not representations. Vohou suggests forms without seeking to reproduce anything at all. These shapes, even if they recall forms in our immediate environment, are characterized by the style of the artist, by their poetic line. These images come from our guts, and offer unlimited possibilities. They are the forms that are tied to

ancestral beliefs. They are inspired by masks, beads, gris-gris, fetishes, etc. Today, Vohou is much more a search for spiritual identity . . . And that brings it a moral balance.³⁷

The movement acquired a place in national memory. The local acclaim of the name of the movement gained the sympathy of general public, which rejoiced over the birth of a homemade aesthetic movement. The group was enlarged by new talent, including Matilde Moreau and Yacouba Touré. The Vohou artists exhibited across the world, especially in France; between 1984 and 1989, Youssouf Bath and Nguessan Kra exhibited in Paris and Bordeaux, and Théodore Koudougnon exhibited in Caen. After the exhibition of 1985, and that of 1992, the Association pour le Développement des Échanges Interculturels au Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (ADEIAO) supported an exhibition made possible by a collection of works that had been gathered by Yankel. The works came from donations by the small colony of artists from Côte d'Ivoire who had studied in France.³⁸ This group exhibition of 15 Vohou-Vohou painters, three of whom were women, reaffirmed the identity of the group.

In the article he dedicates to this movement, the artist and critic Koblan Kouao (1956–2008), distinguishes six great families: the conservative Vohou, the immaterial Vohou, the synthetic Vohou, the floating Vohou, the assimilated Vohou, and the chatting (or chattering) Vohou.³⁹ He casts a wide net in order to integrate into the movement the critiques that had been expressed by the artists involved. Today, in 2012, how many artists of Côte d'Ivoire can claim to be under the umbrella of Vohou? The Vohou spirit did not die with its time. Assita Zézé and Christine Ozoua, the women who were at the forefront of the adventure, seem to have laid down their paint-brushes, but Théodore Koudougnon, Youssouf Bath, Nguessan Kra, and a few others, remain central figures on the national scene. The pictures by local painters which are exhibited for sale in the open air, found at several crossroads in the city of Abidjan, remain for the most part in the grip of the “abstract touch” of the Vohou-Vohou painters. At the end of the 1990s, two initiatives, or artistic regroupings, were seen: Traces and Daro-Daro.⁴⁰ They only lasted one or two seasons.

The Ferment of Culture and Sociopolitical Dynamics

The 1970s correspond in the Côte d'Ivoire to a phase of great economic expansion, even though the region as a whole was marked by coups d'état, overt political violence, and hardening ideologies. In the absence of power bases that would evolve naturally through opposition parties (which were prohibited in the country), intellectuals and cultured individuals invested politically in cultural and aesthetic debates. Unless they belonged to the single political party, intellectuals shunned Négritude in general, and its Senghorian version in particular.⁴¹ Constantly reviewed and briefly summarized as “emotion is Black/reason is Hellenic,” Senghor became a punching bag for intellectuals and students of the period who applauded Stanislas Adotevi’s book *Négritude et négrologues*,⁴² attacking Senghor and Négritude without feeling the need to read the texts in question.

At the same time, on the political stage, Senghor (then president of Senegal) and Houphouët-Boigny (then president of Côte d'Ivoire), who had been political and ideological rivals due to a quarrel over their leadership of the former French West

Africa, had a rapprochement. In 1972, the Senegalese poet-president came to Côte d'Ivoire on an official visit, and delivered a brilliant lecture at the University of Abidjan. In the same year, the department of literature of the University of Abidjan organized an international colloquium dedicated to a book of Ahmadou Kourouma,⁴³ a writer who was critical of both colonization and single party rule. The theme, a search for fundamentally African cultural resources, was of particular interest because 1971, the previous year, had entered into African history as Year 3Z, when Congo Kinshasa became Zaire. One by one, Zaire's president changed the name of the country, the river, and the money, all of which would be named Zaire. He even proposed a national costume, the *abacost*, and instituted Lingala as the national language to be taught in schools. He encouraged citizens to choose names that were African rather than European; joining actions to his words, President Joseph Désiré Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga, that is, "Mobutu the warrior who goes from victory to victory without anyone being able to stop him." In the same spirit of rupture, he countered neo-colonialism by launching the ideology of African "authenticity," or *authenticité*. This *authenticité* was discussed in Côte d'Ivoire, but above all people were listening to Trio Madjessa, Bela-Bela, and other groups whose new Congo-Zairoise music was becoming increasingly popular with dancers and on television shows. It was at this time that Ernesto Djédjé, who had worked with Amédée Pierre, one of the founding fathers of modern music styles in Côte d'Ivoire, created Ziblibiti, a music and a dance inspired by the cultural heritage of the Bete people; it was enthusiastically received.

In Côte d'Ivoire, *Ivoire Dimanche*, a biweekly magazine, opened its columns to intellectuals and to artists.⁴⁴ This publication energized the creative class who had previously expressed themselves every week in *Fraternité Matin*, the daily newspaper of the national party. Radio and the national television station were not far behind; they too organized programs on arts and cultures, such as *Le livre de la semaine*, *Kuma*, *Cora*, and *Belles Pages*. In these relatively open public spaces, a cultured civil society emerged. Remarkable figures on the cultural scene initiated important steps.

In 1972, Aboubacar Touré and Niangoran Porquet created the Masques et Balafons theater company of the University of Abidjan. They presented "Griotique" as an aesthetic theory and an artistic practice, aiming to rethink the rhetorical norms of Ivorian theater through the resources of the oral arts of the bard (*griot* in French).⁴⁵ The dramaturge Bernard Zadi Zaourou, professor of literature at the university, and intellectual advisor to the country's clandestine leftists, worked in the facilities of the Institut National des Arts (INA), where the theater school performed his first plays. Just as was the case for L'École des Beaux-Arts, the school of theater of the INA had French "technical assistants." The principal director of the theater school was Jean Favarel, who launched the first theatrical season in the history of Côte d'Ivoire in 1972. Bruno Gnaoulé-Oupoh recalls: "Four plays were presented that first season, which was an uncontested success."⁴⁶ Gnaoulé-Oupoh also notes that in the same year, 1972, Souleymane Koly put on two plays.⁴⁷ Promoted as director of the department of arts and folk traditions of the INA, the French-Guinean sociologist and artist created the Ensemble Kotéba of Abidjan in 1974. Associated with the offerings of the theatrical seasons was a program of open debates, "wide-ranging and lengthy discussions where the university community and all those who were interested in the dramatic arts were invited to participate."⁴⁸

To speak is to take the risk of discovering that you are not being listened to, that you are not understood. The debates about the theatrical productions made manifest the continental divide that Bernard Zadi describes as follows:

It was there that profound divergences appeared about the goals and the function of theatrical creation, between those adhering to a certain French culture (including Favarel himself) and the others – all those who claimed to return to African “Authenticité.”⁴⁹

As much as it was (simply) Africanization, this orientation towards roots led to a demand for autonomy and even autochthony, and prescribed an “orientation toward the lowbrow, defined as popular or street [culture] as well as an indigenous, or ‘native’ opposition to elites, to (neo) colonialism, and to Western hegemony.”⁵⁰ Within the context of the 1980s, such a position obliquely criticized the regime of Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Certainly the government had just created a state office of cultural affairs, detaching, for the first time, culture from the department of education. But the creative class, which saw that this produced neither subvention, nor encouraging legislation, adopted attitudes of defiance that were all the more remarkable because Côte d'Ivoire was a single party state, and all critical thought was quickly assimilated into political opposition.

Professor Niangoran Bouah, an anthropologist, sketched out the fundamentals of a science of communication based upon the language conveyed by drums, which he called Drumologie.⁵¹ In 1980s, Professor Zadi Zaourou, a renowned specialist in oral literature at the University of Abidjan, put together the theatrical company Didiga. Based upon an aesthetic stance known as the “art of the impossible,” Didiga is the story recounting the prowess of Djerbgeugbeu, a heroic hunter. According to the painter and art historian James Houra, “like the promoters of what was called the ‘theater of research’ in Côte d'Ivoire, the adherents of Vohou-Vohou also wanted to initiate ‘an African way of painting.’”⁵² Both theatrical and artistic movements were more or less a direct echo of themes of African “Authenticité,” understood as an indigenous research into new expressions of African identity. Identity was precisely the theme of two books of Jean-Marie Adiaffi, published in 1980, which benefited from an enthusiastic reception.⁵³ It was Adiaffi whom the literary critic Léonard Kodjo designated as the “public jester,” because of his frequent fisticuffs against the single party state and its leaders, including President Felix Houphouët-Boigny. Adiaffi, by the beginning of the 1970s, was an untiring organizer of public debates, and a major intellectual figure of the Côte d'Ivoire. We knew that he was a philosopher by profession, but these two books revealed that he was also a novelist and a poet. Supplemented by the lectures he gave, these writings gave him the chance to elaborate upon and defend his literary aesthetic and his religious philosophy. His religious philosophy consisted of recusing himself from Western faiths, and of refuting Christianity as an imposture. To the religions of the Book that claim to have divulged and propagated the idea of a single God, Adiaffi opposed his own pagan theme: Bossonisme. This word, rooted in *bosson* or *bosom*, signifying “spirit, deity” in Akan languages, aimed to rehabilitate “traditional” African religions. Tenaciously describing the Akan and Yoruba pantheons, Adiaffi establishes their complexity, and their image of a single God, to demonstrate that Africa did not need to wait for the West to cultivate the notion of a sole God, and that Africa owes itself the right to renounce imported

religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) in order to reinvest itself without embarrassment in the religious practices of its own heritage.

So Bossonism, Griotique, Didiga, Drumologie, and Vohou-Vohou, are all the same struggle? Yes, of course. But please note that the Malinke translation of the term Vohou-Vohou is *gnaman-gnaman*, which signifies dirt, trash, or garbage. At the beginning of the 1980s, at the moment when the Vohou-Vohou artists were returning from France, Gnaman-gnaman had become the name of a muscular form of Ivorian urban music. Gnaman-gnaman is also a dance that was choreographed in the hotspots of Abidjan to which Ivorian musician Kéké Kassiri, then a friend of the couturier Paco Rabanne, referred in a famous musical number of the period titled simply “Gnaman-gnaman.” Carried by the subversive power of Nouchi, that language of Abidjan’s *loubards*, or lowlifes (which is set to rhythm today in Ivorian rap music), Gnaman-gnaman is not a search for authenticity, but an urban expression resonating with the muscled bodies that young hustlers exhibit with aggressive pride. It resounds with a “*loubard* feeling” that announced the beginning of the 1990s, when these marginalized youths would become the key players in social and political events in Côte d’Ivoire.

Vohou-vohou gave form and voice to a return to indigenous culture. It marked Ivorian territory and inspired its inhabitants with remarkable attitudes and viewpoints. On the artistic level, it cultivated an intensity and a range of colors based upon indigenous African resources. At the level of narrative, Vohou was elaborated as a discourse of rebellion, conveyed by an account of its origin, one that recalls the history of Négritude. These two levels lead to a third: that of the territory traversed by the protagonists of the movement and a reception that was both national and international. To sum up, the originality of Vohou is in the structural paradigm it developed, which also invokes the memory of Négritude. The dynamics that carried it spread beyond the field of visual arts.

Vohou-Vohou avoided becoming enclosed in the discourse of autochthony because its birth and its development were inscribed in a schema that opened to the influences of the Antilles on one hand, and of France on the other. Similar to Négritude, Vohou-Vohou and the Black-Caribbean School superimposed a new triangle over the slave trade routes of commerce in human beings. This one connected Europe, the Americas, and Africa, but in this case it was animated by the circulation of free men and their thirst for knowledge and expressiveness.⁵⁴ People of the Antilles were drawn to questions of the future of independent Africa, and in the schools, with African youth, they readjusted the terms of contemporary creativity. The world is thus not only round in shape, but is also “rounded” by people who move from country to country, and continent to continent, traversing borders and ethnicities to make it a world of human beings.

In his autobiographical account, Milton Mezzrow contrasts the spirit of blues and the spirit of jazz, calling out each in turn to see the conditions in which they emerged, one born in terrible oppression and the other allowing itself to turn to a more joyful sound as the burdens of slavery began to be lifted.⁵⁵ Applied to the case of painting in Côte d’Ivoire, this slice of jazz history inspires us to see that Vohou was the attempt of Ivorian art and culture to throw away the burden of Western alienation, and to lighten itself in order to go toward freer and less conventional forms. Vohou-Vohou was not only a spirit, it was a breath of liberty expressed through art.

Notes

- 1 Kra (1993). This quotation and all other French texts quoted have been translated from the original by Monica Blackmun Visonà.
- 2 Founded in 1962, L'École des Beaux-Arts of Abidjan was born of a regrouping of two private art centers directed by two French artists: the studio of Holms on the Plateau (the old center of the colonial administration) and the studio of the sculptor Charles Combès (1891–1968) in Bingerville, the colonial capital founded after Grand Bassam. Although it remained in Bingerville, the Combès studio became the school of sculpture of L'École des Beaux-Arts in 1962, while the Holms studio was integrated with facilities of the Institut National des Arts in the residential center of Cocody, not far from the University of Abidjan. In 1972, L'École des Beaux-Arts of Abidjan became L'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA). Here it shall be referred to as the “school of fine arts.”
- 3 Deleuze and Guattari (1975).
- 4 Tapa: a textile obtained from tree bark that is beaten and made pliable.
- 5 James Houra cited by Bailly (1987, 39).
- 6 Translator's note: Termite mounds are imposing natural structures that are seen as portals to the ancestral world in some African cultures (though not in most regions of Côte d'Ivoire).
- 7 Revue Noire (1991, 19).
- 8 Bath (1994).
- 9 Koudougnon (1987).
- 10 The translation of “vohou-vohou” into Diula, the Mande language, is “gnanman-gnanman,” garbage, trash. The term designated a style of dance and music in Côte d'Ivoire during the 1980s.
- 11 Lagorette (2009, 336).
- 12 Translator's note: “*nègre*” has no direct equivalent in American English, as “Negro” and “Black” are both terms associated with specific time periods and attitudes in the USA and neither are directly relevant here. I have chosen to translate the word as “Black” where an English word is required.
- 13 Collaborating sources suggest that he was named “Boni.”
- 14 Hélenon (2002).
- 15 Bath (2011).
- 16 Célestin Dogo Yao, who died on July 13, 2005, had directed the school of fine arts from 1967 to 1980.
- 17 Christian Lattier (1925–1978) is certainly the most important sculptor in the modern and contemporary history of Côte d'Ivoire, see Konaté (1993).
- 18 Errol (2003).
- 19 Bath (2011).
- 20 Anouma (2011).
- 21 Translator's note: In some francophone countries in Africa it is customary to place the French “Christian name” (“prénom”) after the family names in ancestral languages (which act as surnames), as in this passage. In this essay, however, Professor Konaté follows international usage, placing the surname after other names. Also note that names appearing in some publications may be transcribed in French style (for example, as Konaté rather than Konate).

- 22 Koblan (2001, 19).
- 23 Deleuze (1991, 187).
- 24 In francophone Africa, all of the West Indies are simply known as the Antilles.
- 25 Hélenon (2002).
- 26 See also Okoye, chapter 6 this volume.
- 27 Created in 1969 by a French foreign aid worker (Charles Bieth), who then taught history and geography at the Abengourou secondary school, the Bieth center was at the same time a social center and an art school that welcomed students without any academic prerequisites.
- 28 Translator's note: The national university was known as the Université d'Abidjan from its founding in 1964 until the 1990s, when it was renamed the Université de Cocody, Abidjan; it is referred to here as the University of Abidjan.
- 29 Retord (2011, 8).
- 30 Translator's note: In May 1968, French students initiated a series of strikes and demonstrations in Paris that brought France to a standstill and almost brought down the government.
- 31 Diabaté (2010).
- 32 Youssouf Bath, in Diabaté (2010).
- 33 Courrèges (1990, 99).
- 34 Kasfir (1999, 65).
- 35 James Houra in N'Koumo (1992, 11).
- 36 Touré (1988).
- 37 Koudougnon (1987).
- 38 These included Damase Atsé Aboueu, Youssouf Bath, Tamsir Dia, Jo Diomandé, Kouakou Tano, Théodore Koudougnon, Nguessan Kra, Fatoumata Louget, Ernestine Meléedge, Bakari Ouattara (aka Watts), Christine Ozoua, Jacques Samir Stenka, André Trah-Bi Ninin, and Yacouba Touré, Sita Zézé. It is important to note that, even though they remained fast friends with the group, neither Tamsir Dia nor Watts ever claimed to be Vohou-Vohou.
- 39 Koblan (2001, 18–23).
- 40 "Traces" grouped together Grobli Zirignon, Tamsir Dia, Samir Stenka, and Ludovic Fadairo, with Tanella Boni as a critic. "Daro Daro" assembled, among others, Matilde Moreau, Yacouba Touré, Issa Kouyaté, Essoh, and Mensah, with Mimi Errol as a critic.
- 41 See Grabski, chapter 14 this volume.
- 42 Adotevi (1969).
- 43 Kourouma (1970).
- 44 *Ivoire dimanche* provided information on culture, sport, and leisure. It was created in 1970 under the period of single party govenment, and was dissolved in 1991.
- 45 The bard is an artist, genealogist, and historian who, in the societies of the Sahel (the West African savannahs), is a master of the epic, and sometimes also a musician, a singer, or instrumentalist.
- 46 They were, in the order of their showing, *La tête*, an adaption for the stage of a novel by Pierre Basson, *Les sofas* of Bernard Zadi, *La tribu* of Jean-Hubert Sibney, and *The Swamp Dwellers* (translated as *Les gens des marais*) of Wolé Soyinka.
- 47 These were *Tam-Tam*, *Voix et corps*, and *Clameurs nègres*. To show the ambience of that period, Souleymane Koly explains that when he arrived in France in 1971 with his wife, both obtained a work permit within two weeks – which today would be an utter impossibility.

- 48 Gnaoulé-Oupoh (2000).
- 49 Zadi Zaourou (1986, 37).
- 50 Arnaut (2003, 18–35).
- 51 Translator's note: Niangoran-Bouah chose the English "drum" over the French "tambour" for this term.
- 52 James Houra, cited in Bailly (1987, 39).
- 53 Adiaffi (1980a, 1980b). Adiaffi's aesthetic consisted of mixing poetry, philosophy, and literary fables. He called it "*nzassa* writing."
- 54 Also see jegede, chapter 18 this volume.
- 55 "This blues music was born of terrible oppression, and the moment the colored people were released just the little bit, after the Civil War, and got into New Orleans and started to march in Mardi Gras parades and organize their street bands so they could strut their stuff a little, why, some of the weight was off them and their music perked up, took on a happier and breezier spirit. So out of the blues and the worksongs, that went right back to the days of Simon Legree, came New Orleans jazz . . ." (Mezzrow and Wolfe 1946, 36).

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Contemporary Contradictions

Bronzecasting in the Edo Kingdom of Benin

Barbara Winston Blackmun

Can an African artwork be considered “contemporary art” if it creates innovations within a strong local tradition, but does not conform to Eurocentric concepts of contemporaneity?

In a far-reaching discussion of developments in African art from 1980 to the present, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor have recently defined “contemporary African art as a “landscape of some coherence” that “includes a tissue of . . . productive contradictions which enliven debates on what it affirms and what it contests.”¹ This comment was followed by an encyclopedic roster of African artists who have contributed noteworthy work since 1980, along with handsome photographs of their creative contributions. Curiously, they did not include anyone in Benin City, Nigeria. In an earlier analysis, “Benin Sculpture in Modern (Nigerian) Art,” Okeke-Agulu discussed Felix Idubor, Festus Idehen, and Ovia Idah as artists who were introduced into the contemporary Lagos art scene in the 1950s and 1960s; Ben Osawe, who studied abroad; and Erhabor Emokpae, who also worked in Lagos.² However, he omitted the artists whose works have had the most influence within the kingdom of Benin, and he also quoted Ulli Beier in asserting that Benin’s artistic traditions are “oppressively powerful,” allowing “little room for experimentation, stylistic innovation and individuality.”³

Perhaps it should be noted that both Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor left Nigeria some time ago, for better opportunities abroad. Although the departure of these prominent artist-intellectuals may have robbed that nation’s diverse populations of continued exposure to challenging visual images, it has offered both of them opportunities to be heard outside of the continent, and they have each contributed in major ways to the global deconstitution of Euro-American authority in the ongoing construction of art histories. Nevertheless, the assumptions underlying their omission of recent outstanding artists related to Benin’s bronzecasting traditions should be challenged, along

with Beier's assessment that these traditions have never changed. There have been noteworthy innovations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, accompanied by "productive contradictions" within the careers of contemporary bronzecasters in Benin City,⁴ whose work has recently disrupted art markets in Europe and is valued highly by museums and collectors. Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor also omitted an adventurous and internationally prominent artist, scholar, and lecturer, whose prolific contemporary work is strongly undergirded by Benin's bronzecasting traditions.

Benin's artists work within a unique local context. Superficially, this bustling Edo capital city seems open to outsiders. In its modern commercial traffic, one meets entrepreneurs from many parts of the world. The University of Benin includes faculty and students from other areas of Nigeria, and wealthy Edo chiefs maintain additional residences in Lagos or Abuja. Oba Erediauwa II, the hereditary ruler of the kingdom of Benin, earned a higher degree from Cambridge University in law and practiced for a number of years in London, before returning to Benin City for his installation and coronation in 1978. He has remained active in international affairs, serving on boards of corporations and universities.

In deeper concerns, however, Benin is closed to all who do not share its unique history. Oba Erediauwa is the 38th consecutive ruler in Benin's second dynasty of divinely ordained kings. The ancient mud walls and moats of the historic capital encircle its Edo inhabitants conceptually as well as physically, with the palace of the oba at the center. The identity, social position, and civic obligations of each individual within the city and its satellite communities depend upon one's rank within Benin's town or palace hierarchies, and upon the relationship of each lineage to the oba's court. For centuries, the eldest surviving son of every extended Edo family has maintained an ancestral altar, and these shrines have been enhanced with works of art in bronze.⁵ Men who can trace their ancestry to the arrival of Prince Oranmiyan from the kingdom of Ife (approximately eight centuries ago) still enjoy distinctive insignia at annual *Igue* festivals held at the oba's palace entrance, when the oba's sacred kingship is reinforced and ancient rivalries are ceremonially reenacted.

Within this enclosed environment, a dynamic interaction has been maintained for centuries between the artistic production of bronzes and the more prominent citizens of this centralized society, through the distinctive character of Benin's palace-centered culture. Until the nineteenth century conquest of the kingdom, with isolated exceptions, all supplies of metal and ivory belonged to the oba, and the display of complex artworks in these materials required his blessing. The highest-ranking members of hereditary artists' guilds worked within the oba's palace, and were entirely supported by royal patronage. These guilds included the ivory carvers of the Igbesanmwani and the bronzecasters who worked within the Iguneronomwon.

During the sixteenth century, Benin's cosmopolitan Oba Esigie imported quantities of brass and copper as raw materials from Renaissance Europe, and continued the traditions of his royal predecessors in Benin and ancient Ife by encouraging the court's expert bronzecasting workshops to create naturalistic sculptures for display in his palace. He also added hundreds of innovative sculptural relief panels⁶ in bronze, to enhance the palace walls and pillars. Succeeding rulers commissioned additional reliefs. These panels represent various ranks of warriors, nobles, and officials during central ceremonies, along with symbolic images of divine kingship. They were kept brightly polished, and were noted by European visitors to Benin until the middle of the 1600s.⁷

After this period, there was no further mention of bronze relief sculptures. This seems to be explained by an upheaval within the kingdom, which occurred in the second part of that century. Led by ambitious warlords, the population turned against the monarchy. Oral histories blame a ruler named Oba Ewuakpe, but, whatever the cause, Benin was wracked with civil war, Ewuakpe was deposed, and the royal bronze reliefs were roughly removed and stacked in a storeroom in the deserted palace.⁸

Although Ewuakpe eventually regained his throne, the reliefs were apparently never reinstalled, and they remained in storage as an historical and artistic archive. The kingdom soon resumed the lucrative trade with Europe that had been interrupted by warfare, and Benin's subsequent rulers imported additional quantities of copper and bronze. Within the restored palace, royal ancestral altars were newly enhanced with larger than life-sized bronze commemorative heads of crowned kings, and the top of each heavy bronze crown was open for the vertical insertion of a very long ivory tusk.⁹ By the middle of the 1700s, each upright mounted tusk was carved with multiple rows of small figures, depicting rulers, officials, and warriors – which were based upon the bronze reliefs in palace storage.¹⁰ At the height of Benin's regained power, large numbers of heavy bronze pedestal heads, each supporting a richly carved ivory tusk, were displayed within each of the individual palace shrine courtyards that were dedicated to a former ruler of the kingdom.¹¹

By long-established custom, all supplies of copper, bronze, iron, and ivory belonged to the oba, and the display of complex artworks in these materials by any Edo citizen required this formidable ruler's blessing, as well as substantial payment. The highest-ranking members of hereditary artists' guilds usually worked within the oba's palace, supported by royal patronage. Lower-ranking guild members worked within specialized wards in Benin City. These guilds included the ivory carvers of the Igbesanmwani, and the bronzecasters of the Iguneronomwon. The bronzecasters lived and worked on Igun Street. Throughout the 1700s, and again from 1850 to 1897, Benin's ivory carvers worked with a high level of sophistication, while Benin's bronzes became increasingly stiff and conventional.¹² Thus the bronze heads cast during the reign of Oba Ovonramwen (c.1888–1897) were not as expertly finished as the well-carved ivory tusks that they supported.

In 1897, a cataclysmic event disrupted the Edo universe. The British conquered the kingdom of Benin, and the population went into mourning when Oba Ovonramwen and his family were sent into exile.¹³ Under the new colonial administration, very crude bronzes were cast by the few remaining members of the Iguneronomwon who were willing to work for British officials stationed in Benin City.

In 1914, 17 years after the fall of the kingdom, influential Edo leaders were able to install Ovonramwen's son, Prince Aiguobasimwin, as Oba Eweka II. Under British colonial authority, Oba Eweka was not as wealthy as his predecessors, and was unable to provide incomes for craftsmen who would have worked exclusively for royal patronage in the past. However, Eweka himself had not only mastered wood carving skills, but had also been trained in bronzecasting during his youth. At first, he offered instruction in his palace to revive these arts, and in 1927 he established the Benin Divisional Council's Arts and Crafts School elsewhere in Benin City. Skilled instructors taught wood carving to aspiring craftsmen, as well as specialized ivory carving and bronzecasting skills to qualified members of the hereditary Igbesanmwani and Iguneronomwon.¹⁴

In addition to creating furniture for the oba's palace, wood carvers could sell elaborate tables, stools, and doors with carved relief panels to a widespread clientele, in and

beyond Benin City. Supplies of ivory and bronze still belonged to the oba, and sales of artwork in either medium remained subject to his approval. The few bronzes produced during this period were very basic.

The son of Oba Eweca II was crowned as Oba Akenzua II in 1933. During his reign the Arts and Crafts School continued to encourage craftsmanship, inside and outside of the hereditary guilds. The unsophisticated state of bronzing was still evident in the few bronze reliefs that were commissioned during Akenzua's long reign.¹⁵ Nevertheless, members of the Iguneronomwon became increasingly active, because Akenzua's colorful and impressive palace ceremonies attracted visitors among the colonial officials, missionaries, and foreign merchants who resided throughout Nigeria. The oba allowed small bronze images of Benin's rulers, queens, and chiefs to be sold to these visitors, and a few titled officials commissioned modest bronze reliefs.¹⁶ In the 1950s, Nigerian and expatriate scholars were also resident in Benin, studying the kingdom's complex history and traditions. However, in spite of the income earned by the Iguneronomwon through marketing small bronzes, their ability to stock supplies of expensive copper and its alloys was limited.

Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor have briefly mentioned Ben Enwonwu and Chief Omoregbe (the inneh, or hereditary leader, of the Iguneronomwon) as precursors to contemporary art during the second half of the twentieth century. However, Enwonwu's innovations are not discussed, and Omoregbe (known locally as "Chief Inneh") is represented only through a derogatory quotation from Marshall Mount, who dismissed his portrayal of the late Oba Eweca II with the words, "The casting is cruder than the ancient works, and the filing of surfaces . . . is considerably more inept."¹⁷ Therefore, the advances that Chief Omoregbe pioneered in the Iguneronomwon were summarily discounted.¹⁸ A more balanced discussion of these artists is necessary, along with an introduction to others who have contributed to the impressive development of contemporary bronzing in Benin.

Modern Precursors: Influential Artists during the Reign of Oba Akenzua II, 1933–1978

Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen

Three of the artists who provided early twentieth-century groundwork for Benin's current bronzing innovations were active during this period. The earliest of these was Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen, who was born in 1904 into a Christian family that had inherited membership in the Iguneronomwon. Although he was eligible to reside with the other professional bronzing casters on Igun Street, his Christian faith conflicted with the Guild's worship of Ogun, the deity of metalworking, and in 1931 he established his own compound, some distance away.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Jonathan Omodamwen continued to work within the Iguneronomwon, and during Oba Akenzua's reign, he cast sculptures and reliefs in conjunction with Chief Omoregbe, the inneh (see below). Although I have been unable to isolate examples of his work within the copious production of the Omodamwen bronzing family that he founded,²⁰ an uncharacteristic experiment by Chief Omoregbe in 1959 suggests that Jonathan Omodamwen's influence may have been seminal.

In Benin, the centrality of oral storytelling is pervasive, and the history and traditions of the kingdom are primarily transmitted through this medium. In the annual ceremonies performed at the oba's palace, specific stories of great significance in recounting the past are referenced through hand gestures, costume details, and visual and auditory performance elements. Yet storytelling was not clearly evident in Benin's bronzecasting until the reign of Oba Akenzua II. Judging from the ongoing preferences of the Omodamwen family, the first of Benin's unique bronze narrative tableaus may have been the inspiration of Jonathan Omodamwen.

Omoregbe, Chief Inneh of the Iguneronomwon

It is generally agreed that the inneh, Chief Omoregbe,²¹ substantially improved the quality of Benin's bronzes in the middle years of the twentieth century.²² Some of the symbolic attributes that the Edo associate with individual rulers in the kingdom's long dynastic history are well known within Benin City, and, in 1959, Chief Omoregbe cast a unique and finely detailed bronze representation of a seated oba, playing Benin's *akpata* bow harp. When Philip Dark published a small photograph of this image,²³ he commented that it was "the only known representation in the round of such a figure" in Benin art and that "the cast was much admired."²⁴ The inneh's *akpata*-playing figure of the deposed and abandoned ruler was 19 cm in height, and its present location is unknown. Although Dark realized that this represented a seminal innovation within the Iguneronomwon, he was unaware that the unprecedented figure depicted the seventeenth-century Oba Ewuakpe, or that it illustrated a dramatic disruption in Benin's history.

Benin's storytelling traditions record that Oba Ewuakpe was deposed and abandoned by the Edo people. The deserted oba lost his crown, his palace, and his kingdom. When he learned that Iden, his beloved wife and only loyal friend, was dead, he sat alone and quietly played the *akpata* bow harp, mourning in despair. The Edo population heard his heartfelt music and relented, bringing him food and gifts as proof of renewed loyalty. They knew that Queen Iden had committed suicide, having learned from a clairvoyant that only a human sacrifice could restore Ewuakpe's kingship.

It might be significant that Ewuakpe's well-known story is also represented in an accomplished, multifigured bronze tableau that was cast on a very similar scale at some time before 1979, in a style that suggests the bronzecasters of Jonathan Omodamwen's family. Although Chief Omoregbe's 1959 image of an *akpata* player is not among the figures of this sculptural group, the full tableau portrays a procession of formerly rebellious Edo men and women returning with gifts to renew their allegiance to Oba Ewuakpe as he plays his *akpata*. This tableau has been on display in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich since 1979,²⁵ where it was mislabeled as a "Yam Festival."

Ben Enwonwu

The best known of the twentieth-century artists whose sculptures left a lasting impression on Benin City is Ben Enwonwu, who was born about 1921,²⁶ in the city of Onitsha, into an Igbo family that traced its lineage to the sixteenth century in Benin.

Young Ben Enwonwu's abilities were recognized early in his education and, in 1933, he was selected to join Kenneth Murray's most promising students in an experimental art class in Ibadan.²⁷ With these advantages, his subsequent career moved along a trajectory that was very different from the opportunities available to either Jonathan Omodamwen or Chief Omoregbe outside of Benin.

In 1941, he joined the faculty of Edo College, and claimed Benin as his spiritual home. He was accepted into apprenticeship with the Igunerommwon, learned to cast bronze, and became immersed in the kingdom's complex culture. Three years later he entered the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where his work continued to show influences from his Igbo-Edo background,²⁸ and, under the rigorous academic discipline offered there, he quickly developed excellent representational skills, accompanied by a comprehensive grasp of the principles of design. After receiving his Fine Art Diploma in 1947, he held a solo exhibition in London, was interviewed several times by the BBC, and was inducted into the British Royal Academy of Artists, before returning to Nigeria.²⁹

Upon his return, Enwonwu became known primarily for naturalistic, life-sized bronze portraits of prominent Nigerians, and in 1956, the government asked him to create a life-sized representation of Queen Elizabeth II in bronze. His celebrated success in that endeavor³⁰ led to additional commissions. Nigeria's independence required national portrait statues, and Enwonwu's life-sized bronze civic statue of Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria, is one of his best-known works.

Although he also created expressive stylized sculptures, Enwonwu deplored the divergence between an artist's typical desire to create stylistic innovations that impress sophisticated critics of design, and the ability of typical communities to understand or relate to this type of work. In a number of public pronouncements and essays, he criticized the elite dogma of "art for art's sake" as "an abominable form of narcissism."³¹ Benin's Edo population identifies Enwonwu as one of their own artists, and his well-known views may be instrumental in their strong local preference for life-sized, representational civic sculptures in Benin City. In contrast, Benin's other prominent twentieth-century artists, Festus Idehen, Felix Idubor, and Solomon Irein Wangboje, excelled in more experimental modes. While they have gained well-deserved international recognition, their abstractions have not been widely influential in the forms adopted for twenty-first-century public art in Benin.

Contemporary Artists in Benin since the 1980s

During this period, three highly skilled Nigerian sculptors have been quietly creating innovations in response to local conditions within the heart of the ancient Benin kingdom, and major changes have also taken place within Benin's hereditary bronze-casters' Igunerommwon. Although the first of these local sculptors has neither attended a university nor studied abroad (and his name is barely known outside of Benin), his bronzing skills and those of the Igunerommwon artists he has influenced have had a major impact on art markets, museums, laboratories, and African art criticism in Europe and the USA. He maintains his own foundry and workshop on Canaan Street in Benin City, and also works in conjunction with eight highly accomplished bronzing brothers, whose foundry and workshop complex is on Oloton Street. His name is Peter Omodamwen.

Another comparatively unrecognized contemporary Benin artist has broken through barriers that have long been considered impermeable. This influential sculptor is a woman, and until her recent retirement, she was a member of the faculty at the University of Benin. Her skillfully rendered naturalistic sculptures enhance Benin City, and are highly regarded there. In addition to her university teaching and her contributions to civic sculpture, she maintains her own foundry and practices as a bronzecaster, transcending boundaries within a profession that has been forbidden to her gender, throughout all of Africa, for countless centuries. Her name is Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu.

In judging whether the local innovations of these two artists can be considered significant developments in contemporary practice, perhaps the term “contemporary” needs further clarification. Both of these artists have responded in disparate ways to “the historical atmosphere” within Benin, “the conditions of production” within Benin, and the “cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of postcolonialism” within Benin. In spite of the fact that they have not participated in biennial exhibitions or other international arenas of contemporary discourse, their work has won international appreciation.

The third, university-educated but still unheralded, artist, author, lecturer, and teacher from Benin is also a woman, and her artwork is multimedia, highly experimental, and fully international. Although her workshop is located in Benin City, she is also active professionally in Lagos, Ibadan, and overseas – and her current artwork is intended primarily for an international and Eurocentric public. She is committed to a specific cause: to direct worldwide attention to injustices in Benin’s history that remain ignored outside of Nigeria. Her name is Adepeju Layiwola, and she is the niece of Oba Erediauwa II.

Peter Omodamwen

This twenty-first-century artist is the second son of Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen, the Christian bronzecaster who worked in the mid-twentieth-century Iguneronmwon with Chief Omoregbe. In 1959 (the year that the inneh Omoregbe produced his unique *akpata* playing figure), young Peter Omodamwen had completed some of his secondary school education when he was recruited by a British official to work in an industrial foundry, and became a foreman in the metal-fabricating unit at the ministry of works in Ibadan.³² This experience not only changed his life, but also added depth and complexity to the course of contemporary art in Nigeria.

Throughout past centuries, Benin’s bronzecasters have employed the labor-intensive *cire-perdue* procedure, which has been used skillfully in many parts of the world. Twenty-first-century visitors to Benin are sometimes privileged to watch demonstrations by bronzecasters working with the Iguneronmwon on Igun Street. The traditional process involves forming a simple core of clay of the desired size and generalized form of the sculpture, and covering this with a thin “skin” of beeswax, which is then shaped and finished in every detail by one or more artists, to form an exact image of the intended artwork. This carefully constructed, thin-walled wax image is then gently covered with a thin layer of soft, silted mud, which is thoroughly dried before the entire work is enclosed within an outer layer of heavy clay. After the outer layer is pierced with thin iron conduits called sprues, which touch the wax image inside, the complete, multilayered mold is also allowed to dry and harden.



FIGURE 20.1 Peter Omodamwen sculpting in wax. Photograph by Barbara Blackmun, 1994.

The fire used in casting is built within a pit in the ground, and the entire mold is placed in the fire. The heat causes the wax to melt into a liquid, which flows out of the mold through the iron sprues, leaving a narrow layer or “skin” of empty space, surrounding the central clay core. By diligently pumping a hand-operated bellows for an extended period of time to increase the fire temperature, the craftsmen reach the melting point of small pieces of broken copper, brass, or other metals that they have placed in a crucible. They must operate the bellows vigorously to keep the elevated temperature of the molten mixture consistent, so that when it is poured into the mold, the metal will flow into all of the spaces formerly occupied by the “skin” of wax. After the mold is carefully cooled, its outer clay cover is broken away, revealing a hollow metal image that is identical to the beeswax prototype in thickness, form, and detail.

While Peter Omodamwen worked in the Ibadan industrial foundry, he learned to simplify this process. There he used a diesel-fired crucible that kept the melted metal at precisely the correct temperature so that it would flow easily. He was also taught sandcasting techniques, and how to make removable molds when casting multiple objects like hinges and tools in brass. After returning to Benin City in 1963, Peter built a similar foundry with a diesel-fired crucible in 1966 at the home of his father, Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen, who had been using traditional methods within the Iguneronomwon. There the younger artist experimented with various modern industrial processes in creating complex and highly detailed sculptures in a variety of sizes, based upon Benin’s history and customs (Figure 20.1).

In this small wax image of an elite Edo woman, her kneeling, pregnant figure has been placed in the context of a domestic shrine. Every detail of her lavish crown, her cloth wrapper, the plants that shelter the shrine, and each object on the altar, has been formed in intricate wax, ready to be cast into bronze. This attention to minute detail is reminiscent of the storytelling *akpata* player produced by the late Chief Omoregbe within the Iguneronmwon in 1959, and it may also reflect the influence of Peter Omodamwen's father, Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen.

In 1967 Peter Omodamwen built his own home and studio workshop on Canaan Street in Benin, and constructed another foundry with diesel-driven capabilities there. He also taught modern technical practices to his eight brothers,³³ who continued to use the improved foundry he had created at their father's house. Jonathan Enabulele Omodamwen died in 1978, and since that time, his son Peter has established five more contemporary foundries in Benin City, presumably some of them to serve his brothers' workshops on Oloton Street. In addition to his competent portrait busts of Nigerian leaders, Peter Omodamwen produces expertly cast bronzes that recall Edo customs and oral histories. His sculptures are popular locally, as well as in Lagos art and sales galleries. Yet, even though Omodamwen's impressive bronzing expertise should qualify his work as worthy of attention, he has never sought to participate in the arena of international contemporary artists.

A complicating factor is that some of the warriors, leopards, courtiers, and relief plaques, produced by Peter Omodamwen and his brothers for local ancestral shrines, closely resemble Benin's finest sixteenth-century artwork. When the Omodamwens make their own versions of these sculptures, they often add adjustments or additions, and these have been sought after locally by Benin's older chiefs, for traditional display. Predictably, these near-replicas have also been discovered by African and European dealers who add an aged surface patina, so they can be represented as newly discovered antiquities.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Omodamwens have established an essentially locally grounded practice in producing these bronzes, as opposed to one that is predominantly diasporic.

Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu

An ancient exclusion, strictly enforced throughout Africa for centuries, bars women from even approaching the bronzing process. However, within the palace of Oba Akenzua II in the 1950s, there was a unique departure from this exclusion. One of his young daughters, Princess Elizabeth Akenzua, was talented in sculpture, and she was extremely interested in bronzing. Somehow, Akenzua overcame the objections of the Iguneronmwon sculptors who were casting bronzes in the oba's palace, and insisted that they allow her to observe their practices, and that they answer her questions. Perhaps this was possible because she had not yet reached puberty. Nevertheless, Akenzua's decision was courageous. He later ensured that she received higher education in Lagos, and, contrary to Edo custom, he blessed her marriage to Babatunde Olowu, the Yoruba husband of her own choice.

Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu has developed consummate skill in naturalistic representation. Although she has also produced effective sculptures that are nearly nonobjective, she prefers to create lifelike images that engender human empathy. Of this preference, she has explained (with reasoning that Ben Enwonwu would have



FIGURE 20.2 Princess Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu. *The Zero Hour*, 1986. Cement sculpture, approx. 150cm. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Barbara Blackmun, 1994.

wholeheartedly endorsed), “I believe in translating my imagination . . . into the common language that can be easily understood by the society in which I live.”³⁵

Olowu’s best-known works are warmly human, and some courageously reflect the most intimate personal challenges of her gender. She was pregnant while creating *Zero Hour* (Figure 20.2), and this evocative, over-life-sized work captured her perception of the extreme heaviness of her own alien body, as well as her mixed emotional state during the onset of heavy labor and childbirth.

Earlier, in the 1960s, she had faced a different kind of challenge. She was a student attending the University at Nsukka in eastern Nigeria when this region seceded from the rest of Nigeria and the Biafran War began. The casualties that occurred during the following months included personal friends on both sides of that bitter conflict, and her well-known life-sized *Monument to Soldiers of the Biafran War* is a heartfelt reaction to that tragedy.³⁶ Although she has followed Peter Omodamwen’s example in establishing a modern foundry within her own family compound,³⁷ it is used to cast only her smaller works. In Benin, even membership within the highly respected royal family does not translate into enough wealth to cast life-sized sculptures in bronze.

Adepeju Layiwola

Princess Adepeju Layiwola is the daughter of Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu and the niece of Oba Erediauwa II. She has made intelligent use of these advantages, and has studied

a full range of fine and applied arts, earning a BA Honours degree from the University of Benin in jewelry and metalsmithing (1988), and a Masters and PhD from the University of Ibadan in art history (2004). Her PhD dissertation “Contemporary Benin Brasscasting: A Study in Continuity and Change,” is the most authoritative source of information concerning the role of the Omodamwen family in Benin’s current bronzing.

As a practicing studio-trained artist, activist, and scholar teaching about art and art history on the university level, Dr. Layiwola has been on the faculty of the University of Benin (1991–1995), and currently serves on the faculties of the University of Lagos and the University of Ibadan. In Lagos, she has held a joint exhibition with Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu, and has participated in a number of other seminal exhibitions, particularly in support of the Women and Youths Arts Foundation (WY Art), which she founded in 2004. Outside of Nigeria, solo exhibitions of her artworks have been featured in the UK, Ireland, and the USA, and she has also been a frequent featured lecturer at universities and museums in several other countries abroad. Her published papers have explored several craft traditions in Nigeria, with recent emphasis on the interface between the visual arts and the theater. The title for her provocative 2010 exhibition is also the title of the catalogue: *Benin 1897.com: Art and the Restitution Question*. It includes a wide range of richly experimental visual and tactile explorations, within a hard-hitting accusation of European culpabilities in the 1897 conquest of Benin, and a call for legal redress of those injustices. It is difficult to understand how this influential artist escaped the notice of Chika Okeke-Agulu and Owkui Enwezor as they compiled their comprehensive 2009 volume, *Contemporary African Art since 1980*.

The Iguneronomwon

After Princess Elizabeth Olowu’s elder brother was crowned as Oba Erediauwa II in 1978, more of Benin’s long-standing prohibitions regulating the casting of bronzes were abandoned. In the past, members of the Iguneronomwon have not been allowed to create major sculptures for Benin’s highly competitive titled officials, even if they supplied the metal, because the display of impressive artworks by ambitious chiefs has been considered a challenge to the dynastic authority of the oba. Over the centuries, only a few of Benin’s most prominent nobles have broken this rule, and these exceptions have been noted in oral history. In a major departure from precedent, the newly crowned Oba Erediauwa stimulated the improvement of Benin’s art practices by permitting the Iguneronomwon to buy their own supplies of bronze, to sell their work freely, and to accept commissions for bronze sculptures and reliefs of any size.

Other changes were also taking place in Nigeria. The government was receiving an influx of riches from lucrative oil contracts, and suddenly wealthy officials were eager to exhibit their new empowerment. Some sought to enhance their prestige by displaying complex bronzes that resemble Benin’s celebrated antiquities. These were commissioned from the Iguneronomwon, who had responded to the higher standards of the Omodamwen family by adopting contemporary technology, thus improving their skills. These changes are evident in the increase of classic royal bronze pedestal heads and other conventional staples of the Benin corpus (which immediately began to be offered on the European art market as long-lost masterworks), as well as in the new variations of classic Benin horsemen, warrior chiefs, hornblowers, cocks, and leopards. All of these became locally popular for display in the domestic ancestral shrines of Benin’s chiefs.

By the end of the twentieth century, the influx of expertly cast Benin bronzes was challenging European and American galleries, auction houses, and museums, and even experienced collectors became convinced that these recent forms must be newly discovered work that had been cast in the 1600s. Dealers offered them for inflated prices, amid far-fetched stories that they had been hidden away for centuries. It is unclear whether the original agency in this misrepresentation was inside or outside of the Iguneronmwon. Nevertheless, within the parameters of Benin's uniquely focused universe, these contemporary innovations became extremely rewarding financially.³⁸

Further developments led to the adoption of additional subject matter in deference to some of the younger Edo chiefs who have accepted Pentecostal Christianity. For those who no longer maintain ancestral altars in homage to their lineage antecedents, life-sized, expressive bronze portraits of these relatives by the Omodamwens, or by David Ewere's workshop, have become an acceptable replacement. Other artists excelling in portraiture are associated with Emuze and Sons, and with Osadolor Igbineweka.

Benin's new artistic practices have revitalized Benin's culturally centered arts, and the inhabitants of this ancient city are enthusiastically supporting the public display of large representational sculptures. Elizabeth Olowu's sculptural workshop at the University of Benin is well established, and civic groups offer prizes to encourage life-sized local statues that continue the naturalistic legacy that was recognized by Ben Enwonwu. In front of the Edo state government building, for example, groups of skillfully rendered cement delegates seem to converse quite naturally, as they deliberate the problems of governance,³⁹ and a celebrated sculpture by Bello Kuranga commemorates the attack by Benin's warriors on the members of Consul Phillips' unwelcome expedition to the capital city in 1897.⁴⁰

Benin City is very different from New York or London, and it is also different from Nsukka, Lagos, or Johannesburg. Representations of historic rulers in bronze have been recognized in the oba's palace for generations, and past-looking aesthetics complement the preoccupation of Benin's families with their personal ancestral hierarchies. In addition, the commoditization of contemporary bronzes that resemble Benin's antiquities has been a powerful incentive to preserve visual identification with the past.

This incentive affects ivory carving as well as bronzing. When the organizers of Nigeria's Pan-African FESTAC were unable to borrow the celebrated ivory mask of Benin's early Queen Idia as the symbol of this historic event, a carving contest was held in Benin to find an artist who could carve a convincing replica from ivory. The unusual results reflect the skills preserved by this culture, as well as its pride in ancestral accomplishments. Not one, but two excellent replicas were produced within a few weeks, by young unknown artists working from published photographs. The example carved by Emoruyi Omoregie has been displayed as "The FESTAC Mask" in the National Museum of Art in Lagos, although Joseph Alufa Igbinova displays his National Award as a Member of the Order of Niger, to prove that he won the contest, and it was his ivory mask that was actually used at the festival.⁴¹

Valid local modernities are evident in the distinctive storytelling functions of Benin's life-sized civic sculptures, in the expressive personal sculptures of Elizabeth Olowu, and in the small but ambitious bronze figural tableaus produced by the Omodamwen

complex, which serve as eloquent illustrations of Benin's history and folklore. However, contemporary bronzecasting in Benin is full of internal contradictions, some of which are listed here:

- Bronze is a very expensive medium. Princess Elizabeth Olowu, the most ambitious of Benin's contemporary sculptors, has established a successful career as a bronze-caster, within a field forbidden to women. She has created a modern foundry in which she casts small bronzes, but she cannot afford the expense of casting her more important works in bronze, and receives no government or community grants to assist with these unusual projects.
- Elizabeth Olowu is also a university graduate, and a university faculty member, whose royal status has not restricted her ability to move into the world professionally. She is creating expressive, life-sized, and lifelike cement sculptures that are relevant and highly appreciated locally (see Figure 20.2), and other sculptors are following her example in Benin City. Yet, in the myopia that severs Benin from elsewhere in Nigeria, she has not been recognized within the encyclopedic index of *Contemporary African Artists since 1980*.⁴²
- Although Olowu's talent and her ambitious sculptures have attracted some international attention, she works in a field reserved exclusively for men. Benin's male bronzecasters are also inventing a variety of expressive and sometimes less successful forms of art (see Figure 20.1),⁴³ and their superior economic position allows them to cast all of their sculptures in bronze. However, their higher income depends heavily upon the problematic sales of their "sixteenth-century bronze antiquities" abroad.
- To the bronzecasters on Igun Street, the choice of whether they would prefer to have their best work accepted as contemporary art, or presented as long-lost antiquities, is a matter of economics. Sculptures and reliefs that appear to be "old" bring these artists far better financial rewards than any obviously recent work, no matter how high the quality. Therefore, the present Chief Inneh has diplomatically insisted⁴⁴ that the Iguneronmwon occasionally sells sixteenth-century bronzes that have been "preserved as models" for hundreds of years.
- The success of the Omodamwens' bronzes and of the Iguneronmwon versions of Benin's contemporary "antiquities" as commodities in international markets has led to efforts of other African bronzecasters, such as those in Cameroon, to market their unusual versions of "Benin bronzes," without any insight into their cultural interpretation. Ironically, these Cameroon bronzecasters can afford to buy enough copper and its varied alloys to cast gigantic bronze versions of Benin's chiefs, leopards, warriors, and royal figures – a luxury well beyond the capabilities of any artists in Benin.

In discussing these contradictions with Peter Omodamwen in 1994, I asked why he didn't establish international name recognition, so that he could sell his excellent bronzes as a well-known contemporary Benin artist. He smiled and told me that for a time he had signed his works. The dealers who purchased them had objected, and had removed his signatures with a file.

Nevertheless, Benin's contemporary artworks do inspire admiration and interest in Europe and America, even when they are known to be recent. It has been mentioned above that, at some time before 1979, Benin's twentieth-century bronze tableau of Oba Ewuakpe with his *akpata*⁴⁵ was taken to Germany, where it was displayed in the Museum

für Völkerkunde in Munich. This complex work has been featured in two international exhibitions,⁴⁶ even though the artists who made the effective group have not been identified and the significance of the work has been lost to international viewers.

Other recent bronzes based on pivotal incidents in Benin's history have been included in the international exhibition that opened in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna in 2007.⁴⁷ In 2010, an Omodamwen bronze tableau was added to this museum's permanent collection,⁴⁸ and another has been added to the collection of the Art Institute in Chicago. Like the Munich tableau, the subject of the Vienna bronze is both historic and sympathetic. It portrays Oba Ovonramwen, his queen, and two attendants in a boat, guarded by British soldiers as they were taken into exile in 1897, after the conquest of the kingdom of Benin.

It's clear that current art making within Benin City fits well into Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor's definition of "contemporary African art" as "a landscape of some coherence" that "includes a tissue of . . . productive contradictions which enliven debates on what it affirms and what it contests."⁴⁹ Inside as well as outside of the Igunerommwon, bronzedcasting innovators have broken through conventional expectations to create new approaches, subjects, concepts, and functions for Benin-based artworks. Although their most astonishing innovations⁵⁰ may not be supported by the international client base that seeks to admire only classic sixteenth-century Benin bronzes, it is evident that Ulli Beier's pessimistic assessment that Benin's "oppressively powerful" art traditions "allow little room for experimentation, stylistic innovation, and individuality"⁵¹ has been disproven.

Yet, as we enter the second decade of this century, the varied work of Benin's contemporary artists remains strangely invisible to international critics. Therefore it is still too soon to know whether young generations of artists elsewhere will be introduced to Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu's eloquent life-sized sculptures, the stellar craftsmanship of Peter Omodamwen's detailed miniatures, the tableaus of the Omodamwen and Emuze families, or Adepeju Layiwola's powerful exhibition mixtures of activism, colors, shapes, materials, techniques, history, and vehement protest. All of this rich contemporary art coexists and thrives, within the unique universe known as the kingdom of Benin.

Notes

1 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009, 10–11).

2 Okeke-Agulu (2007, 264–267).

3 Okeke-Agulu (2007, 266).

4 The Edo word *Igunerommwon* can be translated into English as either "bronzedcasters" or "brasscasters." Following standard museum practice, the term "bronze" refers here to any of the varied copper alloys used in casting important works of art. European tastes prefer artworks with a dark patina that is often the result of age, while the well-known sculptures and relief panels of the Benin corpus were originally displayed with the bright color and shining surface that is commonly associated in Europe with less valuable objects made of brass. This bright surface is still preferred in Benin.

5 An introduction to Benin's complex social structure is given in *Benin Studies*, a compilation of R. E. Bradbury's earlier monographs (1973). These include "The Kingdom of Benin," pp. 44–75, and "Patrimonialism and Gerontocracy in Benin Political Culture," pp. 129–146.

- 6 Plankensteiner illustrates a representative selection of Benin's bronze relief plaques on pp. 116, 160, 241, 280, 281, 312, 313, 324, 325, 329, 336, and 338 of *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* (2007).
- 7 A Dutch writer, Olfert Dapper, wrote an admiring description of Benin City that was compiled from the journals of various travelers. He described Benin City's wide streets and fine buildings, and the magnificence of the king's palace, where the pillars were covered from top to bottom with cast copper reliefs that were kept clean and bright; see Dapper (1668).
- 8 Ben-Amos (1999, 42–45), offers a discussion of Benin's traditions involving the population's rejection of Oba Ewuakpe near the end of the 1600s.
- 9 The next detailed description of the oba's palace was written by David van Nyendaal, a Dutch trader who visited Benin City in 1702, after Oba Ewuakpe's monarchy had been restored. Nyendaal (1705) did not mention any copper reliefs. Instead, he described 11 large ivory tusks displayed upright on the ancestral altar in the oba's reception room, and added that each tusk was supported upon a crowned head that was cast in copper. A photograph of several carved Benin tusks mounted on crowned royal pedestal heads during a London exhibition is featured in Dark (1973, plate 10), although the surfaces of Benin's altar tusks were probably not carved until later in the 1700s. Ben-Amos (2007) discusses ancestral altars in the Oba's Palace; also see Blackmun (1983, 59–70), where a carved tusk is illustrated and the motifs are explained.
- 10 Blackmun (2007, 161–169).
- 11 Landolphe (1823, 59).
- 12 Blackmun (1984, vol. I, 163–171). Well-designed ivories were carved during the reign of Oba Ovonramwen (1888–1897), for the palace altars that honored his father, Oba Adolo, and earlier kings. The tusks that enhanced the altar at that time can be identified through their carved motifs. Sixteen tusks that bear these motifs have been charted in detail (Blackmun 1984, vol. I, 163–171, and vol. III), and the craftsmanship evident in the carving of Ovonramwen's ivories far surpasses the overelaborated, cylindrical effect of the heavy bronze commemorative heads that supported them.
- 13 A well-known photograph of the defeated Oba Ovonramwen on board the ship that carried him to exile is featured by Adepeju Layiwola in *The Benin Massacre: Memories and Experiences*, see Plankensteiner (2007, 87, fig. 5). A relief plaque based on a second photograph (Plankensteiner 2007, 484) has been cast by Philip Omodamwen; see Plankensteiner (2007, 487–488, fig. 272). In 2007, the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde purchased from the Omodamwen brothers a bronze figural tableau of Oba Ovonramwen in a canoe taking him away from Benin (Plankensteiner 2007, 489, fig. 273). Another Omodamwen version of this canoe scene has recently been published by Nevadomsky (2012, 20, fig. 8).
- 14 Gore (1997, 57).
- 15 Nevadomsky (2007b, 498–501) discusses this period in regard to figs. 280–282 in Plankensteiner (2007) and he provides a valuable overview of Benin art during the past century in the *Benin Centennial* issue of *African Arts*, vol. 30, no. 3 (see Nevadomsky 1997). His contributions in that issue include the feature, "First Word" (pp. 1–10) and the essay, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture, 1897–1997" (pp. 18–27, 91).
- 16 Several bronze plaques were commissioned by the late Ezomo Omoruyi, who died in 1960. See Bradbury (1973, 252, plate 2) and Plankensteiner (2007, 503, cat. 285). When Queen Elizabeth II of England visited Benin in 1956, High Priest Ebohon

- also commissioned a bronze plaque commemorating the event, see Plankensteiner (2007, 499–500, cat. 281).
- 17 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009, 14).
- 18 See Blackmun (2003) for an early discussion of these innovations.
- 19 Gore (1997, 57–58).
- 20 Adepeju Layiwola (2003) completed an extensive study of the Omodamwen bronze-casting family as a thesis requirement for the PhD in art history. She is the foremost authority on the work of this family (and of the Iguneronmwon) during the reign of Oba Akenzua II.
- 21 Dark (1973). Chief Inneh (inneh of the Iguneronmwon) is discussed on pp. 76 and 77, and his work appears in plates 62 and 63. Several views of his expertly detailed 1959 bronze figure of the *Bow-Harp Player* (or *Akpata Player*) appear in plate 63, illus. 145–146. (These are not listed as figure numbers. Dark organizes the volume into full-page plates from #1 to #80, and discusses the smaller photos within each plate as numbered “ills.” or “illustrations.”)
- 22 See note 13. Nevadomsky (1997) includes a bronze figure of an oba, by the former inneh of the Iguneronmwon, as fig. 13 on the lower right side of p. 25. The level of detail is evident, even though the sculpture had not yet been finished by removing the sprues and runners. Also see Nevadomsky (2007a), and his commentaries that accompany figs. 280–282 (2007b).
- 23 Dark (1973, plate 63, illus. 145–146).
- 24 Dark (1973, 76).
- 25 Museum für Völkerkunde Munich, 79-300.875. Illustrated in Eisenhofer (1997, 194) as “II/1.16: Figure group, bronze, 83 × 41 × 43 cm, accessioned in 1979” (my translation from the original label in German).
- 26 Kelly and Stanley (2003, 193–198).
- 27 Ogbechie (2008, 37–41).
- 28 Ogbechie (2008, 25, 57–58).
- 29 Ogbechie (2008, 74–84).
- 30 Ogbechie (2008, 132–141, figs. 4-9, 4-10).
- 31 Ogbechie (2008, 149).
- 32 My opportunity to return to Benin for further research in the spring of 1994 was generously funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities Interpretive Research Grant. Although much of the following information was obtained during an interview with Peter Omodamwen in Benin City, confirmation and additional details were generously provided by Princess Adepeju Layiwola in March 2011.
- 33 Layiwola (2003, 79–80) gives the names of the nine Omodamwen brothers in the order of their seniority as Eliasha Osaizogue Omodamwen, Peter Osasebo Omodamwen, Lugard Ernest Osasuyi Omodamwen, Billy Ikponwosa Omodamwen, John Orokoro Omodamwen, Victor Izewuwa Omodamwen, Osasuwa Omodamwen, Efe Omodamswen, and Eguasa Omodamwen.
- 34 Blackmun (2008, figs. 17 and 18).
- 35 La Duke (1991, 27).
- 36 Blackmun (2008, 153, fig. 7).
- 37 In 1994, I was invited to meet Princess Elizabeth Akenzua Olowu at her home, where she shared information about her ongoing career and its challenges. She introduced me to many of the life-sized sculptures within the walled garden that encloses her large foundry compound.

- 38 The controversy that led to a challenge of a prominent and hotly defended claim that a large group of contemporary bronzes cast by the Iguneronmwon were antiquities, is discussed in Blackmun (2008) and in Pernicka, Berswordt-Wallrabe, and Wagners (2008, 153–163).
- 39 Blackmun (2008, 157, fig. 8).
- 40 See Nevadomsky (1997, 62, fig. 20). Also Ogene (2012, 44, fig. 5).
- 41 Personal communication, my interview with Joseph Alufa Igbinova in the spring of 1994. His mask was featured in the *Benin Kings and Rituals* exhibition in Vienna, and is illustrated in Plankensteiner (2007, 505, cat. 287).
- 42 See the first paragraph of this chapter.
- 43 Also see Gore (1997, figs. 1, 9, and 10).
- 44 During the program of lectures that accompanied the opening of the *Benin Kings and Rituals* exhibition in Vienna, the recently installed inneh of the Iguneronmwon took part in the sometimes heated public discussion (Inneh 2007). This debate included conflicting opinions about the reliability of popular commercial laboratory tests that were advertised as “scientifically accurate” in determining the age of bronze sculptures. It also concerned the improbability of the claim by several dealers that the families of Benin’s chiefs had commonly concealed royal bronzes from the oba’s palace within their own compounds (for up to five centuries) without being detected.
- 45 The style of this complex bronze illustration of Oba Ewuakpe’s returning supporters suggests that it may have been cast by the Omodamwen brothers. In 1959, Jonathan Omodamwen was working with Chief Omoregbe, inneh of the Iguneronmwon, who was already experimenting with at least one small sculptured figure that illustrated this popular theme (see note 19).
- 46 The tableau was featured in the exhibition catalogue of *Kulte, Künstler, Könige in Afrika* at the Schlossmuseum, Linz, Austria, in 1997 (Eisenhofer 1997, 141, fig. II/1.16) and it also appeared in the Vienna and international *Benin Kings and Rituals* exhibition. It is illustrated in Plankensteiner (2007, 504).
- 47 Plankensteiner (2007, figs. 272, 273, and 282).
- 48 Layiwola (2007, 85, fig. 4).
- 49 Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009, 10–11).
- 50 Nevadomsky (2012, 23, figs. 13, 15).
- 51 Okeke-Agulu (2007, 266).

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Puppets as Witnesses and Perpetrators in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*

Peter Ukpokodu

Introduction

Ubu and the Truth Commission, a theatrical collaboration between artist/director William Kentridge, playwright Jane Taylor, and puppeteers Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones – the latter the founders of the Handspring Puppet Company – premiered at The Laboratory (Market Theatre) in Johannesburg, South Africa, on May 26, 1997. It subsequently traveled abroad where it was shown at various festivals (e.g., in Weimar, Germany and Avignon, France in 1997) and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC in 1998. Conceived of as a multimedia event, this play both engaged and Africanized Bertold Brecht's Epic theatre and its *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation" or "distancing" effect). Dealing with the difficult subject matter of human rights abuses during South Africa's apartheid regimes and the nation's focus on catharsis during public hearings associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995, it juxtaposes a variety of artistic media to solicit audiences' emotional, but critical responses. This chapter analyzes the drama's narrative structure and characters with a particular eye on the collaborators' defining stage craft, thereby offering a theatrical perspective on African modernism.

The collaborators' varied backgrounds and considerable skill, evidenced by their formidable individual careers, created a sophisticated scenario that stands in stark contrast to Brecht's sparse mise-en-scène. Hyperrealistic hand puppets, life-size puppets reminiscent of masquerades, silent puppeteers, and actors share the stage with documentary film footage, graphic media, and Kentridge's animated drawings of the menacing apartheid landscape. Each entity and prop is endowed with human characteristics, including (or notable absence of) a conscience, and transgresses the boundaries between stage and backdrop, human and graphic form. This artistic transgression of boundaries in itself creates an aesthetic sensibility for the viewing audiences as overwhelming scenarios of the curses of apartheid are staged.

Historical Background

The historical event that inspired *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Set up by President Nelson Mandela in 1995, just two years before the first performance of the play, the TRC consisted of 17 members, with Archbishop Desmond Tutu acting as its chairperson. The Commission was empowered by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act to investigate and document the gross violations of human rights in and outside South Africa committed by the South African government and its opposition during the period known as apartheid,¹ particularly the period from the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 to Mandela's assumption of the office of president in 1994, as the first South African ruler to be democratically elected, which was the most violent and the bloodiest. The Commission's report was expected to be as comprehensive as possible. As the Commission pointed out, apartheid itself was in concept a violation of human rights; human beings have no control over the color of their skin, thus using that color factor as the basis to determine one's political and civil rights constituted human rights abuse. The Commission found that as the apartheid government eroded the civil, social, economic, and political participation of other races, especially Blacks, it maintained white supremacy as an ideology, and through it implemented a massive social change based on legalized social discrimination. To crush its opposition, the government created a massive internal security organ which it supported with bewildering legal powers. A quick look at some apartheid legislation provides background knowledge not only to *Ubu and the Truth Commission* but to such plays as Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island*, and *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*.²

The bedrock of apartheid was the Population Registration Act that assigned every person living in South Africa to one of four racial classifications – White, Bantu (Black), Coloured (mixed race), and Indian (Asian). The color of one's skin was destiny. As stated by D. F. Malan, a former prime minister of South Africa and also an ordained minister of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church):

The difference in color is merely the physical manifestation of . . . two irreconcilable ways of life; between barbarism and civilization, between heathenism and Christianity . . . Apartheid is based on what the Afrikaner [Dutch-speaking descendant of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century white settlers, representing the instigators of apartheid] believes to be his divine privilege . . .³

South African prime ministers of the National Party⁴ operated with the religious backing of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Afrikaner Broederbond (bond of brothers), an ultranationalist clandestine, exclusivist organization of Afrikaner elites, further supported their white supremacist policies. In what came to be referred to as the formulations of the "Apartheid Bible," notable neo-Calvinist Afrikaner theologians interpreted Genesis 1:18 – that God separated day and night, light and darkness "and God saw that it [the separation] was good" – along racist lines so as to legitimize segregation. Professor F. J. M. Potgieter was particularly instrumental in this. He extended his argument to a theory on the arts, asserting that Black writers (artists) "have a style of

their own that could not have been produced by any White person”;⁵ he thus presumed inferiority of Black creativity to white artistic superiority. N. Diedrichs carried this theological interpretation to absurdity; he contended that “any attempt to obliterate [racial] differences abrogated God’s natural law.”⁶

Having secured the religious blessing of the Dutch Reformed Church and the powerful Broederbond, the National Party was fortified with spiritual and secular ammunition to introduce and enact a host of apartheid legislation. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and Immorality Amendment Act (1950) prohibited interracial marriages and sexual intercourse between Black and white. The implementation brought public humiliation and shattered family unity. Harassment under this law not only led people to commit suicide but the structures where people were caught in flagrante delicto were “bulldozed . . . to the ground.”⁷ Fugard’s play *Statement after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* addresses this phenomenon.

The Group Areas Act (1950) divided South Africa into zones reserved for racial groups. When it was implemented, masses of mostly Black South Africans were forcibly uprooted from their homes, and some communities such as Sophiatown, District Six, Cato Manor, and South End in Port Elizabeth were totally destroyed. Income and property were lost and immense suffering ensued. Aspects of the Group Areas Act are dramatized in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a play devised by Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona.

Defining communism in deliberately vague and absurd terms, the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) banned the South African Communist Party and any form of dissent. The Separate Amenities Act (1953) enforced social segregation by designating all public facilities and amenities for the exclusive use of specified racial groups. Beaches, sports arenas, libraries, zoos, parks and other places were so demarcated; most were closed to nonwhites. The Bantu Education Act (1953) created a separate and inferior system of education for Blacks. This legislation would also affect art education in South Africa, and adversely affected mission schools that had produced brilliant leaders of thought. Hendrik Verwoerd, the Afrikaner minister of native affairs who is referred to as the “architect” of the Bantu Education Act, justified the legislation:

There is no place for [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. It is no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim, absorption in the European community. Black people are not to receive an education that would lead them to aspire to positions they wouldn’t be allowed to hold in society. Natives [Blacks] must be taught from an early age that equality with Europeans [whites] is not for them.⁸

Similarly, the Extension of University Education Act (1959) denied Black South Africans the right to attend their preferred university.⁹ It became illegal for white institutions of higher learning to admit Blacks except with approval from the ministry of education. Separate colleges were thus created along ethnic lines for Coloureds, Asians, and Blacks, respectively. This restricted educational access amounted to racial and social engineering.

As an awesome social engineering project, apartheid wreaked unimaginable havoc on South Africans and tried the limits of human endurance as Black South Africans, dumped in *bantustans* (homelands or so-called independent national states within South Africa) – without citizenship, without jobs, without water, without shelter,

forced to carry passes that restricted their movement – endured unimaginable hardship. The United Nations General Assembly had repeatedly labeled apartheid a crime against humanity, and, in 1984, the Security Council of the same body (the UN) passed Resolution 556 that declared apartheid as a crime against humanity.¹⁰ This is the background to the subject matter of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.

Theoretical and Critical Issues

Ubu and the Truth Commission draws a richer artistic response than other apartheid and Truth and Reconciliation Commission plays because of the unique artistic collaboration between Jane Taylor as dramatist, William Kentridge as director, and the puppeteers (Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler) of the Handspring Puppet Company. The team effort of these South Africans of varied backgrounds (all opposed to apartheid) narrows the difference between human performers, puppets, and visual artworks that are given performance space on the screen behind Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu, main characters in the play. Because the puppets and artworks are treated and perform as autonomous characters in the play along with human characters, they are not mere mise-en-scène that lose their individual meaning and self in the unfolding story. Not mere decor or props, the artworks retain their individual recognition as characters and interact with perpetrators on the stage. Thus, graphic projections respond to human actions, as when Pa Ubu's notations in a book show up as scribbling on the screen behind him, or when animated scenes act independently and reveal and comment upon the inner workings of characters' minds. In a reversal, actors and puppets' physical absence on the stage sometimes looms larger than life as they transgress physical boundaries and appear as projections.¹¹

This distinctive attribution of character and individual identity to works of fine art in the play flies in the face of Susan Langer's theory of drama, especially her principle of assimilation in which one artistic genre loses itself as it is integrated into another, or, in Langer's words, "whereby one art 'swallows' the products of another."¹² Thus "when a composer puts a poem to music, he annihilates the poem and makes a song."¹³ Langer does provide exceptions to this principle of assimilation – she notes, a "poem that has perfect form . . . will not give up its literary [or artistic] form."¹⁴ The range of artistic forms in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* in which puppets, drawings, and photographs seemingly assume individual importance contradicts Langer's assertion. Langer recognizes that theatre is "more variable, more tolerant of choices made by performing artists, than any other art and mode,"¹⁵ but she is quick to point out that theatre is not a "democracy of various arts functioning together."¹⁶ In Langer's vision, Kentridge's animated contributions to *Ubu and the Truth Commission* would be reduced to mere props, secondary illusion to the "commanding form" of the primary illusion established by the dramatist.¹⁷

The artistic complexity of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* heightens interpretation because even as it seems to negate an aspect of one theory of art, it affirms other theories and practices, for example, Robert Smithson's theory of "cultural confinement." While the individual components, the drawings, the puppets, etcetera, are veritable artworks that could be displayed in a museum gallery or, as in the case of the sculpted mechanical vulture, in a sculpture garden, Smithson opines that doing so is to disengage such artworks from the real world outside the museum. He compares such curatorial attitude of confining artworks to a museum to imprisonment in a jail or confinement in an asylum. In the galleries of a museum where the curator, like a

prison warden or superintendent, has successfully removed the artworks from the rest of society, art loses its vitality. I could readily prolong this metaphor by pointing out how museums are fortified with thick walls, surveillance cameras, locks, lights, and alarms as in a veritable minimum penitentiary. What is absent are the sharp barbed wires of a maximum prison. It is in such museums that artworks, separated from their vital origins from humans and from free interactivity with human beings in a broader societal context, are confined like sick and dying prisoners, as “inanimate invalids.”¹⁸

To escape this confinement, Smithson proposes a dialectical engagement of an artwork with the real world where culture is actively pursued as a part of life. Such a relationship between an artwork and society, even when inherent contradictions may be involved, is liberating. It restores the primary quest and motivation behind a work of art or any creative work in general – liberty. For an artwork to exercise its freedom and help liberate the art world from “abstractions and concepts,”¹⁹ it must actively engage its society and the world. Without that existential relevance and engagement, museums would remain ossified as “graveyards above the ground – congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality.”²⁰

What *Ubu and the Truth Commission* has successfully executed is the liberation of the visual arts to perform with human actors on the stage. Here animated artworks that demonstrate human intellection and passion gain relevance in a sociopolitical world and respond to seemingly cataclysmic events. This, though intriguing, is really not new in African art. For example, masquerades I have encountered in Nigeria, such as the *gelede* of the Yoruba, the *iyabena* and *ikpeh* of Jattu-Uzairue, and the *alagba* of the Kalabari take on life and cultural meaning when seen in performance, not in museum seclusion. One may recall the scene in Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka’s play, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, featuring a Yoruba *egungun* masquerade involving Mr. Pilkings (a British district officer in colonial Nigeria) and Sergeant Amusa (a native administration policeman). Mr. Pilkings and his wife, Jane, had worn a “costume . . . fancy dress” and were rehearsing a dance with it in the hope of “taking first prize at the ball” in honor of the prince who was on a tour of the British colonies.²¹ By dancing in the *egungun* costume, the Pilkingses unknowingly were involved in a “dead cult, not for human being.”²² Amusa, who had come to report that Elesin Oba was going “to commit death tonight as a result of native custom,”²³ was aware of the cultural importance of *egungun* and refused to report to the district officer wearing *egungun*. Threatened with disciplinary action for this refusal, Amusa responds: “Sir, it is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police . . . ”²⁴

We soon learn that the costume was confiscated a month earlier from *egungun* performers when their leaders were arrested. Amusa, who gazes at the ceiling in an effort to avoid looking at the Pilkingses while they are wearing the masqueraders’ sacred cloths, tells Jane Pilkings:

Madam, I arrest the ring-leaders who make trouble but me I no touch *egungun*. That *egungun* itself, I no touch. And I no abuse am. I arrest ring-leader but I treat *egungun* with respect.²⁵

The point of emphasis here is that when a work of art leaves cultural confinement, competency as regards the cultural context of its creation is necessary to truly liberate it to make a relevant impact in a real sociopolitical world.

It is not only Smithson that validates the role of the visual arts in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Before Smithson, and at the beginning of the modern period, Richard Wagner had developed the theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (variously translated as “unity of arts,” “unified artwork,” or “work-of-all-arts”) that permits a synthesis of the arts in a theatrical production. Such fusion of the arts would enable the creation of a cultural meaning to arise from a communal experience – not unlike African masquerades or presentations of multimedia artworks in the context of African festival traditions! Wagner’s desire to create an “empathic response” to multisensual simulation led to the “notion that the success of a production is determined by its ability to engage the audience’s emotions and to draw it into the world of the play.”²⁶ Wagner’s theory influenced Adolphe Appia who emphasized the fusion of all visual elements into a “unified whole” through lighting technique, and Gordon Craig whose concept of the theatre was “primarily in visual terms” because people go to the theatre “to see rather than to hear a play.”²⁷ Craig’s emphasis on the visual and his rejection of egotistical actors led him to conceptualize the use of a *Übermarionette*, a super-puppet devoid of any ego yet capable of performing all assigned roles in a performance.

Further, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*’s dexterous use of pictures, documents, images, and drawings alongside human and puppet actors is reminiscent of the Epic theatre theory and practice by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. Brecht had worked collaboratively with Piscator until the latter left Germany for the USA. Piscator sought to bring theatre as close to sociopolitical reality as possible to help argue for meaningful reforms. Towards this, he utilized in his productions, cartoons, films, projections, and segmented settings to enable theatre audiences to draw parallels between historical events and theatrical events. It is Brecht, however, who became the major theoretician of the Epic theatre as he emphasized the capability of such theatre to use many more devices than was proposed by Piscator. Narrative, critical, and dramatic techniques were broadened by challenging audiences to actively and critically follow the unfolding story of the theatrical event. His greatest contribution to the Epic theory is his concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (“alienation” or “distancing” effect). To prevent audiences from being passive at a theatrical event, Brecht sought to make the production strange enough to make the audience think about it and raise questions. To facilitate this process, he sought simplicity in production, especially in scene changes and lighting. His theatre was also episodic, and he achieved this by inserting narratives, captions, and songs between dramatic episodes. *Verfremdungseffekt* also introduced a new acting style in which performers, instead of identifying with their roles as in Stanislavsky’s acting method, demonstrated the actions of a character. The aim of his Epic theatre was to lead the audiences at a theatrical event to relate their dramatic experience to socio-political and socioeconomic realities in the world outside theatre. Each theatrical event gave the audiences a new perception, and it was Brecht’s desire that they apply their new perspective and insight to work for some change in their society and in the world.²⁸

Showcasing *Ubu and the Truth Commission*

Ubu and the Truth Commission closely resembles a *Gesamtkunstwerk*; puppets, drawings, photographs, projections, music, songs, and human performers are actively engaged in realizing the play. Visual arts and language arts are core elements. The play first “showcased” at The Laboratory (Market Theatre) in Johannesburg in May 1997,

with the world premier at the *Kunstfest*, Weimar, in June 1997. It is important that it was “showcased” instead of “performed” or “exhibited”; showcasing is a more neutral word, and seems appropriate to depicting the meeting between the performing arts and the visual arts. It is significant that the showcase was at The Laboratory; theatre laboratories are normally sites for the avant-garde and experimental theatre.

The events in South Africa that led to the creation of the TRC parallel the exploits of King Ubu in Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, hence the title *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.

The grotesque world of King Ubu, set in Poland, is totally devoid of human decency. A puppet-like figure, Ubu comes out as the embodiment of all that is despicable, mean, avaricious, vile, unimaginative, ignoble, and destructive in the human experience. Brockett and Findlay give an apt summary description of Ubu as a central figure in *Ubu Roi*:

[He] is violent, stupid, totally devoid of moral scruple; he is the epitome of all that Jarry found inane and ugly in bourgeois society, of all that is monstrous and irrational in man [sic]. The action of the play shows how Ubu makes himself king of Poland and keeps his power by killing and torturing all those who oppose him; eventually he is chased from the country but promises to continue his exploits elsewhere.²⁹

This excerpt is meaningful. If one replaces Ubu with apartheid (as a personification), the qualities and events are ascribable to South Africa. There is a marked difference though: the actions and qualities of King Ubu are a figment of playwright Jarry’s imagination and a tribute to his creative ingenuity; the occurrences in South Africa under apartheid were real, so hauntingly real that it became necessary to set up the TRC to look into what the UN had called a crime against humanity.

The primacy of the visual over the audiolingual is established as the play opens. In the first three scenes of Act One, there are only two short lines of dialogue, and the first is just one word, “Pschitt!!” The emphasis is on the visual as we see a handpuppet, manipulated by silent puppeteers, “near centre stage” making soup.³⁰ These puppets – there are several of them – are mostly made of wood, and the “rough carving ensures that [their] faces have a surface well-keyed for illumination . . . [which] assists the illusion of changing expressions on an otherwise immobile face.”³¹ The entire first scene is devoted to the puppet; there is a drawing of an Ubu mannequin on the screen. The scene of a lonely soup-making puppet shifts to a “cartoonish piece” and a vulture-puppet. A witness-puppet (handpuppet) also making a pot of soup is introduced, along with Pa Ubu (played by Dawid Minaar) who unconsciously kicks over the soup-maker. The soup-making puppet drops and is carried off the stage by a puppeteer. This is a harbinger of dreadful events to come, the story of apartheid in which “ordinary” citizens who struggle to make ends meet (as in the basic meal preparation) are “kicked over” without any sense of moral responsibility, awareness, and accountability by the rich and powerful (in this case, the apartheid government and its agents). In this scene, in which poignant visual communication alleviates the need for words, we are introduced to the TRC story of victims and witnesses (soup-making puppets) and of perpetrators (Pa Ubu) whose uncultured language (“Pschitt!!?”) is as dirty as their acts of destruction. It is a story of makers or creators versus destroyers. It is a story of victims who are carried away, and of perpetrators who do “dance poses and smiling freezes,”³² ostensibly oblivious to the harm and pain they have caused others.

The latters' insensitivity to the plight of the Other has become routine, a practiced and refined method of live-art "poses" and "freezes." The perpetrators' world has devolved to one of snarling rage and fight; even the cherished pastime has become a "dance-fight" of one chasing the other. The world as understood and lived by perpetrators is one of conflict.

By the third scene of the first act, the world of the play is almost established. Various images – a veritable "visual field"³³ – appear as projections on a screen suspended behind the stage. Actors on stage variously interact or ignore these animated projections as they choose. Major artistic motifs – the all-seeing eye, the camera tripod (one of many variations on the all-seeing-eye), and the main character Pa Ubu (in his mannequin aspect) have been introduced.

The all-seeing eye, drawn in various styles, is present throughout the play and introduces an element of ambiguity. It is a religious symbol. In some African traditional religions, the sun is the right eye of the supreme being (God) and the moon is his left eye. Thus, God is always able to see all of nature and humanity, both are under surveillance day and at night. Another projected image, that of fire (light) in the house, is a gift to humanity. It makes God's presence felt in the house. In Christianity, the Lumen Christi (light of Christ) ritualized in a holy week ceremony drives home this presence of the divine. The all-seeing eye symbolized in the sun, the moon, light, and fire is the site of sight, of perfect vision, of the ocular presence of God, of an aspect of God's ubiquity, his indisputable omnipresence and omniscience. But does the all-seeing eye both affirm and condemn apartheid? It is important to reiterate here the theological foundation for apartheid and to remind the reader that the "Apartheid Bible" stipulated that no human being should put together what God has separated.³⁴ The all-seeing eye then is a witness to Ubu's destructive acts and the excesses of apartheid, whether those excesses were carried out at night or day.

That God can see all things does not mean that God can "act" or intervene here, for the divine attribute of ocular or visual omnipresence is not equated with divine omnipotence. The neo-Calvinist theology of apartheid thus (dis)ingenuously separated one attribute of God from the other. If omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence had been conflated in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* it would have befuddled hermeneutics why a God who witnessed the atrocities of apartheid could or would not act in all his omnipotence to reverse the course of history. Since all religions do explain God in anthropomorphisms, would it be correct here to rationalize that during apartheid, God slept or took a siesta? It must have been a short nap, judging by God's infinity. While God slept, Satan visited South Africa, and made Ubu his trusted disciple. In his *miserere* before the Truth Commission, Ubu would later call on the blood of Christ to wash him clean, "the blood of the lamb" to liberate him.³⁵

As the divine all-seeing eye lays doggo, incapable of action, it can only witness human rapacity that lays a country's human resources to waste, to death, to the precipice of annihilation. The mechanical sculpture of the vulture-puppet flaps its wings ready for action. Its action is to surfeit itself with human carrion, for human waste (the dead) is actually a feast for a vulture.³⁶ In this sense, the vulture, no matter its repulsiveness, performs a cleansing act for the human society. By feeding on the dead, it performs a sanitary act, and Ubu can save energy for burning the dead. In a line taken almost verbatim from the TRC hearings, Ubu notes, "it takes a human body about seven hours to burn to ashes."³⁷ The irony is that even as humans distance themselves from vultures, they unintentionally draw closer to the carrion feast, and to behaving

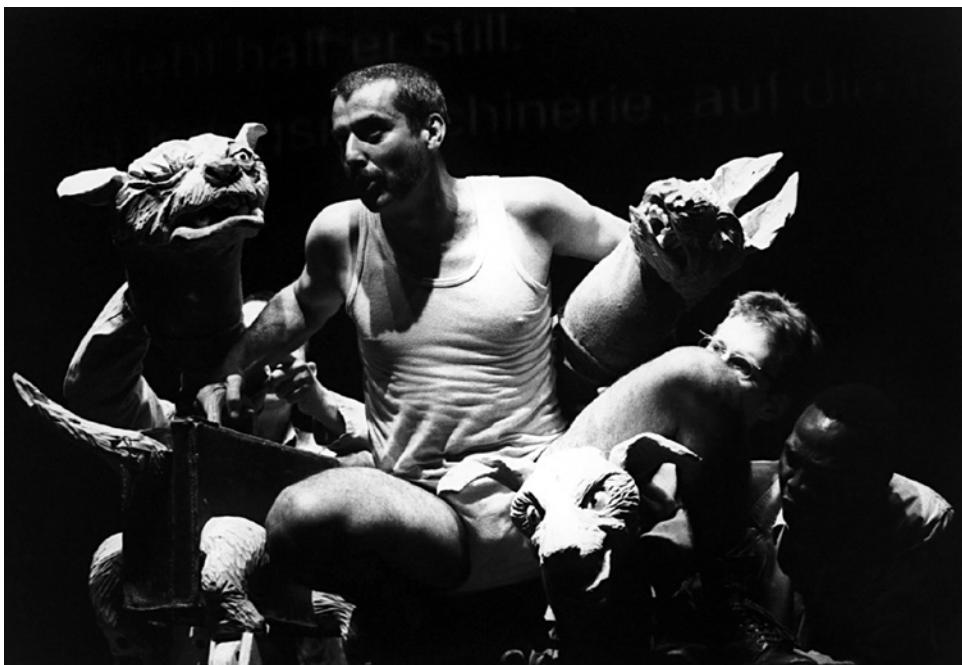


FIGURE 21.1 Pa Ubu (Dawid Minaar) with Brutus, the three-headed dog, sing a scat quartet together, from *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Photograph courtesy of Handspring Puppet Company.

like these ugly, repulsive birds. The TRC hearings revealed that men would at times enjoy a barbecue while they were simultaneously roasting human bodies to rid themselves of evidence of their crimes and Taylor incorporated some of the graphic details of these repulsive acts in the script.³⁸ The human being has gradually devolved to claim its rightful place among animals, and the distinction between the human and the beast becomes blurred. The closer the two, the louder the interrogation of human appropriation of divine semblance to himself: did God make “man” (humanity) in his image? If true, is there an ugly side to God that is reflected in the human image of God? Nowhere is this interrogation of a people’s Christian sentiment louder and more visible as in the puppet of the three-headed dog Brutus, manipulated by Pa Ubu (Figure 21.1). This creature represents three-canines-in-one-dog, its single body articulated as a suitcase.

In Brutus’s appearance, the Christian theology of the trinity seems caricatured to mock the South African experience. If the Dutch Reformed Church could find from biblical exegesis the basis for racism, the play’s creation of the puppets of the three-headed dog manifests an iconoclasm of that God. Christianity’s three-persons-in-one-God has been transformed in a visual representation of Brutus; dog is an anagram of God. The triune God of Christian theology meets the triune dog of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. There is a collision of altars – the Christian and the theatrical; the one is associated with and identified in the other. Sacred theology is made to share a bed with artistic profanity, and the profane becomes an image of the sacred. The world thus becomes oxymoronic as concepts find true definition in their opposites.

Brutus serves as the “henchman” of Pa Ubu. The dog’s three-head personalities – politician, foot soldier, and military general – and Pa Ubu share culpability for all the violence and evil they engage in in the play. Brutus, a special breed, is a dangerous attack dog (the name Brutus is from *Julius Caesar*) a weapon of unimaginable violence, whose only loyalty is to Pa Ubu. Pa Ubu created him to evade the law, to attack as programmed, and to respond only to the master, Pa Ubu. A distinct whistle controlled by Pa Ubu acts as the code or password to access Brutus, “old Pa Ubu’s dog-of-war.”³⁹

It is significant that the perpetration of violence on the people, the underdogs who are no match to Pa Ubu’s super-dogs, has taken over Pa Ubu’s basic human masculinity – the performance of sexual intercourse. Ma Ubu (played by Busi Zokufa), observes that her husband comes home every night, “used up and tired,” and goes into the shower “[w]ashing, washing, washing.” She thinks that Pa Ubu is having an extramarital affair. Sandwiched between the dialogue on shower and sex is the screen caption, “The Smell of Blood and Dynamite” as a metaphor for violence.⁴⁰ Thus positioned, it is violence that functions as the entity that comes between Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu. It is to this entity that Pa Ubu aided by Brutus directs his focus and passion, for every “smell of blood” or sound of “dynamite” makes him achieve a vigorous metaphorical sexual ejaculation and momentary satisfaction of the senses.

Soon Pa Ubu’s “affairs of state”⁴¹ are exposed by the witness-puppets. The first witness-puppet narrates an occurrence in Queenstown (also applicable to the Soweto riots or the Sharpeville massacre) aptly captioned on the screen as “A Bath . . . A Bloodbath.”⁴² As the witness-puppet describes the horror of the killing of children (at the mortuary “Bodies were stacked upon each other” and “a thick stream of blood was running from under the door . . . blocking the outside drain”⁴³), Pa Ubu, who represents the perpetrators, is having a shower. The “bloodbath” caption on the screen, therefore, carries a double meaning: Pa Ubu is in reality washing off the splattered blood of people he killed, a nightly ritual that metaphorically showers him in the blood of his victims. Even though the witness-puppet is able to identify her child because of a mark on his chin, the agony of the truth is too much for her. She takes consolation in the emphatic denial of her child: “This is not my child.”⁴⁴ A psychological cleavage is thus created in her by the collision between expectation (of finding her son alive) and reality (of finding her son dead). Woman, behold thy son! The mother’s separation from her son is final (as the dead from the living), the umbilical cord that tethers childhood to motherhood is irreparably ripped apart, the Madonna has become the mater dolorosa.

The sorrow by mothers over their children’s wasted lives exacerbates when another witness-puppet narrates how she found the bodies of her children. The remains had no eyes, parts of their craniums were missing, and their hands and legs were gone, severed from their bodies. To accentuate this unfathomable human destitution and to provide an answer to our inner interrogation of how this disaster occurred, the play provides animated drawings of Pa Ubu and Brutus’s construction of a parcel bomb. The sequential detonation of the parcel in houses and bars – “each time the parcel comes to rest, it blows up, transforming the original drawing into a blast-site”⁴⁵ – explains the mangled remains of what once were children, beloved by their parents and grandparents, their brothers and sisters, their aunts and uncles, their nephews and nieces; Pa Ubu and his three-headed dog have struck again!

So overwhelming is the carnage, perhaps even for the vulture, that Niles, a crocodile-puppet as large as the Brutus dog-puppet and the unnamed vulture-puppet, is

brought in to help clean up the mess. To emphasize its insatiable appetite, its belly is made of a “large canvas bag.”⁴⁶ Pa Ubu feeds the crocodile-puppet incriminating evidence that requires concealment and destruction. Among the “food” fed to the crocodile-puppet are pieces of a shattered human skull, skin, heart, tongue, and a “pair of hands torn off at the wrists.”⁴⁷ Even the voracious crocodile is fed too much and develops heartburn. It moans in discomfort until it falls asleep. The artistic world depicted here is one in which things have turned topsy-turvy. In the normal world, it is humans who are fed animal meat; in the artistic rendering of South African affairs at the time of apartheid, it is human flesh and body parts that are fed to animals and birds. Human existence is thus devalued in revolting images. What is frightening is the closeness of the artistic depiction to real events in South Africa then; real life had gradually become absurd.

From the crocodile-puppet’s mouth emanates a dark, spoken phrase, “*fiat experimentum in corpore vili*, that is, let experiment be made on a worthless body.”⁴⁸ These are a few words, but they do convey much about real experiments, especially in torture, on “worthless” bodies, mostly Black South Africans, during the apartheid regime. Torture administered to a person’s private parts seems to have been fairly common in reports by witnesses and victims at the TRC hearings. A 14-year-old Patrick Mzathi narrated how his penis and testicles were held and pushed into a drawer which was then slammed shut on these organs with such ferocity that he fainted. A woman, Ntombizanele Zingxondo, testified of the application of a similar torture to her breasts: “They unbuttoned my shirt, and pulled my breasts out of my bra. They emptied one drawer and my breast was squeezed in the drawer. They did this several times on each breast until white sticky stuff burst out of the nipples of my breast.”⁴⁹ A witness-puppet would put these experiments on the human body in one gruesome sentence: “They electrocuted my private parts.”⁵⁰ Pa Ubu shouts at this witness and others: “Communists!!!”⁵¹ Once labeled a communist, even without proof, the person becomes a worthless body that can be experimented upon.

Pa Ubu describes “tubing,” one form of torture practiced in this context. The tube of a tire is placed over the face of a person. A slit in the tube allows the person’s tongue to come out while he is being suffocated. The increasing length of the tongue determines closeness to asphyxiation, and when this is accompanied by the victim’s urination in his pants, the experiment concludes; the person is in the throes of death. This experiment is carried out to get a suspect to talk. If the person still refuses to talk, he is beaten to death with iron pipes. The script illustrates this with Kentridge’s drawing of a victim being beaten to death with pipes by a perpetrator. In this manner, the art of theatrical narration is complemented by the fine art of drawing projected onto the screen.⁵²

So prominent is the visual impact of Act Three, Scene 2 that about 30 drawings and images of “political-criminal activities” on human experiments (euphemism for human torture) are cast on the screen, even as Ma Ubu translates into English, Pa Ubu’s (as perpetrator) explanation in Afrikaans of “*Ons het dit ‘tubing’ genoem*” (we called it tubing).⁵³ Pa Ubu does not have to explain; the drawings, images and animations give the audience a richer, visual story than any verbal version of “tubing” could. The images of hangings, shootings, people thrown to death from heights, children being shot, suffocations, electric shocks, stabbings, people smashed against walls, and people lying on the cold floor with hands tied behind their back⁵⁴ prepare us for the climactic revelation. We see a person being beaten to death with a spade, the body set



FIGURE 21.2 A witness puppet, from *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Photograph courtesy of Handspring Puppet Company.

on fire on a pyre of wood and tires. While the human body is burning, the perpetrators are drinking and having another barbecue “next to the fire.”⁵⁵ The play’s “*Fiat experimentum in corpore vili*” was experienced by South Africans, mostly Blacks. When the surgeon-general, Dr. Wouter Basson, was arrested and his documents confiscated, among the items on the list for poisonings “included anthrax in cigarettes, botulinum in milk and paraoxon in whiskey.”⁵⁶

Because of these criminal activities, especially the torture and death of human beings, Pa Ubu’s sleep is tormented. Some of his heinous crimes play themselves out in his sleep, and the audience is made aware of this through animated drawings that appear on the screen. These dreams dance in Pa Ubu’s head and stab at him; he writhes in his sleep at each stab. A white man shoots a boy to death, “dragging him by the legs, like a dog,” and digs a hole to dispose of him.⁵⁷ Pa Ubu wakes from his dream to see his wife on television as she reveals secrets about him in an interview. He does not take kindly to this and, cursing Ma Ubu’s “[j]ou Ma se gat!” (Mother’s arse!), promises his wife “the sjambok” (whip) when she returns home.⁵⁸ The betrayal and violence at home mirror the existence of these at the national level, and the link between the microcosmic and macrocosmic experiences of violence is Pa Ubu. He professes no shame and feels no remorse; he was “only doing [his] job!”⁵⁹

A witness-puppet draws attention to another aspect of the historical reality of apartheid South Africa (Figure 21.2). Recounting her son’s killing, she tells the audience she could be tempted, as a maid, to poison the children of her white employers.⁶⁰ The unrestrained violence by Pa Ubu threatens to unravel the national fabric through unleashing an endless cycle of vengeance and disastrous retaliation. It is known that Umkhonto we Sizwe (the Spear of the Land), as the military wing of the African National Congress



FIGURE 21.3 Ma Ubu (Busi Zokufa) draws Niles, the crocodile puppet, toward her, against her breasts, from *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Photograph courtesy of Handspring Puppet Company.

(ANC), did unleash retaliatory violence on the apartheid government. Descriptions of acts of violence perpetrated against white South Africans, as in the St. James Church massacre, became evident during the TRC hearings. Three Black youths had attacked a white church and killed some members of the congregation; they echoed Pa Ubu's response to the sorrowful witness-puppets, "It wasn't personal. It was war!"⁶¹

Pa Ubu survives. He plants incriminating evidence on Brutus, even after a pact of solidarity with this triune dog. After each of the three Brutus personalities has been sentenced to jail by the judge, Pa Ubu helps them escape, but images of three hanged dogs on the screen suggest that Pa Ubu rids himself of his partners in crime, who might have testified against him during his turn in front of the TRC commission. His testimony is that all he did was in the spirit of his military training and profession, as a "true soldier . . . prepared to lay down his life for his fellow citizens and for his country."⁶² Posing as a true repentant, Pa Ubu sings a hymn to God, to "the blood of the Lamb" (Christ) to set him free and to cleanse him.⁶³ Even as he sings this, two visual field composites are projected onto the screen. The first is a collection of the evidence against Pa Ubu – all the violence and murders perpetrated by him. The second is a collection of real pictures of jubilating South Africans when it was publicly announced that the ban on the ANC had been lifted. As these visual fields intensify, Pa Ubu "freezes," and he is "wheeled off stage on his lectern, as if he is a statue being removed."⁶⁴ The pairing of images is powerful; it is reinforced by sound, Pa Ubu's lowly, lonely, individualistic, and sanctimonious blood-of-lamb hymn slowly being drowned out by the jubilant national anthem of the risen masses that fills the auditorium – *Nkosi sikelele iAfrika*.

In the end, Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu sail away in a boat, and, in a truly Brechtian manner, the drawing of a boat is projected on the screen. They take with them the vulture and Niles, the crocodile. This is important because it opens the possibility of a new beginning for the country. The principal agents of death and destruction are gone;

Brutus the three-headed dog is dead, and Pa Ubu is sailing away. The vulture and the crocodile follow Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu to exile (Figure 21.3). They all sail away towards “the giant eye,” the all-seeing eye that gradually becomes the sun as a motif of the eye.

Concluding Remarks

In *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, one remains fascinated by the many techniques employed by art to try to surmount the anguish and inhumanity of the apartheid system. In using puppets and placing visual arts over performing arts, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* creates a deceptively dispassionate approach to the narratives of various witnesses. The witnesses are puppets, and as witness-puppets they cannot shed tears, change their facial expressions, and show emotions of ultimate suffering of unfathomable atrocities. The puppets keep their artistic serenity and allow audiences to follow the lives involved in the unfolding story as dispassionately as possible.

The use of puppets in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* enables the creation of an ideal visual *Verfremdungseffekt*, perhaps in a way that Brecht never imagined when he theorized and practiced that technique of art in his Epic theatre. Because it is the same society that creates the torturer and the victim, the villain and the hero, the perpetrator and the witness, the presence of the puppets as emotionless performers, even when manipulated, yields that aesthetic distancing par excellence. Because puppets are not humans, we are spared the vagaries of psychological explanations. This does not mean that we are not appalled by the monstrosity of apartheid and the witnesses' narratives of horror. We are, but the puppets allow our reactions to be personal, intellectual, and emotional. It is no longer mass reaction and appreciation of a performance when we clap along with others; rather, the result is the deeply personal appreciation of a work of art, and the memories, passion, and vision that are aroused in us individually.

Even as visual memories are created by the puppets in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, the puppets are also a perfect retrospection of human reification during apartheid. The victims of this inhumane system have been turned into “things”; as they are killed or maimed or rendered voiceless, their stories are only what the perpetrators and the state tell about them. “They were treating people like animals . . . even a dog . . . you don’t kill it like that, even an ant, a small little ant, you have feelings for an ant, but now, our children, they were not even taken as ants.”⁶⁵ By exposing the dark side of humanity through art, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is reminding us to value our common humanity. Art thus delivers a healing message by constantly prodding us to resist this human devolution to bestiality. With the horror experienced in Syria, Kosovo, Rwanda, the Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Libya, it is only a matter of time before we witness the creative responses to such memories that are as liberating as *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.

Notes

- 1 Clark, Worger, and William (2004).
- 2 These three plays are in the collection Fugard (1986). The first two plays (*Sizwe is Dead* and *The Island*) in this volume are “devised” by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, as a collaborative work between a white man and two Black men.

- 3 Ngcokovane (1989, 18).
- 4 D. F. Malan (1945–1954), J. G. Strydom (1954–1958), H. F. Verwoerd (1958–1966), B. J. Vorster (1966–1975), and P. W. Botha (1978–1989).
- 5 Loubser (1987, 77).
- 6 Ngcokovane (1989, 5).
- 7 Harrison (1982, 171).
- 8 Clark, Worger, and Williams (2004, 48). Here is a related quote by Hendrik Verwoerd as prime minister: “The school must equip the Bantu to meet the demands which the economic life will impose on him . . . What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it [sic] cannot use it in practice? . . . Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life . . . ” (quoted in Giliomee 2012).
- 9 See Allara, chapter 24 this volume.
- 10 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1988).
- 11 For clips from the performance at the Festival d’Avignon, see Ina.Fr (1997). For a demonstration of the hand puppets see TED (2011).
- 12 Langer (1953, 157).
- 13 Langer (1953, 153).
- 14 Langer (1953, 154).
- 15 Langer (1953, 314).
- 16 Langer (1953, 322).
- 17 Langer (1953, 314).
- 18 Smithson (2002, 970); cf. Salami, chapter 29 this volume. Salami also speaks of the significance of performance contexts of static African artworks.
- 19 Smithson (2002, 972).
- 20 Smithson (2002, 971).
- 21 Soyinka (1975, 24).
- 22 Soyinka (1975, 24).
- 23 Soyinka (1975, 26).
- 24 Soyinka (1975, 25).
- 25 Soyinka (1975, 25). Chinua Achebe gives a chilling account of the unmasking of an *egwugwu* (the Igbo equivalent of the Yoruba *egungun*) in *Things Fall Apart* (I am taking a few excerpts here but the whole chapter 22 makes good reading):

It happened during the annual ceremony . . . held in honor of the earth deity. At such times the ancestors of the clan who had been committed to Mother Earth at their death emerged again as egwugwu . . .

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an egwugwu in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did. [He fought with and unmasked an egwugwu.] Enoch [the new Christian] had killed an ancestral spirit . . .

That night, the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had even heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death.

. . . The eerie voices of countless spirits, the bells that clattered behind some of them, and the clash of the machetes as they ran forwards and backwards and saluted one another, sent tremors of fear into every heart. For the first time in living memory the sacred bull-roarer was heard in broad daylight. (Achebe 1994, 186–187).

- 26 Brockett and Findlay (1973, 31–32).
- 27 Brockett (1991, 492–493). Though Wagner's theory influenced many theatre theorists and practitioners, he was heavily criticized by Langer who theorized that "The Gesamtkunstwerk is an impossibility, because a work can exist in only one primary illusion, which every element must serve to create, support, and develop" (Langer 1953, 164).
- 28 See Brockett and Findlay (1973, 406–425).
- 29 Brockett and Findlay (1973, 137).
- 30 Taylor (1998, 1). Unless otherwise indicated, all page references to the script of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* are from Jane Taylor (1998).
- 31 Taylor (1998, xvii).
- 32 Taylor (1998, 1).
- 33 Taylor (1998, 3).
- 34 See Loubser (1987, 195–197). Also see Peter Ukpokodu (1999, 244).
- 35 Taylor (1998, 69).
- 36 At the end of the play when Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu sail away, the vulture-puppet flaps its wings, squawking that a meal of some cheese and bread is (barely) tolerable now that Pa Ubu will no longer be available to feed it its favorite meal of human flesh (Taylor 1998, 73).
- 37 Taylor (1998, 45).
- 38 The fact as presented at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Captain Dirk Coetzee is more repulsive than Taylor's description. Says Coetzee:

The burning of a body to ashes takes about seven hours, and whilst that happened we were drinking and even having a braai [barbecue] next to the fire. Now, I don't say that to show our braveness, I just tell it to the Commission to show our callousness and to what extremes we have gone in those days . . . The chunks of meat, and especially the buttocks and the upper part of the legs, had to be turned frequently during the night to make sure that everything burnt to ashes. And the next morning, after raking through the rubble to make sure that there were no pieces of meat or bone left at all, we departed and all went our own way. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998, vol. 2, chapter 3, article 284)

The person who died this way was Gcinisizwe Kondile, a political activist from Eastern Cape. He was killed in August 1981 while in police detention. Fearing that his death might bring the kind of problem that occurred when Steve Biko died in 1977, the police decided to destroy all evidence of Kondile's existence. Cf. Taylor (1998, 45). On Steve Biko see Millard (1987).

- 39 Taylor (1998, 9).
- 40 Taylor (1998, 11).
- 41 Taylor (1998, 3).
- 42 Taylor (1998, 11).

- 43 Taylor (1998, 13).
44 Taylor (1998, 13).
45 Taylor (1998, 30).
46 Taylor (1998, xvi).
47 Taylor (1998, 33).
48 Taylor (1998, 33).
49 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998, vol. 2, chapter 3, articles 115 and 116).
50 Taylor (1998, 55)
51 Taylor (1998, 57).
52 Taylor (1998, 43).
53 Taylor (1998, 43).
54 Also see Newbury (2009).
55 Taylor (1998, 45). The TRC confirms the actual planned experiments on human beings:

The image of white-coated scientists, professors, doctors, dentists, veterinarians, laboratories, universities and front companies, propping up apartheid with the support of an extensive international network, was a particularly cynical and chilling one. Here was evidence of science being subverted to cause disease and undermine the health of communities. Cholera, botulism, anthrax, chemical poisoning and the large-scale manufacture of drugs of abuse, allegedly for purposes of crowd control, were amongst the projects of the programme. Moreover, chemicals, poisons and lethal micro-organisms were produced for use against individuals, and “applicators” (murder weapons) developed for their administration. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998, vol. 2, chapter 6).

- 56 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998, vol. 2, chapter 6, articles 1 and 18).
57 Taylor (1998, 47–49).
58 Taylor (1998, 53).
59 Taylor (1998, 55).
60 Taylor (1998, 55).
61 Taylor (1998, 55).
62 Taylor (1998, 69).
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64 Taylor (1998, 69–71).
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Moroccan Art Museums and Memories of Modernity

Katarzyna Pieprzak

In the spring of 2011, Mustapha Akrim exhibited *Article 13* at the Rabat art space, L'Appartement 22. *Article 13* (Figure 22.1) reproduces the thirteenth article of the Moroccan Constitution in Arabic, in English, and in concrete. This article declares that all Moroccan citizens have the right to education and to employment. The weight and grayness of the concrete hanging on the white walls of the exhibit space is stark compared to the filigreed plaster carvings that are so celebrated in traditional Moroccan architecture. The chosen material, concrete, speaks to the serious modern issues at stake for young Moroccans today and does so in no uncertain terms. However, when I asked Akrim why he had chosen concrete as a material, his response showed less a preoccupation with its symbolism than with more practical notions of the work itself: his father worked in construction, had easy access to concrete, and showed Akrim how to manipulate the material.

L'Appartement 22, a 98.5 square meter apartment, is located on Avenue Mohamed V across the street from the Moroccan parliament building and, as Abdellah Karroum likes to put it, it is his “permanent seat in front of parliament,” a space in which and from which he can curate art actions that speak to Moroccan realities on the street.¹ Karroum describes Akrim’s project in the following way:

Mustapha Akrim, in the manner of a generation that is active on the Moroccan scene since the middle of the 2000s, claims an artistic practice that is critical and political. These are artists that have surpassed self-censure and who risk themselves through their engagement in social, scientific, ethical and spiritual fields.²

Risk in this case is not just about aesthetic transgression, but also about physical detention and prosecution. Artists like Akrim question state rhetoric and work to move a progressive vision of Moroccan modernity forward.



FIGURE 22.1 Mustapha Akrim. *Article 13*, 2011. Reinforced concrete, 130 cm diameter for image on left, variable dimensions for image on right. Courtesy of the artist and L'Appartement 22, Rabat.

In the spring of 2011, a few blocks away from L'Appartement 22 and the Moroccan Parliament building, the national Musée des Arts Contemporains was under construction. Named the *Mathāf al-funūn al-mu'aṣirah* in Arabic and labeled the Musée d'Art Contemporain in the press, the museum is slated to open in 2013. On paper, the ministry of culture has promised a museum that will “promote, sensitize and initiate a wide public to contemporary works of art” and “actively participate in the cultural life of the country by favoring exchanges between the public and artists.”³ As officials at the ministry present the project, the museum will provide “a veritable window on cultural life in Morocco.”⁴ A three-level 22,350 square meter building, the museum will consist of 4,921 square meters for a permanent collection and 2,558 square meters for temporary exhibits, a parking structure in the basement, conservation labs, a reception area, lecture room, offices, security posts, a bookstore, auditorium, educational center, multimedia library, and a café.

However, both the conceptual and the physical building of the museum have been mired in controversy since the museum’s inception. Artists and curators feel left out of the process and fear that the museum will be an empty gesture to the global community, a symbolic architecture to prove that Morocco is not behind the times. Fouad Bellamine, an important postindependence Moroccan painter, has noted the superficial way in which the museum’s collection is being conceived, and asked the pointed question: “What is the very notion of this museum in our time?”⁵ Artist Maria Karim has exclaimed:

There is no arts education, so for whom are we constructing a museum?! Personally, I believe that it doesn’t serve anyone to say “Yes, we too in Morocco, we have a museum.” I don’t think that there is a political will that sees much further than this type of statement.⁶

And scholar Dounia Benqassem, author of the *Dictionnaire des artistes contemporains du Maroc*, has recently stated:

Regarding the contemporary art museum that has been slated to open for quite some time now, my sense is that it will be a cemetery of pictorial works, acquired by the Ministry of Culture without any recourse to the expertise of museum professionals, and above all, created without any consultation with artists.⁷

These artists, curators and critics do not reject the potential of museums to become relevant institutions in Morocco. The frustration that underlies their comments is born of an anger and a fear that important works and histories will be left out of this museum, and that the collecting trends of the king and his advisors will take precedence over the shared knowledge, expertise, and experience of over five decades of Moroccan modern and contemporary art. It is an aggravation born of decades of top-down state rhetoric that has resulted in little concrete action – a rhetoric that purports to address, all the while effectively silencing, the voices of many important cultural agents in Morocco. As journalist Ali Amar put it recently, in Morocco “art is unfortunately still seen [by the state] as potentially nihilistic” to its existence.⁸

The deep disconnect between stalled and alienating state institutions and the vibrant art projects that animate and engage Moroccan culture, such as those exhibited at L’Appartement 22, is reflective of larger political relationships between the Moroccan state and the Moroccan people since independence in 1956. What is said about modernity and art by state officials, and what actually happens, are often very different things. Where the Moroccan state has consistently shown itself content to display signifiers of modernity, including modernism in art, to assure its global standing, a sense of despair at the worsening of life conditions for the everyday Moroccan has called into question the state’s investment in an “emancipatory modernity” (the potentially liberating tenets of modernity that value education, justice, and social and political freedoms). By exploring both the history of state museums and practices of dialogical aesthetics by art collectives and curators, I hope to show how negotiations about museums and the modern have taken place in postcolonial Morocco, and to illustrate how issues of the role, place, and memory of modern art in Morocco are inherently linked to those of participatory memory, political rights and voice, and progressive social, political, and economic policy in the country.

What Museum for Art? Frames and Questions

In speaking of contemporary African art, scholars often focus on the global and the transnational aspects of the works themselves.⁹ While some contemporary African artists, their work, and their aesthetics circulate globally, it is also important to examine what art institutions and infrastructures of support exist on the continent. In the case of Morocco, I would like to turn to an examination of local architectures for the production and display of art, acknowledging that the local in modern and contemporary art is inextricably linked to (and often emerges from) larger global art markets and collections. The main questions that drive this chapter are thus: What spaces exist for modern and contemporary art in Morocco? What spaces exist that remember the local art history that has lead to the present moment? What does it mean to invest in or disinvest in the modern as a category of memory?

Moroccan artists and critics agree that a modern art museum must be more than an empty edifice, an artificial import, or a symbolic collection. So what should it be, and what gives it value? How can the museum as an institution be redefined to become an infrastructure for shared resources and not an institution that houses unidirectional and alienating narratives about art and the modern? In 2011, Moroccan theater director and writer Driss Ksikes stated in an interview with the online arts project *La chaise rouge* that “the only place that has been ritualized in our society is the mosque, and

the bar"; sites of culture (theaters, museums, cultural centers) have not yet become integral parts of Moroccan life.¹⁰ How can the art museum become a relevant structure in Moroccan life? How can it work to promote access to and participation in Moroccan cultures and history?

A Short History of National Museums in Morocco

In 2005, the former director of museums in Morocco, Ali Amahan, summarized the nation's postindependence museum history in these rather bleak terms:

At the beginning of the 1970s, the Ministry of Culture started to reorganize the museums and their collections . . . and we realized that we didn't really have any museums, only depots for objects . . . We tried to put in place a policy of acquisition and even a revision of the concept of the museum. But unfortunately these projects have dragged on and never come to term.¹¹

As described by Amahan, Moroccan museums today suffer not only from a lack of political will or funding, but also from an incomplete redefinition of their founding intellectual missions.

It is important to understand these founding intellectual missions, for in many respects the twenty-first-century Moroccan museum is still haunted by its colonial and postcolonial history. Conceived and developed by the French Protectorate's Administration des Beaux-Arts (1912–1956), the Moroccan museum project never sought to promote contemporary Moroccan art or facilitate community-building, two goals that are central to those who are currently invested in the future of the Moroccan museum. As I describe in greater detail in my book *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Post-Colonial Morocco*,¹² the colonial museum project was primarily invested in the creation of storehouses of objects that could serve as prototypes in the renewal of local craft industries. The museum functioned as a depot for "authentic" arts,¹³ such as carpet weaving and ceramics, which would then be reproduced in workshop ateliers on the museum grounds. While Protectorate museums created valuable catalogues of artisanal practice and art, they were heavily mediated by French art historians such as Tranchant de Lunel and Prosper Ricard, who had their own theories about good taste and art, and who curbed modern innovations in practice and design. By 1950, at least six "national" museums had opened in Protectorate Morocco. In addition to their commercial role as sites of production for authentic Moroccan arts, they were also open for visits by foreign travelers anytime during the week (a guard would grant these visitors access), but they were usually open one day a week to Moroccans. Certain museums, like the Batha in Fez, created colonial narratives featuring items linked to the humiliation of the local population. For example, the Room of Imperial Memories (*La section des souvenirs impériaux*) displayed the sofa upon which the sultan was seated when he signed away Moroccan independence. After independence, the Moroccan state attempted to modernize the museums and make their exhibits more appropriate to narratives of an independent nation, but museums suffered from the same problems as their counterparts in other postcolonial African nations: small budgets, lack of domestic curators and trained personnel, and an alienated and uninterested local public. The immediate postindependence period

was a time of great instability for the Moroccan state: from 1956 to 1966 alone, the Moroccan government changed 11 times. This instability affected the ability of the loosely defined ministry of culture to create and execute effective policies in any area of cultural production.¹⁴

Unlike the museums of Mali, which were fundamentally restructured in the 1980s under the directorship of Claude Arduin and Alpha Oumar Konare, the Moroccan museums struggled to redefine their initial colonial structure and purpose. As Mary Jo Arnoldi documents in “Overcoming a Colonial Legacy: “In order to transcend its colonial legacy, the museum needed to develop strategies to increase public access to the museum in terms of both physical and intellectual or cultural access.”¹⁵ The restructuring of the museum in Mali not only reworked its physical structure and collection, but also the unseen structures of support from the local population. Local interests were taken into account and invited to set the agenda. And perhaps most importantly for the purpose of this chapter, Arduin argued that “contemporary African art is a legitimate category of cultural heritage and should be collected by African museums.”¹⁶ With few exceptions, until the establishment of the Musée de l’Art Contemporain in Tangier in 1990, the state-run museums in Morocco largely excluded artwork by academically trained Moroccan artists as legitimate categories of cultural heritage. And thus, in the postindependence period, unlike their Malian counterparts, Moroccan museums neglected to collect the full range of artistic production in their country. Neither local interests regarding the role of the museum in the community, nor living local artists were taken into account, or into the museum.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Moroccan modern and contemporary art, when not housed in museums and galleries in Europe, was largely exhibited in private galleries, bank and large hotel lobbies, and foreign cultural centers – spaces and resources shared by few and inaccessible to many. As writer Edmond Amran El Maleh quipped: “when an adolescent risked entry into a gallery in Casablanca for example, one had one’s eye on him just in case he had introduced himself into the gallery in order to swipe something, like maybe an ashtray.”¹⁷ With the exception of the Bab El Rouah gallery in Rabat, there was no public space for modern art. Artists and intellectuals continually petitioned the government for a modern art museum, and criticized the lack of any political will to promote contemporary Moroccan painting and other forms of local modernist culture in public space. In 1967, the *L’Opinion* columnist “Ben” wrote in his column “Read This,”

Make the tour of all public establishments (ministries, prefectures, provincial offices, theaters, post offices, banks, cinemas and airports) and show me with your finger one authentic painting of a Moroccan artist. Don’t forget to pass by those villas that resemble palaces and whose construction cost 50 to 100 million francs. The state and its privileged servants, can’t they purchase some paintings, decorate their rooms and show what our national artists produce?¹⁸

In 1969, artists associated with the Casablanca School¹⁹ published a manifesto in the cultural journal *Lamalif* that also decried the lack of public exhibit space: “Through a lack of galleries and exhibition sites, artists have been pushed to exhibit in spaces in the foreign cultural missions, and we have seen a new resurgence in the paternalism that characterized this field during the protectorate.”²⁰ As the manifesto notes, cultural centers run by agencies of foreign governments, such as the Institut Français, often had

political agendas that reproduced colonial relations of dependence and exclusion, and further alienated a nonelite local public from accessing contemporary cultural production.²¹ When Casablanca School painters Mohamed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebâa, Mohamed Hamidi, and Mohamed Melehi took their work to local high schools in the Casablanca region in 1971, many students noted that they had never been exposed to painting precisely because of a lack of accessible spaces devoted to modern art. One student stated: “I am twenty years old, and I admit that I had never been in front of a painting. Maybe because I cannot enter into the lobby of large hotels . . .” Another stated: “I think it would be very good for this type of exhibit to continue and for this type of exhibit to continue to surpass the rigid and austere framework of galleries.” And a third exclaimed: “They should leave these places in favor of schools, parks, train stations and public squares. In this way art would be popular. I know this is difficult, but I do not think that it would be impossible.”²²

The dynamics of alienation and lack of accessibility that characterized the national museum situation and the modern art scene in Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s continued through the 1980s when banks and corporations started collecting Moroccan art. As I describe in detail in my book, as neoliberal economic policies took hold in Morocco, financial institutions like the Wafabank created cultural capital for themselves and their clients through art.²³ The establishment of art galleries in corporate headquarters further removed public access to contemporary cultural creation. Visual art in Morocco arguably became even less visible to the everyday Moroccan.

In 1990, the Musée de l’Art Contemporain opened in Tangier. Established under the direction of Ali Amahan, this national museum consisted of five rooms and an entry hall that totaled 905 square meters of exhibition space. As Amahan stated in an interview with me 10 years later, the museum was created by the ministry of culture as a symbolic gesture to the Moroccan arts community, and it was opened in Tangier because: “it was physically the closest to Europe,” the implied natural location for modern art.²⁴ The works in the collection date from the 1970s and 1980s and include paintings by important Moroccan artists such as Abdellah Hariri, Fouad Bellamine, Mohammed Kacimi, Fatima Hassan, Mohamed Chebâa, Mohamed Melehi, Farid Belkahia, and Chaïbia, though according to Amahan, the size of the collection is “insignificant.”²⁵ While his assessment should be challenged, his dissatisfaction with the museum he once directed cannot. By 2006, the physical site, a villa that formerly housed the British Consulate in Tangier, was in grave need of maintenance, and the high humidity in the non-air-conditioned building had taken its toll on many of the paintings. In 2006, the museum was shut down and reopened in 2007 under the name Galerie d’Art Contemporain Mohamed Drissi. Mohamed Drissi is a Moroccan painter born in 1945, who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Tetouan and has been active on the contemporary art scene. Yet the first artist to be shown was neither Moroccan nor contemporary; the opening exhibition was *Picasso’s Ceramics*.

The terms “contemporary” and “modern” often collide in Moroccan art institutions and discourse. For example, despite its name, the former Musée de l’Art Contemporain in Tangier built a collection that represented a history of Moroccan visual art that was anchored in the work of Moroccan modernists. Likewise, one might question the display of Picasso in the gallery of contemporary art that took its place. The new Musée des Arts Contemporains currently under construction in Rabat has the potential to address this sliding terminology. The plurality of the term “*arts contemporains*” signals a commitment to a diversity of cultural production in both Morocco and on the

international art scene. By not limiting itself to one trajectory or history of art, the name also allows the museum to ask the following questions: Where does the contemporary begin? How does one represent the history of modern art in Morocco? (And will the ministry be able to acquire, permanently or on loan, any of the important modernist pieces of Moroccan art currently owned by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and by various international and local collectors?) How does one represent the progressive and often censured political actions linked to art movements in the 1960s and 1970s? The museum's permanent collection has the possibility to create historical classifications in Moroccan art that would recognize the diverse periods and schools that have emerged in the Moroccan art world. Pulling modernism and the modern out of the contemporary would give a greater sense of history to Moroccan visual arts.

The ministry has not been very forthcoming about the collection it is organizing. And more importantly it has not opened up a meaningful dialogue that might address these questions with the arts community in Morocco. As such, artists, curators, and critics see a lack of willpower from the ministry to make this first real museum of contemporary arts in Morocco into the institution it could be. Museum scholar Steven Conn writes, "Beyond the basic requirements that all institutions need to operate, museums need ideas that continue to compel and inspire and around which their objects can be organized and displayed."²⁶ Much like the construction work that starts and stops for months at a time, the new institution is not doing the intellectual work to compel and inspire. And, thus, even larger questions arise: Is the idea of modern art no longer compelling to the nation or the state? Or inspiring to the general population, or contemporary artists? Is the project of modernity itself seen as a stalled or symbolic process without a clear future?

The Intertwined History of Emancipatory Modernity and Modern Art in Morocco

During my last visit to Rabat in March 2011, building construction at the Musée des Arts Contemporains had halted yet again. The museum's foundation had been poured, the skeleton of the building and the roof was up, but there was no sign that work on the interior of the building had commenced. The site felt eerily abandoned, and the lack of movement behind the corrugated tin fences made the building feel more like an abandoned ruin than a museum in progress. A modern art museum as a ruin or a stalled architecture is a provocative metaphor for discussions of modernity in Morocco in general. As Michael Fehr has written, museums can become "second-order systems, within which visitors can become observers of the rise and decay of orders."²⁷ Like its mired museum to modern art, modernity in Morocco appears to no longer be a state project, but rather a stalled condition, a ruin of what once might have been. James Ferguson argues that today there is

a different understanding of modernity in which, no longer promised as a *telos*, it has come to be simply a status – a standard of living to which some have rights by birth and from which others are simply, but unequivocally, excluded.²⁸

Some have made the case that the project of modernity in Morocco was never compelling or inspiring to the state, but rather just functioned as a discursive veneer to

disguise deep socioeconomic injustice and inequality. For example, in *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, originally published in French in 1974, Moroccan historian Abdellah Laroui argued that

Modern culture is . . . a means, a tool, an ideology subordinated to traditional culture where the latter is propounded as an intangible value . . . The political elite directing the national State, the traditional or modern elite, the civil or military bureaucracy, the technocratic stratum, etc. – none of these groups, all of which belong to the petite bourgeoisie, wishes for or seriously imagines a victory of modern over traditionalist thought. No one would like to see modern rationality overstep the limits of the factory, the public bureau, or the office.²⁹

Laroui went further to implicate the Arab intellectual as partly responsible for this dynamic:

All too long has the Arab intellectual hesitated to make radical criticisms of culture, language, and tradition. Too long has he drawn back from criticizing the aims of local national policy, the result of which is a stifled democracy.³⁰

Indeed, one might argue that, like the history of Moroccan museums, the history of modernity as an emancipatory project in postindependence Morocco has been a rather pessimistic one. Modernists who applied their energy to remaking the nation, especially those with Marxist affiliations, were swiftly met with state repression.

The late 1960s to the late 1990s, known as the Years of Lead, was a time of political repression, human rights abuse, and economic hardship in Morocco.³¹ During this extremely difficult, often dangerous, and highly unstable political climate, many Moroccan artists invested in the idea of modernity as a progressive social, political, and economic project. They answered Laroui's call for radical intervention, but these artists did not see modernity as only an exclusionary Western force that marginalized them and their work, nor did they necessarily see "traditional" culture as an immutable value. As critic Abdellah Stouky explained: "Traditional patrimony is one dimension of the Moroccan artist while modernity is another. It is up to him [the artist] to find the geometric link between the dimensions."³²

Artists such as Chebâa, Melehi, and Belkahia, among many others, participated fully in work and actions that sought to break up reified colonial and postcolonial structures of thought and culture both at home and abroad. As art historian Toni Maraini describes it,

They were conscious of the historic role of their generation. They had numerous projects and a work plan to shake up and change (in) existent structures . . . We were animated by that which the "project of modernity" claimed as the most liberating and dynamic.³³

They committed to the spread of literacy, education, freedom of expression, secularism, and art as an autonomous sphere. They founded the Casablanca School, an art group that privileged local motifs and materials in art education, and whose artists created public events that took modern art into the streets and into Moroccan schools. Artists and poets created art and cultural journals like *Integral* and *Souffles* that documented

developments in the art world in Morocco and the rest of the world, and at the same time reported on social inequalities and pushed ahead on important issues in Moroccan society such as the reduction of poverty and the elimination of elite privilege.

Modern art was seen as a means through which a larger social education could take place, through which society could be reformed, and through which the most liberatory elements of modernity could be embraced. In 1978, painter Mohamed Melehi and photographer-now-politician Mohamed Benaïssa started the still ongoing annual Asilah Arts Festival in order to provide an international venue for the arts and transform life in a coastal town that was, in the words of Benaïssa, “a disgrace, lots of garbage, the sewage was a total disaster, the walls had collapsed, no electricity.”³⁴ In true modernist fashion, art would cure the town of its insalubrities and reconfigure social relations. It can be debated whether the residents of Asilah were particularly happy when the artists came to paint the exterior walls of their homes with abstract geometric murals under the slogan: “Culture and Art for Development.”³⁵ However, Asilah was a success in the eyes of its modernizing cultural agents and also according to those artists from abroad who participated in the festival.

The Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi, founder of the cultural journal *Souffles/Anfas* described the postindependence energy for innovation and modernization in the following way,

Something is preparing to happen in Africa, and in other countries [sic] of the Third World. Exoticism and folklore are becoming unsteady. No one can predict what this “ex pre-logical” thought will give to the world. But the day when the true speakers of collectivities make their voices heard, it will be like an explosion of dynamite in the rotting arcades of old humanisms.³⁶

For Laâbi, the power to disrupt and break apart both colonial narratives and dominant local discourses lay with the people. After the stifling period of the Years of Lead, the ascension to the throne of Mohamed VI in 1999 marked a new time of reform and social change in the country, and people grew hopeful that that the time had finally arrived for everyday Moroccans to make their voices heard. But the progressive agenda that Mohamed VI promised in his first speech from the throne quickly met the realities of the power system in Morocco and, while state repression certainly relaxed, it did not disappear, as witnessed by the ongoing tension in levels of freedom of expression in the press and widening inequality in Moroccan society.

Working through and Remembering Modernist Projects

What does it mean to invest in the modern as a category of memory? How are projects of modernity and modern art remembered? And where are they remembered if there is no museum of modern art?

The 2011 uprisings in the Arab world and the return of the project of emancipatory and participatory modernity have been met in the Western media with a certain nostalgia for 1960s activism – the coining of the term Arab Spring, for one, consciously evokes the Prague Spring of 1968. And this Western nostalgia for the 1960s is not unique to political activism, but rather reflects an ongoing cultural memorialization of the period. In his essay “The Return of the Sixties in Contemporary Art and Criticism,”

James Meyer explores current art projects that engage with 1960s practice and political movements, and asks, “A fundamental reference for progressive cultural politics, does the sixties risk becoming an object of nostalgic longing, indeed affirmation?”³⁷ Where the 1960s might risk becoming a nostalgic longing for articulations of freedom and liberation in the contemporary European and American art analyzed by Meyer, in the Moroccan case, nostalgia is not the central frame through which 1960s artistic practice or political involvement is remembered today.

As I have already described, the 1960s, the beginning of the Years of Lead, represent different experiences of freedom, liberation, and activism in Morocco than they do in Europe and the USA. In terms of art practice, contemporary artists and curators engage with the period critically and do not dwell on romanticized or nostalgic notions of the 1960s; they neither uncritically reproduce it, nor hope to return to it. Curator, art historian, and artist Mohamed Rachdi has made sure that the space that he now directs, the gallery at the Société Générale bank in Casablanca, is such a site of memory and critical art history. His recent exhibit, from December 2010 to May 2011, on nature and landscape, consisted of 72 works, from Orientalist painting to video, from photography to performance. He included works by some of the most innovative and interesting Moroccan artists practicing today in dialogue with iconic works from Morocco’s modernist past by Mohamed Melehi and Fouad Bellamine among others. In so doing, he produced not only an art history, but also a critical dialogue between generations. As I will describe below, groups such as La Source du Lion, curators like Abdellah Karroum, and artists like photographer Yto Barrada continue the progressive drive of Moroccan modernists to invite the general public into art institutions and practices, but their approach is more aware of the contradictions, obstacles, and inherent power relations that are present in the relationship between the Moroccan general public and contemporary art. Rather than a top-down modernist art education, as characterized by the outdoor work of the Casablanca School, the Asilah Arts Festival, and the projected Musée des Arts Contemporains, they ultimately seek to create a collective memory of art and modernity. Through collective artistic practice – with artists and local communities of nonartists – they work to remember not only the past, but also the present and future. These cultural agents are working to understand their relationship to the history of Moroccan art and move what appears to be a stalled project forward, and they have made significant strides to turn Moroccan art history into an accessible and relevant presence in the life of various communities. In their work, the concept of participation is key.

For artist Hassan Darsi and his collective, La Source du Lion, collective memory and participatory movements are at the center of their work. Through his work with the Hermitage Park in Casablanca in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Darsi redefined public art in a Moroccan context. The 1960s and 1970s outdoor exhibits of the Casablanca School sought to invite public participation in art, but often recreated the exclusionary dynamics of gallery spaces;³⁸ for example, the famous 1969 exhibit in the Jemaa Al Fna in Marrakech used metal barricades to keep the public a safe distance from the art on display. Rather than using public space as a site solely for display like their Casablanca School modernist predecessors, La Source du Lion initiated and then *participated* in a radical rethinking of the utility and beauty of an abandoned and dilapidated neighborhood park. They engaged with community activists who advocated for the rehabilitation of the space, and through artistic interventions, they worked alongside community members to respect the memory

and history of the park as they transformed it into a shared space of discovery (art installations and children's art education programs), repose (spaces for rest and reading), and shared history (storytelling groups).³⁹ In many respects, the work of Darsi in this park moves the modernist projects of the Casablanca School forward from unidirectional aesthetic and social education to polyvalent communicative practices.⁴⁰

The progression from the practices of Casablanca School outdoor displays to the La Source du Lion park project is akin to what Grant H. Kester has coined a movement from “orthopedic” to “dialogical” aesthetics in contemporary art.⁴¹ Where an orthopedic aesthetic is one in which “the viewer’s implicitly flawed modes of cognition or perception will be adjusted and improved via exposure to the work of art,” dialogical aesthetics promote process-based work that demands long-term reciprocal communication, commitment, and exchange between artists and participants.⁴² Dialogical aesthetics go beyond Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of relational aesthetics in that the aesthetic practice is more than the mise-en-scène of social environments and “choreographed” performances of social exchange.⁴³ Rather, in dialogical aesthetics, artists give up their monopoly on voice, commit to a “dialogue extended over time,” and recognize the importance of shared discourse and “a common system of meaning within which the various participants can speak, listen and respond.”⁴⁴ Art is not created for its participants, but rather it is created in and through participation, a self-aware participation that acknowledges the potentially unequal power and social relations that structure it.

In 2002, in addition to his work with La Source du Lion, Hassan Darsi brought his “Family Portrait Series” to the Maarif neighborhood in Casablanca in another participatory project. His goal was to invite new encounters and chronicle unseen identities in the intimate interior of city life without violating the privacy of those people and that space. Rather than entering homes and literally *taking* images, he invited people to participate in staging their own family life by bringing an object from home onto a common set, a fabric shared by all. This participatory model of creating an image without exploitation allowed people to perform their family’s individuality, difference and similarity vis-à-vis dominant society. The project’s participatory approach was civic-minded in that it recognized that one of the responsibilities of belonging to a community was to hear its various voices. It espoused urban cosmopolitanism as a practice of mutual respect and recognition within the neighborhood.⁴⁵

Confronting the Modern Image and Images of Modernity

Another example of sustained dialogical aesthetics in the Moroccan context is the creation of the nonprofit Cinémathèque de Tanger. In 2006, under the direction of photographer Yto Barrada, local participatory activism for the renovation of the historic and dilapidated Cinéma du Rif led to the birth of a contemporary community space devoted to film. In her words, the renovation was “a collective work by the Tangier artistic crowd” with people donating time and resources.⁴⁶ And the result is collective in another, wide sense: the Cinémathèque has become a space where people of all ages gather to screen old Moroccan films from the archives as well as new productions that emerge from workshops sponsored and housed at the

center. The Cinémathèque thus not only creates a site in which participants are able to access images of Moroccan life and culture, but more importantly, it is a site through which participants actively take on a critical position in the construction of these very representations, whether through dialogue or through the production of film itself.

In a speech on the politics of memory in the Arab world, the Moroccan cultural critic Abdelkebir Khatibi argued for the necessity of Arabs to decode Western dominant representations and produce images of themselves:

In order to decode, one must learn the language of the production of signs and images. To produce oneself, it is necessary to respond to this demand: plug in technological powers into the depths of memory . . . Code, decode, create, by framing a memory of becoming; that is the proposal I submit to you.⁴⁷

The memory of becoming (*la mémoire en devenir*) is an important concept for Khatibi. Memory is not static, nor is it located solely in the past. Memory is to be made, to be actively produced, and it is a participatory activity of society as a whole. Yto Barrada's Cinémathèque de Tanger has the potential to become a participatory space of storytelling, memory and image creation. And this is done not only through the production of images, but also through a practice of social imagination that exists in public screenings and public dialogues about film.

The 1995 novel *La querelle des images* (The Quarrel of Images) by Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito illustrates how the cinema in Morocco is a public space that engenders aesthetic interventions into dominant systems of representation. In the introduction to the novel, Kilito writes that he is interested in the transition between a “culture based on the text and a culture in which the image manifests itself, timidly at the beginning, but more aggressively as it gains turf, attempting to even expulse the text, to replace it.”⁴⁸ Kilito’s dichotomy of West/image and East/writing simplifies the interesting and complex history of image production in the Islamic world, and although he states that the image is the central character or hero of the book, he is less interested in the image itself than in its role in the meeting of cultures and the social practices of imagination. It is the movement of aggressive replacement that concerns and intrigues Kilito, forcing him to ask,

The entry of the Arab peoples into modernity, wasn’t it due in part to the image? Maybe we should ask one day what it is that the Arab peoples have lost in entering into the era of the image?⁴⁹

The nostalgia of the question underlines the question of local memory. How are local memories erased or replaced by global images that do not correspond to a local reality? *La querelle des images* presents a Morocco that is in constant negotiation if not contestation with visual images from the West. Kilito’s examination of the play between the world of images and the Moroccan spectator asks us to revisit Susan Sontag’s famous formulation that, “a society becomes modern when one of its chief activities is producing images.”⁵⁰ How do Moroccan spectators of the image challenge its claims to modernity? And produce their own images, claims, and practices? The Cinémathèque de Tanger, a renovated colonial era theater, is now a contemporary space that welcomes and encourages the type of engagement that Kilito describes and,

through shared technological resources, it becomes a space where collective memory is produced.

Rural Spaces and Nomadic Curation

When the Casablanca School took their modern art to various high schools in Casablanca in the early 1970s, a number of students urged the group to exhibit in rural locations: “I would like to ask one question: Why do the artists exhibit only in towns? Why don’t they go to the countryside?” and “Leave the town and go to the markets . . . ”⁵¹ Thirty years later, curator Abdellah Karroum brought contemporary art and the practice of dialogical aesthetics to rural areas throughout Morocco through his *Le bout du monde* and *Multipistes* projects. Started in 2000, *Le bout du monde* is anything but Kester’s “orthopedic.” Unlike Melehi and Benaïssa’s modernist project in Asilah, Karroum’s *Le bout du monde* did not travel to rural areas to clean them up or to educate their isolated populations. Rather, Karroum created portable art actions that took a progressive definition of a museum – as a site of discovery, of encounter with art and an invitation to enter discourse – to various places that, in the words of Karroum, were “territories that were far removed from the official contexts of contemporary arts.”⁵² Karroum defines his curatorial practice as one located not just in objects but in contemporary issues and, through movement, his nomadic exhibits invite a reorientation of vision on the part of the artist and the spectator, producing conversations with and within diverse environments.⁵³ By the fall of 2011, Karroum had curated five “expeditions” within Morocco with French and Moroccan artists, and four others: in Cameroon, the Polar Circle, France, and South Korea. As Karroum explains, the point wasn’t to come into remote areas and display objects of art. Nor was the purpose to educate villagers about art and turn them into public spectators. Rather the project’s aim was to invite artists and local people to participate in discussions together about life, and to see artists as fellow creators in the world.⁵⁴

In all of Karroum’s curatorial expeditions, the object takes a back seat to discourse and interaction. Most recently, in 2011, he curated a project entitled *Working for Change* at the Morocco Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale that sought to facilitate the connections between art, politics and activism. For the Biennale, he created a workspace with several desks for activities such as curatorial dialogues, production, editing, communication, as well as artist tables for performances and presentations of works in progress, and a satellite TV monitor running Al Jazeera and the BBC. As Karroum describes it, “the structure of the Working for Change space in Venice is imagined as a creative place, an ideal research and action ‘milieu’ that merges the curatorial office with the artist’s studio.”⁵⁵ Moroccan artists such as Karim Rafi (Figure 22.2), Batoul S’himi, Mounir Fatmi, and Youssef Rahmoun all participated – whether in Venice itself or, as in the case of Rafi, virtually from Casablanca. By opening up the concept of work as a multilayered form of artistic practice and political action, Karroum strove to create “An open and long-term collaboration between Moroccan and international artists and curators . . . through which to consider artistic production and its role in changing societies.”⁵⁶ Karroum is not looking back with nostalgia to Moroccan modernism. His frame of memory is progressive and forward facing.



FIGURE 22.2 Karim Rafi. *Tout va bien* (*Everything Is Fine*), 2011, from the artist's contribution to the *Working for Change* project, Venice Biennale, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and L'Appartement 22, Rabat.

Conclusions

As I write this chapter in 2012, hundreds and often thousands of Moroccans take to the streets every month pressing for government reform and the existence of a truly participatory democracy. Mainly but not exclusively young, these men and women protest peacefully across the country in order to have their voices heard. While the Moroccan demonstrators in the February 20 Movement have taken up a “reform not revolt” position, they share concerns common to the revolutionary protests that occurred across the Middle East during the uprisings of 2011: democratic and free public participation in political life, protection of human rights, freedom of expression, and an end to government corruption. In the Moroccan context, protestors have marched to curb the powers of the king within a real constitutional monarchy, to end a system of nepotism among the political and economic elite, and to recognize the Amazigh⁵⁷ language Tamazight as an official national language on par with Arabic. Although less populous and less concentrated than the demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia, the mass demonstrations in Morocco have already had some effect. Under the guidance of the king, Mohamed VI, the Moroccan constitution has been significantly revised, often in direct response to activist demands. As Paul Silverstein writes, “overall the constitution’s rhetoric appears lifted directly from the slogans and communiqués of the protestors.”⁵⁸

However, yet again, the term “rhetoric” is key. As Silverstein discusses, those who continue to protest see the revised constitution as “a half-measure, heavy on inclusive rhetoric and light on actual reform.”⁵⁹ And if one studies the rhetoric closely, one can see that, while the language of the new constitution seeks to appease local activists, it also and perhaps primarily seeks to reassure global investors, the Diaspora, and international tourists. As Silverstein puts it,

In many places, the document reads less as a model for government than as a mission statement crafted for the international diplomatic and business community . . . Assurances of transparency, good governance and civil liberties are vital for the procurement of development monies from international agencies that increasingly have democratization riders attached.⁶⁰

Susan Slyomovics concludes in her analysis, “100 Days of the 2011 Moroccan Constitution,” that while certain articles in the new constitution, such as the declaration that all forms of torture are a crime (Article 22), entail a move forward, pressing issues such as the ongoing war in the western Sahara, and the royal family’s vast economic holdings in the country have been “elided.”⁶¹ Karim Boukhari, editor of the Moroccan magazine *Telquel*, puts it more bluntly: “Yes, but, Morocco deserves much more, and starting now.”⁶²

While the February 20 Movement demonstrations have led to a greater sense of a shared collective agency amongst those who have long been disenfranchised from national politics, only time will tell whether this protest movement will be a true turning point in the country’s history, and whether a static condition of a rhetorical modernity will actually become a participatory and progressive project of reform; whether politics will have really been “reborn”⁶³ or whether they continue to be “stuck in the ground zero of development, modernity and citizenship.”⁶⁴

Likewise, modern art and its relationship to the museum in Morocco are at a cross-roads today. In the 1960s and 1970s, the national art museum – an institution absent in Morocco, but present elsewhere – became a central trope through which artists and intellectuals critiqued processes of modernization taking place in the nation – a modernization deemed superficial and unequal by these critics. In 2012, with a state-run museum for modern and contemporary art all too slowly emerging from its ground zero, a new generation of artists and curators has created smaller, more tactical spaces of memory and shared resources to fill the museum void. Ironically perhaps, the stalled project of a national art museum has freed Moroccan artists and curators from memorialized state-sanctioned narratives of modern art history in Morocco, and has enabled them to enter into a critical relationship with the past.

As I hope I have shown here, modern art in Morocco and its project for emancipatory modernity is not forgotten but rather exists in critical dialogue with contemporary Moroccan art and political actions. Will the Musée des Arts Contemporains in Rabat be able to build anything more than an edifice? How will it represent Moroccan art history and the work of progressive modern and contemporary artists in Moroccan society? While artists and curators are pessimistic about this museum’s future, they are actively reworking crumbling discourses on the modern into meaningful participatory engagements. They are moving even larger stalled projects forward.

Notes

- 1 Abdellah Karroum, interview with author, Williamstown, MA, May 24, 2008.
- 2 Karroum (2011a).
- 3 Ministère de la Culture (2011).
- 4 Jadraoui (2011).
- 5 Karroum (2005, 50).
- 6 Karroum (2005, 56).

- 7 Benqassem (2011).
- 8 Amar (2011).
- 9 See Kasfir, chapter 26 this volume.
- 10 Ksikes (2011).
- 11 Karroum (2005, 52).
- 12 Pieprzak (2010).
- 13 Also see Bridges, chapter 3 this volume.
- 14 Pieprzak (2010, 30).
- 15 Arnoldi (1999, 29).
- 16 Arnoldi (1999, 39, note 4).
- 17 El Maleh (1997, 13).
- 18 “Ben” (1967, 4).
- 19 The Casablanca School was an art group founded in 1964 by artists who were associated with the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca. Their primary aim was to not only “break away from academic teaching practices [inherited from the West] and naïve painting, but also to eradicate the difference between craft and fine art that had been inherited from the West in order to reconcile the past with the present” (Shabout 2007, 30). See Vogl, chapter 10 this volume.
- 20 Ataallah et al. (1969, 48).
- 21 In a 1971 piece entitled “Actions, limites, avatars et dangers des centres culturels étrangers,” cultural journalist Zakya Daoud wrote, “the domination of foreign cultures on national culture . . . handicaps the progression of the latter and the accelerated diffusion of one language and one civilization, especially true of France . . . becomes more and more a source of social antagonisms. One regrets the place that these centers have taken in Moroccan cultural life, and furthermore, the content of the culture that they disseminate” (1971). In 2011 Morocco, the role of cultural centers is seen more favorably by many in the Moroccan arts community. In some instances, experimental art groups seen as too radical by the ministry of culture, like Driss Ksikes’s theater group Dabateatr, have found a supportive home in the Institut Français. See Amar (2011).
- 22 Integral (1971, 8).
- 23 Pieprzak (2010).
- 24 Ali Amahan, interview by author. Ministry of Culture, Rabat, May 19, 2000.
- 25 Ali Amahan, interview by author. Ministry of Culture, Rabat, May 19, 2000.
- 26 Conn (2010, 195).
- 27 Fehr (2000, 59).
- 28 Ferguson (2006, 189).
- 29 Laroui (1977, 166).
- 30 Laroui (1977, 176).
- 31 This recent history has started to come to light more fully since the creation of a public Truth and Reconciliation Committee by Mohamed VI in the late 1990s and the publication of these testimonies and histories.
- 32 Stouky (1972, 38).
- 33 Maraini (1990, 21 and 24).
- 34 Haupt and Binder (2004).
- 35 For a more sustained description and critique of the festival, see Pieprzak (2010, chapter 5).
- 36 Laâbi (1966, 6).
- 37 Meyer (2008, 328).

- 38 Pieprzak (2010).
39 Derain (2006).
40 Pieprzak (2011).
41 Kester (2004).
42 Kester (2011, 35).
43 Kester (2011, 32).
44 Kester (2004, 85).
45 Pieprzak (2009).
46 Lindsey (2008).
47 Khatibi (1993, 56).
48 Kilito (1995, 10).
49 Kilito (1995, 10).
50 Sontag (1977, 153).
51 Integral (1971, 8).
52 Karroum (2000).
53 Karroum, interview with author, Williamstown, MA, May 24, 2008.
54 Karroum, interview with author, Williamstown, MA, May 24, 2008.
55 Karroum (2011b).
56 Karroum (2011b).
57 In current usage, the adjective Amazigh and the noun Imazighen have replaced the often pejorative term Berber. See Vogl, chapter 10 this volume.
58 Silverstein (2011).
59 Silverstein (2011).
60 Silverstein (2011).
61 Slyomovics (2011).
62 Boukhari (2011a, 4).
63 Silverstein (2011).
64 Boukhari (2011b, 4).

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Part VIII



Primitivism as Erasure

The Enduring Power of Primitivism

Showcasing “the Other” in Twenty-First-Century France

Sally Price

Take the entire holdings of France’s colonial museum and all the ethnographic collections of its national anthropology museum, an unparalleled supply of some 300,000 precious testimonies to the cultural riches of the world beyond Europe. Add to that political support at the highest level, a whole wing of the Louvre, a building site next to the Eiffel Tower, a construction budget of more than 300 million dollars and another 30 million for new acquisitions, a prize-winning architect, the participation of major collectors of non-Western art, the endorsement of academics from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Maurice Godelier, and a stated goal of building greater recognition and appreciation of non-European arts and cultures.

How could these ingredients have produced exhibition spaces that depict Africa as (in the words of historian Gilles Manceron) “savage, exuberant, dangerous and primitive”?¹ Spaces that (in the words of Africanist Jean Polet) “give the impression that colonization never took place, as if art existed outside of the world”?² Or that Africanist Jean-Loup Amselle dubs a “de-historicized vision of alterity . . . based on a combination of naturalism and primitivism”?³ This chapter explores the cultural ideology and hierarchy of power that produced what many consider an anachronistic monument to primitivism in the heart of twenty-first-century Paris: the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB). It draws primarily, but not exclusively, on the museum’s depiction of African cultures to make its argument that the MQB accords the peoples it represents a kind of dubious membership in the modern world.

Critics of the MQB have focused on various aspects of the project: the exterior architecture, the interior layout, the tension between aesthetic and ethnographic goals, the depiction of French colonialism (or lack thereof), the treatment of cultural property issues, premises about differences between Euro-based and non-Euro-based cultures, the distribution of decision-making power among participants from different disciplines, professions, and class-based identities, and much more.

Each dimension has been invoked both in support of the museum (most notably in statements by members of the museum staff) and in critical commentary (such as the conclusions cited above).⁴ I begin with a brief rundown of some of the features that have led observers to see in the museum a kind of pre-postcolonial primitivism; the rest of this chapter will explore the ideological positions and structural mechanisms responsible for making the museum vulnerable to such criticism.

The Exterior: Architecture and Landscaping

Even before making their way to the ticket counter or the grand reception hall, visitors to the MQB enter an environment indelibly marked by a stereotypical vision of the primitive world. Jean Nouvel won the architectural competition on the basis of his promise to produce a dreamlike space permeated with spiritual presences:

It is a place marked by symbols of forest and river, and the obsessions of death and oblivion . . . It is a haunted place, wherein dwell and converse the ancestral spirits of those who awoke to the human condition and invented gods and beliefs. It is a strange, unique place. Poetic and disturbing . . . In a gentle shift, a Parisian garden becomes a sacred grove and the museum dissolves in its depths.⁵

Nouvel's goal of evoking a world in which men were "awakening to the human condition" and "inventing gods and beliefs" had solid support from the garden architect, Gilles Clément. Despite the museum's claim that "the garden's botanical vocabulary borrows nothing from tropical exoticism" (in that the plantings are all species "at home in the Paris climate"), the explicit aim was to create "a setting that harks back to the riotous landscapes of the animist world, in which every living thing, from grass to tree, from insect to bird, whether high or low, faced mankind on equal terms of mutual respect."⁶ And this comic-book-level vision of an animistic forest is not limited to grass and tree, insect and bird . . . there's also a hint of the human presence, as irregularly sized "boxes" protrude from the side of the central building, creating the effect of (as the museum puts it) "huts rising up out of the forest."⁷ Finally, the garden is punctuated by multiple evocations of the tortoise, billed as "a mythic creature holding a special place in the animistic and polytheistic cosmogonies whose sacred works are collected by the museum" and said to provide meaning for artworks around the world, from Bali and Mali to the Amazonian rainforest.⁸ How, we might ask, would most Africans react to being included in this fantasy landscape of universal turtledom?

This "riotous landscape in an animistic and polytheistic" world prepares visitors for the exhibition spaces themselves, which carry the primitivizing vision forward with equal vigor.⁹

The Interior: Layout and Lighting

Once inside the museum, visitors begin their trek up a long (180 m) winding ramp, which ends in a dark tunnel, apparently intended to prepare their eyes to the dim lighting in the exhibition space itself. Here again, the architect's vision of the primitive

world has held sway, creating an environment that reviewers have described variously as “a spooky jungle . . . a crepuscular cavern,”¹⁰ “the worst malarial European nightmare of the dark continent [incorporating] all the cliches we should be running headlong from . . . [and] a catastrophe sunk in a swamp of hubris [that] makes you want to cry.”¹¹

Daylight is kept at bay by images of jungle foliage etched onto the windows, and a black mesh screen on the ceiling further reduces illumination of the exhibited objects. As if this were not enough, Nouvel created even darker spaces to house chosen pieces from the African collection that he felt would be most at home in small *grottes de découverte* (“caves of discovery”). This, then, is the environment for such objects as *minkisi* brought from the Congo when it was French Equatorial Africa, or the “*Kono*” (*boli*) that Michel Leiris snatched surreptitiously from a shrine in Mali during the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of the 1930s.

But there’s more to the creation of a particular atmosphere than simply the amount of light in a given space. Susan Vogel has pointed out the power of different choices in the *angle* at which objects are illuminated.

Enter the little cabinet plunged in darkness where Congolese power figures, “magical statues,” are exhibited, and the museum’s perspective becomes quite clear. The statues are illuminated from below, and the intense light creates powerful, grotesque shadows . . . Filmmakers know this procedure as “monster lighting”: It is commonly used in horror films, and rarely in museums. The gloom of the Quai Branly restores, not the darkness of African sanctuaries, but rather the arbitrary lighting of nightmares and horror, the artificial light that evokes the discomfort of the intruder. It’s the light of a European nighttime – artificial, shadowy, and theatrical.¹²

Artists’ Names

The staff of the MQB seems to have had a bit of difficulty with the names of some of the artists represented, raising the possibility that non-European identities have been treated with somewhat greater nonchalance than those of (for example) French explorers, military figures, collectors, and the like. Several examples:

When the museum opened, the exhibit of two magnificent statues taken from the palace of Abomey during the 1893 conquest of Dahomey (King Glele as “the lion king” and his son Béhanzin as “the shark king”) credited Amédée Dodds, the conquering French general who seized them, but made no mention of Sosa Adede, the famous artist who sculpted them. Once attention was drawn to the omission, a new label was added with the sculptor’s name, but the statues (from what is now the Republic of Benin) have remained unattributed in the museum’s published *Guide*.

Making artists’ names a low priority is far from limited to the museum’s African exhibits, as we see from the absence of individual artists’ names for a whole series of Aboriginal barkcloth paintings from Australia.¹³ The museum’s *Guide* points out that Karel Kupka, who collected them in the 1960s, took special pains to identify each of the individual artists. But, in the exhibition space of the museum, they are rendered virtually anonymous.

Or again, while the names of the eight contemporary Australian Aboriginal artists whose artworks were integrated into the building appear, most of them correctly

spelled, on the outdoor plaques next to the back entrance that acknowledge their contribution, other mentions of them have fared less well. Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford's name seems to have proved particularly challenging. On the plaque it appears as "Paddy Ngunkuny Bedford" in spite of the fact that his coexecutors made it clear, "time and time again," that the correct spelling was Nyunkuny, not Ngunkuny.¹⁴ Germain Viatte's book on acquisition policies (2006) rendered his first name as "Patty," the museum's inaugural portfolio opted for "Pady," and the museum website still, five years after the museum's opening, responded (with six results) to "Pady Bedford." (Viatte also got tripped up on another of the Aboriginal artist's names, misspelling both Ningura and Napurrula.)¹⁵

The suspicion that individual identities of these exotic artists may have been a low priority concern was further reinforced on one part of the museum's website (now removed), where Gulumbu Yunupingu's artwork was attributed to John Mawurndjul, John Mawurndjul's was attributed to Ningura Napurrula, and Ningura Napurrula's was attributed to Gulumbu Yunupingu.¹⁶

Artists' Voices

Still focusing on the artists who were invited to contribute to the museum's architecture, we notice another discrepancy between the treatment of those of European and non-European origins. Charles Sandison, a Scottish artist whose complexly computerized jumble of exotic place names was installed on the entrance ramp to the exhibitions in 2010, is given ample space both in the museum itself and on the MQB website to explain the idea behind his creation. It runs to some 1,000 words.¹⁷ However, the eight Aboriginal artists, fully as "contemporary" (twenty-first century) as Sandison, are given no voice, either in the museum or on the MQB website. The objections of some of them to the way parts of their work were transformed for purposes of the architectural design were disregarded¹⁸ and the critical and political intent behind their work was largely whitewashed into a primitivizing stereotype. A text on the museum's website says that "the themes of Aboriginal paintings are taken from mythical times. They may illustrate the creation of the world or of a particular places [sic], inscribing their stories in the landscape."¹⁹ How, then, could visitors to the MQB understand that a number of the paintings depict a twentieth-century massacre by poisoning of Aborigines by a white landowner? What would allow them to understand urban artist Judy Watson's graphic references to toxic waste produced by French nuclear testing in the Pacific? And what hint are they given that Michael Riley's photographic images are condemning the Christianity that was imposed to replace traditional Aboriginal beliefs? Vague mention of "symbols of resistance and survival" or "the opposing values of Aboriginality, Christianity and pastoralism"²⁰ hardly suffice for capturing the very specific historical, political, and autobiographical allusions in their work.

The Collection History of Exhibited Objects

Pleas were made repeatedly by anthropologist Maurice Godelier, during the three years that he was involved in museum planning, for including information on the circumstances under which particular objects on display had been collected. Citing a

number of interesting examples, he argued that this would help the public to step back and take a critical view of Western history. He pointed, for example, to a statue from Guinea-Bissau, and explained that

[This statue] comes from the island of Karavela in the Bissagos islands (Guinea-Bissau), and represents a goddess. As far as we know, it was kept in the house of a headman and was stolen by a lieutenant of the French navy [Pierre Auguste Eugène Aumont] at the start of the nineteenth century. On the order of the French government, the lieutenant had led a punitive expedition against this group on the pretext that they had earlier attacked a French ship, though in reality this attack had been a response to France's failure to pay for the meat and fresh water that their ships regularly took on at this spot. Several villages were laid waste, and in one of the huts the officer [Aumont] noticed some strange objects, which he took. A century later his descendants donated them to the Musée de l'Homme.²¹

But others on the committee were sufficiently opposed to this approach that, after Godelier promoted it valiantly for more than three years, he resigned in anger, leaving his colleagues free to eschew information on collection history in favor of commentary on the objects' aesthetic attributes and (to a much lesser extent) cultural context.

Labeling for the shrine object that Michel Leiris took in Mali constitutes a particularly glaring missed opportunity for opening up issues concerning the collecting strategies that have produced museum collections, not just in France, but around the world.

One of the “boxes” of the African section includes a sacred object (*boli*), a ritual object used by the Kono association, which was encountered by Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris in the course of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931–1933. When the museum opened, this object was accompanied by a label announcing that “Michel Leiris described the discovery of the *boli* [which he calls a *Kono*] in its sanctuary,” and quoting his text:

Inside the tiny structure on the right are some indefinable forms in a kind of nougat brown material which is none other than coagulated blood. In the middle is a large calabash filled with assorted objects including several flutes made of horn, wood, iron, and copper. On the left, hanging from the ceiling amidst a bunch of calabashes, a foul bundle covered with the feathers of different birds in which Griaule, who palpates it, feels that there's a mask.

The museum label ended at Griaule's tactile encounter with the mask. Leiris's published description from which it was taken, however, goes on to describe in vivid detail the acquisition of the Kono objects:

Irritated by the foot-dragging of the people [who have been making an annoying string of demands for a sacrificial offering], our decision is made quickly: Griaule grabs two flutes and slips them into his boots, we put things back in place, and we leave. [After some discussion with the villagers] Griaule decrees, and has the chief informed, that since people are mocking and insulting us, it will be necessary for them to make amends by surrendering the *Kono* to us in exchange for 10 francs, and that otherwise the police hiding (he claimed) in the truck would have to take the

chief and the village dignitaries into custody and drive them to San, where they could explain their behavior to the Administration. Dreadful blackmail! . . . We order the men to go inside and get the *Kono*. After they all refuse, we go in ourselves, wrap up the holy object in the tarpaulin, and emerge like thieves . . . [The next day] we visit the village and abduct a second *Kono*, which Griaule had spotted when he slipped unnoticed into its special hut. This time it's Lutten and I who manage the operation. My heart beats very fast. Ever since yesterday's scandal, I understand much more clearly the gravity of what we are doing. [Later on another *Kono* is taken.] This time I'm the one to do it all by myself, carrying a knife in my hand. I realize, with a stupefaction that turns into disgust, how very cocky a person can feel when he's a white man and he carries a knife in his hand.²²

What a fine opportunity the display of this object would have provided to raise the issue of changing ethics in the collection of artifacts! Here, the participant himself acknowledged the nature of the act and brought it to public attention in his published chronicle of the expedition. For him this colonial encounter (and others of the same nature) constituted a kind of wake-up call, inspiring him to become active in the promotion of respect for other peoples' cultures, including through the establishment of the International Committee on Museums. "For religious objects or art objects transported to a metropolitan [European] museum," he wrote, "no matter how the people who possess them are indemnified, it's part of the cultural patrimony of the whole social group that is being taken away from its true owners."²³ In response to early reviews that criticized the truncation of the text, the museum, rather than adapting it to engage the issue of collecting ethics, simply deleted all reference to Leiris's commentary.

When the MQB does attempt to recount how objects moved from their home in Africa to a museum in Paris, it sometimes adopts a narrative pitting valiant Europeans against undeserving natives. The video screen that accompanies the statues from the palace of Abomey, for example, tilts its selection of details in this direction, telling museum visitors that kings Glele and Béhanzin enriched themselves through participation in the slave trade, commanded armies of Amazons who beheaded enemy warriors, proudly "sowed terror," committed human sacrifice, disrupted the harbor (thus hampering its use by the French), attacked and threatened the French soldiers, suffered defeat, and set fire to their own palace. French fighting is either depicted as self-defense or described in passive terms: "Conflict erupted." It's worth noting that the encounter took place on African soil, not in Europe. If the roles had been reversed – that is, had the Africans attempted to conquer Paris, as in Bertène Juminer's novel, *The Revenge of Bozambo* (1968) – it seems unlikely that the French would have been portrayed as "threatening" the invading Africans!

The removal of valuable objects from their non-European settings is frequently justified on the grounds that they are being "rescued" – rescued from kings who set fire to their own palaces, rescued from the ravages of a tropical climate, rescued from native negligence, rescued from termite nests, and so forth.²⁴ Their transfer to a Western museum where they will be placed in secure, air-conditioned spaces then takes on the look of a benevolent act of salvation. As MQB curator Yves Le Fur expressed this perspective in 2010, "If, at a particular point, a culture has neglected its objects . . . they will later find themselves in museums, which are institutions of conservation. Thus, it's completely justified to keep them."²⁵ One problem here is

deciding what constitutes “neglect.” Was General Dodds, for example, saving the Dahomean throne from “neglect” when he took it from the palace of the king he had just defeated? Certainly, views concerning cultural property have changed substantially since many museum objects were acquired. But avoiding all mention of the political and ideological climate that allowed such seizures (sometimes in the not so distant past) – seizures that have supplied the riches of Western museums around the world – contributes importantly to the reputation of the MQB as a museum of (historical) denial.

Finally, not all stories of the way objects have passed from native ownership into Western collections are free of creative retellings. The MQB’s most prized possession, a statue from the cliffs of Bandiagara in what is now the country of Mali, was purchased in Paris in 1969 by art dealers Philippe and Hélène Leloup.²⁶ But when Mme Leloup is interviewed for an MQB-sponsored DVD,²⁷ she opts for a more exciting story. There, Germain Viatte sets the stage by commenting that “No one knows exactly where the objects come from.” The voice-over narrator follows by asking, “How did they come all the way to us?” and Hélène Leloup picks up the dialogue: “I was in Paris and someone said, ‘There’s an extraordinary object here. You’ve got to come!’” When the DVD later returns to her story, it shows stills of her as a slightly younger woman in the cliffs of Bandiagara, being led by local guides to discover the cave where the statue had lain hidden for centuries. Leloup, still distancing herself from the purchase in Paris, exclaims, “It was so much better to go there and buy in the country itself!” And when the still frames follow her into the cave (crawling on hands and knees past the killer bees that guard the entrance, she reminisces), we witness her amazement at what appears to be her first view of “the Djennenké,” lying on its side against a rock in the darkness, apparently untouched for centuries. Might one of Jean Nouvel’s darkened “caves of discovery” have provided the stage set for this filmed recreation? In any case, the DVD evokes an adrenalin-rush encounter between art lover and art object, and successfully hides from view the little that is known about the acquisition of this important work of sculpture.

The historical backdrop to stories like this consists of a careful soft-pedaling of the tensions between Africans and their colonizers from France. In her role as curator of a major exhibition at the MQB in 2011, Leloup offers a comparative gloss of the colonial past:

Each colonizing country had a different style. For example, the English ruled from a great distance and the Belgians viewed the Congo as the personal property of Leopold II. As for the French, they focused on assuring the peace and the future of their colonies, building roads, health services, and schools. That is, the French took an interest in the life of the populations. . . . Certain criticisms of the French presence are justified, but we need to be careful: The young people who can now speak French are very happy to be able to communicate in Bamako, and with their neighbors in Burkina or their employers in the Côte d’Ivoire.²⁸

Such a rosy depiction is an interesting twist on the realities of the African past. Given what we know about the pervasiveness of communication among African peoples prior to (and independent of) colonization, it’s clear that learning French from the occupying colonizers was hardly a necessity for keeping networks of inter-African relations alive and well.

Aesthetics and Ethnography

The relative importance given to aesthetic or art-critical versus historical or anthropological input can be said to constitute the most delicate, and most controversial, aspect of the museum's mandate, and most observers are in agreement that proponents of a primarily aesthetic (and ahistorical) presentation have won the day on the Quai Branly. Jacques Kerchache, the mastermind behind the galleries in the Louvre devoted to "arts premiers" died before the MQB opened, but echoes of his militant opposition to ethnographic contextualization are not hard to find in the museum. An explicit decision was taken to put as much distance as possible between the objects on display and information about the cultures from which they came (including the artists who made them) in order to favor an uncontaminated aesthetic experience: "We wanted to privilege a sense of mystery, to allow people to discover the work in itself . . . putting as much distance as possible between the object and the information relevant to the object," said Didier Brault, the project director.²⁹ Toward that end, a certain amount of the contextualization (masks being danced, etc.) is visually separated from the objects on display by leather-covered walls (conceptualized as a "serpent") that create a channel (conceptualized as a "river") winding through the center of the permanent exhibition space in which information is available on tiny video screens and texts in both printing and braille. Part of the idea is that aesthetic appreciation of the isolated object is somehow more enlightened and more respectful than appreciation based upon an understanding of the life of the object and the histories of the people who owned it, and that you can't privilege both at once. As the description of one MQB series ("Arts du Mythe") puts it, "Primitive objects, long disdained as curiosities, and later taken as simple ethnographic documents, are from now on recognized as veritable works of art."³⁰

None of this is to say that evocations of Africa and the rest of the non-Western world that supplied the collections are absent from the Quai Branly. On the contrary, they pervade the museum at every turn. Critics who argue that anthropological input has been taken less than seriously point not to the amount of contextualization, but rather to its nature. As we saw earlier, both the exterior and the interior of the museum were designed from the beginning to produce a sort of ethnographically suggestive landscape, an environment in which the products of all of these disparate indigenous cultures would seem to be comfortably at home. The question is not only what that landscape would look like but also whether it's reasonable to construct a single setting for cultures from Brazil to Burkina Faso, from Mali to Madagascar, from Senegal to Samoa. Is it appropriate (as the architect proposed) to set these cultures against the backdrop of a dimly lit, "haunted space," bordered by jungle foliage and "inhabited by the ancestral spirits of the men who, awakening to the human condition, invented gods and beliefs"? Is it a world in which people have generally agreed to embrace the form of the turtle as a symbol of their animistic and polytheistic cosmogonies? Is it a world that can most usefully be viewed through the eyes of an early twentieth-century art dealer in Paris, as in the quote from *Primitive Negro Sculpture*³¹ that was used to label two *nkisi* statues from the Congo?³² Where, critics ask, are the lived realities – as opposed to the familiar literary constructions and popular fantasies – of life in the African, Asian, Oceanic, and Native American cultures whose works are represented in the museum? Why do the computers on the mezzanine offer information on

totemism, animism, shamanism, and cannibalism, but not on colonialism, slavery, or tourism? Relegating these latter kinds of issues largely to temporary exhibitions, colloquia, or the *université populaire* in no way excuses their poor showing in the permanent galleries, which have been criticized for presenting an ahistorical “ethnographic present” more reflective of attitudes expressed by scholars of the early or mid-twentieth century than of positions held by anthropologists and art historians in the twenty-first.

Admissions and Other Practicalities

The priorities of a museum are not communicated solely through exhibitions, catalogues, videos, and the like. There are also hints lying quietly in such mundane practical matters as schedules and admission fees.

In 2009 France adopted a law that provided for free admission to museums for young people (ages 18–25, with children considered separately), and each museum changed its schedule of fees accordingly.³³ There was, nevertheless, some wiggle room in the exact implementation of the law. The newly established Cité de l’Histoire de l’Immigration³⁴ decided to offer 18–25-year-olds free admission to both permanent and temporary exhibits, whether or not they were from the European Union. The MQB interpreted the law somewhat less generously, specifying that free admission to its permanent exhibits would be granted only to young people from the European Union. And access to temporary exhibits was not part of the offer, despite a long list of other categories that benefitted from free admission such as students at the École du Louvre, Friends of the Museum, the unemployed, and wounded war veterans. What this means, for example, is that, according to official MQB policy, a student at the University of Bamako who’s visiting a cousin in Paris pays 8.50 euros to see the impressive “pre-Dogon” statue from her homeland, though a European of her age pays nothing.³⁵ And that the young Malian has free admission to temporary exhibits at the immigration museum, but not to the Quai Branly’s spectacular 2011 exhibition of Dogon statuary.

The original idea behind the creation of the MQB was to honor the “three quarters of humanity” (as Chirac put it) from beyond Europe – Africans, people from Oceania, and native Americans (later joined by Asians). An admissions policy that specifically limits their access to the collections, compared to that of Europeans, shows how much difficulty the museum has had in living up to that goal.

How Did All This Happen?

Museums are enormously large and complex institutions, of necessity depending on the professional experience of a vastly diverse personnel, from academics and museum curators to collectors, dealers, philanthropists, architects, landscapers, designers, photographers, archivists, librarians, conservators, public relations firms, journalists, politicians, filmmakers, publishers, editors, accountants, technicians, guards, docents, and more.³⁶ Distributing responsibilities – and, ultimately, decision-making power over the museum’s fundamental character – within such a mixed population is obviously a delicate and daunting task.

It could be argued that the realization of a truly state of the art ethnographic museum in the twenty-first century depends heavily on how much it calls on the expertise of people who are up to date on interdisciplinary scholarship focused on the cultures that form the core of the museum's mandate. To what extent do the MQB's chief decision makers follow (and take seriously) current debates about the mission and politics of museums? These are debates that have veered away from the dominant issues of the mid-twentieth century and introduced a cluster of new concerns. For example, rights of interpretation are coming under lively discussion, cultural authority is being renegotiated, the privileged status of long-established canons is being questioned, and ethically focused debates aimed at responsible deaccessioning and repatriation are beginning to contest traditional acquisition policies that were designed to maximize the preservation of data and the growth of scientific knowledge.³⁷

As I review the history of the MQB, it seems to me that this is one key to understanding the problems cited by people like Manceron, Polet, and Amselle that I quoted above. For the museum has, from the very beginning, given an unusual amount of authority to people with impeccable professional credentials in their own fields of expertise (who could deny that Jean Nouvel has earned his impressive collection of international prizes in architecture?), but demonstrated little direct involvement in the very fruitful interdisciplinary debates of the past several decades among anthropologists and art historians working with non-European cultures.³⁸ Senior administrators from the world of mainstream art museums, graduates of the prestigious École Nationale d'Administration (well known for the elitist gatekeeping of its entering students), prominent art collectors and gallery owners, and world-renowned architects are superbly qualified for many aspects of the complex series of tasks involved in the creation of an ambitious new museum.³⁹ But it would be hard to argue that their grasp of scholarship on non-Western arts and cultures reflects an up-to-date vision of Europe's "Others" in Africa or elsewhere. Or that, in any case, their first priority would be to communicate such a vision. For, in order for a museum to be truly founded on a vision of "cultural dialogue" informed by twenty-first-century knowledge, it would have to (for example) privilege attention to historical background, give serious treatment to colonial relations, and invite the decision-making participation of native voices. All this could risk compromising the vision of France as a benevolent force in Africa (as expressed by the gloss of French colonialism cited above), which may explain why it is sorely missing in the permanent galleries of the MQB.⁴⁰

The way in which power was apportioned within the MQB staff has been a veritable thorn in the side of anthropologically leaning members of the staff. As one high-level member of the original team noted (and others still there have confirmed to me),

the curators are appalling prisoners of the system, declaring to anyone who will listen that they can no longer express themselves about anything other than temporary exhibitions and that they no longer have any direct access to objects or museum storerooms.⁴¹

One member of the museum staff asserted that "the directors have become managers of an operation in which scholars and curators have no place, showing total disdain for literary, artistic, or scientific production." And another commentator alludes to "a wrestling match between architects and curators in which the latter rarely have the last word."⁴²

Jacques Chirac, passionate amateur of non-European cultures, provided the foundational idea for the MQB, and it was his political muscle, as president of France, that allowed its realization. The original goal – building appreciation for the arts and cultures of non-Western peoples – could hardly have been more admirable. Chirac's original pleas for honoring the “three quarters of humanity” that were all too often “disdained, unloved, or forgotten” carried little foretaste of the primitivizing vision that eventually came to dominate the project. On the contrary, he argued emphatically for a vision of the cultures in question that specifically recognized their individual historicities. Speaking on April 13, 2000 at the inauguration of galleries devoted to African, Asian, Oceanic, and Amerindian art in the Louvre, for example, he declared:

“*Arts premiers*,” “Primitive Art” – the terms are conventions, and therefore convenient . . . But in my view they have a double drawback. First, they define societies, not in terms of their intrinsic characteristics, but rather in terms of their specific contributions to the aesthetic history of the West. And secondly, which is even more serious, they claim to designate people without history. Now, there is no greater injustice in the world than to deny a people their right to history.

What an insightful starting point for the museum project that was just beginning to be put in place! It's almost as if Chirac had absorbed the underlying lesson of Eric Wolf's 1982 book, *Europe and the People without History*⁴³ or Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983). But somehow the idea of allowing that non-Europeans live in history, and that their pasts have been marked by interactions with colonizing powers, seems to have stalled at an early stage, and the conviction that Africans and others beyond the European orbit live outside of history continues to represent a viable (though of course not universally accepted) viewpoint in France, even at the highest level of national leadership. Chirac's successor in the presidential palace, speaking to a university audience in Dakar, Senegal, a year after the inauguration of the MQB offered a chilling confirmation:

The tragedy of Africa is that the African (*l'Homme africain*) has not sufficiently entered into History. The African peasant, who has for centuries been living according to the seasons and whose ideal in life is to remain in harmony with nature, knows only the eternal renewal of a temporal rhythm that depends on an endless repetition of the same acts and the same words. In such a vision where everything is always repeating, there is no place for the human adventure and no place for the idea of progress.⁴⁴

Primitivism of the early twenty-first century is not exactly the same beast as its nineteenth or early 20th-century-century ancestor, though the central idea has held firm. It still draws a spurious line between European-based societies and cultures (whether in Europe, Asia, the Americas, the Pacific, or even small enclaves of white settlement in Africa) and the societies and cultures of innumerable societies in Africa and elsewhere around the globe that have developed out of different traditions representing an immense range of different religions, kinship systems, political organizations, and material cultures. It then conceptually merges this latter set of unrelated cultures and societies into a single homogeneous whole and assigns them a set of common characteristics, imagining, for example, that they are all centered on animistic and

polytheistic cosmologies, that they are all “in harmony with nature,” or that they all live outside of history.⁴⁵

While the basic definition of primitivism still applies today, its specific contours have been subtly altered by a number of factors, including globalization and new directions in academic research. The growth of a critical literature that documents the imperialist agenda behind traditional practices for “collecting” objects of “primitive” art, for example, has meant that most interested observers are agreed on condemning the methods of domination and appropriation exercised by those who seized material objects by force or trickery in the colonial era and those who engage in similar tactics today. And the dominant feeling among scholars is that this history needs to be brought into the open rather than swept under the rug. Another factor is that conquests and colonial oppression have given way to subtler forms of political and cultural domination, such as Westerners defining themselves as the voice of authority, rather than sharing that role with the people whose ideas, practices, and material objects are in question. A rhetoric, and even a genuine feeling, of deep admiration coats this appropriation of authority with a veneer of benevolence and serves as apparent testimony to one’s tolerance, sophistication, and embrace of foreign peoples as equals. This then brings us directly to the claim that what’s happening at the MQB is “cultural dialogue.”

But even in this ostensibly “softer” form, with its careful effort to avoid a vocabulary of condescension (“savages,” “superstitions,” “primitive art,” etc.), primitivism is built on cultural arrogance, and, even in the absence of colonialism, it is informed by nationalistic agendas. De L’Estoile points out that the vision of art projected by the MQB owes its “magic” to its reconciliation of potentially conflicting values, a posture of generous recognition of the Other combined with a claim of universalism and national pride.⁴⁶ There, French explorers, navigators, military leaders, artists, writers, and scholars hold pride of place, and even the French who frequent the museum are given particularly high scores for their openness to other cultures. As Stéphane Martin put it in a monologue entitled “Curiosity about the Other,”

The public is more and more interested in everything that lies outside of their own culture and the traditions they were brought up with. I find that this interest is especially strong in France, and particularly in Paris. There are several reasons. First, I think that in fact we’re a country where cultural activity is clearly pleasurable. We’re one of those countries where you often see people going to a museum during their lunch hour. They don’t need to organize a family outing or a group visit to go to a museum.⁴⁷

It’s true that if you measure interest in other cultures by how often people spend their lunch hours in museums, France would certainly garner high scores . . .

Ultimately, the primitivist gaze leaves little room for according any kind of priority to non-Western individuals and the specific details of their ways of life – details that may matter a great deal to the people concerned, but that lose their relevance once they make their way to, for example, Paris. Why should a museum care whether an exhibited textile collected in an African-descended culture in South America was collected in Suriname or French Guiana, whether it was made by people known as Saramakas or Paramakas, or whether it was made to be viewed horizontally or vertically?⁴⁸ Why should curators care whether an object was made by a people in New Guinea who

speak Tifal or Telefol, whether Mr. Bedford's name is Paddy or Patty, whether the photo of a ceiling painting is attributed to Ningura Napurrula or Gulumbu Yunupingu, whether a textile was made to be worn as a loincloth or a shoulder cape, whether a statue represents a supernatural murder or a tender embrace, or, ultimately, whether the exegesis of an object's symbolism is based on researched fact or speculative guess-work?⁴⁹ In contrast, careful attention is paid to the depiction of the individuals who have provided sustenance to the museum as military commanders, explorers, or collector-donors; we would be surprised indeed if Charles Sandison were called Irish rather than Scottish or a typo in a donor's name slipped through the cracks.⁵⁰

Are these sorts of problems more severe in France than in (for example) the USA? French scholars who have their antennae out to the "anglo-saxon" world (as it's known in France) have assessed the situation in their country as "*en retard*." Maureen Murphy, for example, noting that Paris was both "the cradle of the avant-gardes" and "the birthplace of primitivism," has seconded others for whom France is "behind or deaf" to international debates impacting the museological treatment of ethnographic collections: "In anglo-saxon universities," she writes, "post-colonial reflection was already going strong by the 1970s. In France it wasn't until the 1990s that these questions were taken into account by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. In art history the field is virtually virginal."⁵¹ The timing of French entry into "postcolonial" debates was less than propitious for the MQB. During the years when the museum was taking shape and setting priorities, these debates had barely entered mainstream discussion in France, and hadn't really touched the art world in any significant way. That meant that the tug of war between art-oriented and anthropologically oriented players was being conducted in terms of a dated view of what a proper museum of African, American, and Oceanic art would look like. The choice almost seemed to be between an evolutionist science of the early twentieth century pasted over with an ahistorical Lévi-Straussian structuralism on the one hand, and an upstart "anglo-saxon" model, straitjacketed by the "hyperrelativism" of American political correctness on the other. Neither was very attractive for those in charge of building a monument to France's appreciation of the Other. To make matters worse, France's hierarchy of museums gives top billing to art museums; others simply don't have the same stature. The alternative, then, was to go with a presentation that highlighted the objects' aesthetic qualities and simultaneously comforted popular understandings of cultures in Africa and other regions of the world that are viewed as fundamentally different from those based on European traditions.

Critical assessment of the museum (my own book included, at least in its American edition) seems to be a relatively small concern among upper-level members of the team, since it has rarely addressed those aspects of the museum by which they gauge their institution's success: attendance figures, reviews in art magazines, the enthusiasm of visitors, the generosity of patrons, and the like. Measured by the criteria that matter most to its directorship, the Musée du Quai Branly is an unqualified success. And mainstream French media tend to follow suite. In 2010 the MQB was awarded first prize for French art museums (from the magazine *Artclair*) on the basis of 69 criteria, beating out both the Pompidou Center (second place) and the Louvre (third).⁵² Parisian magazines like *Connaissance des Arts*, *Télérama*, and *Beaux-Arts Magazine* have raved about the MQB at every opportunity. High marks are regularly handed out from inside the organizational structure of the museum. Stéphane Martin exudes pride in the MQB's accomplishments on radio and TV, on the MQB website, in his video

monologue, and in countless MQB publications. “With 1.5 million visitors in 2007, we have surpassed by far the most optimistic predictions,” he beamed, in a 2008 report. “This new museum has found its place among the great cultural institutions of our land.”⁵³

And indeed it has.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Chrisafis (2006).
- 2 Polet ().
- 3 Amselle (2010, 182, 184)
- 4 The positive (some would say self-congratulatory) assessments have the upper hand in terms of accessibility to the public: the museum shop is largely an outlet for MQB publications, lavishly displayed in large numbers, and the museum enjoys wide exposure via billboards, magazines, radio and television programs, and more. Critical assessments tend to be less easily stumbled upon in Paris. Partly because the MQB has copublishing arrangements with major French publishers (e.g., Gallimard, Flammarion, Actes Sud) and substantial financial support from the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN), texts that present the museum in a less than glorious light are largely relegated to scholarly journals and small-run publishers. See, for example, Bensa (2006, esp. chapter 5, “La fin des mondes ou le cénotaphe des cultures”) and Desvallées (2008).
- 5 Nouvel (2006).
- 6 Musée du Quai Branly (2006, 15).
- 7 Musée du Quai Branly (2006, 7).
- 8 Musée du Quai Branly (2006, 16).
- 9 Renzo Piano, a finalist in the MQB architectural competition, took a very different tack in his design for a cultural center in Noumea, New Caledonia, engaging the partnership of anthropologist Alban Bensa, a specialist on Kanak ethnography, which helped him avoid facile stereotypes of the “primitive world.” For reflections on the dilemmas they faced and the solutions they settled on, see “L’ethnologue et l’architecte” in Bensa (2006).
- 10 Kimmelman (2006).
- 11 Gibbons (2006).
- 12 Vogel (2007, 179).
- 13 I am grateful to Géraldine Le Roux for pointing out this omission (Le Roux 2010, 322).
- 14 E-mail of May 28, 2012 from Bedford’s coexecutor, Peter Seidel.
- 15 Germain Viatte (2006, 61).
- 16 Searching on the museum website for the names of the eight artists brings up no results other than mention of them in four photo credits. Another site I once found – also in a rubric designed for donors – offers useful information on each of them and is still available if you know the url (Australian Indigenous Art Commission, n.d.), but it’s not clear how anyone would find it, since searching on the museum website (under “Australians, Aborigines, Australian Aboriginal Art, Australian Indigenous Art Commission, etc.) does not bring it up.
- 17 For a sample, see Price (2011, 281).

- 18 For example, the contrasting black and white shapes of Lena Nyadbi's artwork were realized in subtle grays, apparently in order to make them "more harmonious" with the Haussmanian buildings across the street (Morvan 2010, 126; see also Price 2007, 138–139). Or, again, Paddy Bedford's painting *Thoowoonqgoonarrin* 2006 was cropped down to a single one of its several elements, patched together with a completely different painting, and installed backwards (left-to-right) in a service corridor that is off limits to the public and cannot be seen from either inside or outside the museum. For a photo of both the original painting and the MQB installation, see Price (2012).
- 19 Philippe Peltier, "Aboriginal Ceiling Paintings: Presentation." Statement posted on the MQB website and accessed in December 2002, no longer available.
- 20 See Australian Indigenous Art Commission (n.d.).
- 21 Godelier (2002).
- 22 Leiris (1934), entries for 6–7 September 1931.
- 23 Leiris (1969, 86). For more on Leiris's post-expedition position on relations between colonizers and colonized, see Leiris (1969) and Price (2004). During a 2010 visit to the museum, I noticed that all reference to Leiris's diary had been removed.
- 24 Tales of the way objects at the MQB were collected offer examples: On the Moai head from Easter Island taken by traveler and writer Pierre Loti: "these monumental statues inspired nothing more than a confused feeling of fear in the population of Easter Island. [They] had already lost their sacred meaning for the inhabitants." Or the totem pole from British Columbia brought to France by artist Kurt Seligman: "The pole he's chosen is particularly impressive . . . but it is in danger of collapsing, being eaten away by mold and insects" (Augustin Viatte 2006).
- 25 Le Fur was speaking in a special program devoted to the tenth anniversary celebration of the Pavillon des Sessions wing of the Louvre (galleries devoted to art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Native America), in a France-Inter radio series called "Bibliothèque Médicis" hosted by Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, April 16, 2010.
- 26 Richardin et al. (2006); De Roux (2004).
- 27 Augustin Viatte (2006).
- 28 Leloup (2011, 65).
- 29 Moniteur and Musée du Quai Branly (2005, 7)
- 30 Formerly on the MQB website (accessed September 14, 2010), but no longer available.
- 31 Guillaume and Munro (1926).
- 32 The museum also provides photographs and descriptions in its online catalogue, sticking very close to purely physical details. The entry for the "*nkisi nkondi*" no. 73.1963.0.175, for example, specifies dimensions and materials, and goes into great detail about the statue's appearance (most of which one could have read directly from the photograph): "Standing figure with hands on hips and the feet spread on two pedestals. The head leans slightly back, the chin lifted . . . The nose has flat nostrils. The mouth is open, showing the teeth . . . It wears a bonnet. The shoulders are wide . . . The hands are small. The torso is large," etc. There is not a word, however, that touches on the object's role in the society from which it was taken.
- 33 In April 2009, France offered free admission to all of its museums for European citizens under the age of 26. On July 31 it was officially extended to include young people with long-term visas.
- 34 Housed in the Porte Dorée palace, originally built for the 1931 colonial exposition. It first served as a colonial museum, then as a museum of Overseas France, and was

- later turned into a museum of African and Oceanic art. In 2003 its collections (some 25,000 objects) were taken over by the MQB.
- 35 Note that in 2012 the per capita GDP (gross domestic product) in Mali was \$1,100 compared to \$35,500 in France and that Mali is ranked 214th out of the 229 countries in the world on this index (CIA 2013).
- 36 The security team is rarely mentioned except when there's a problem (such as the disappearance of artifacts from the MQB's ultra-high security storage area in the summer of 2010). My conversations with African American guards at Baltimore's Walter's Gallery in 1982, when the traveling exhibit *Afro-American Arts from the Suriname Rain Forest* joined the museum's usual fare of illuminated manuscripts and medieval armor, suggest that these employees are not simply wooden sentinels; their understandings and feelings about the treasures they watch over might someday make an interesting study.
- 37 For a fuller discussion of these changes, see the afterword in Price (2001).
- 38 The architect participated actively in the selection of objects for display and decisions about how they should be presented. Art dealers, too, "played a decisive role in acquisitions," in disregard of the normal policy of public museums requiring a "rigorous separation" between art dealers and acquisitions committees (De L'Estoile 2007, 293, 280).
- 39 This list could also include an administrative director who was put in charge of MQB operations for three years on the basis of her past service and loyalty to Jacques Chirac during his time as Mayor of Paris (Price 2007, 56–57).
- 40 Part of the problem at the MQB (and in France more generally) is the tendency to read or cite only French sources, which have lagged behind those of other countries in this regard. When Germain Viatte, for example, asserts that "anthropologists and even archaeologists have long been uninterested in . . . the acquisition and origin of objects, the people who collect and their procedures," and that only a handful of scholars have been paying attention to these matters in recent decades, the names he cites are all people who write in French (2006, 17), even though scholars elsewhere have been largely leading the way. (One could cite Janet Berlo, James Clifford, Christian Feest, Donna Haraway, Ira Jacknis, Aldona Jonaitis, Shepard Krech, John Mack, Enid Schildkrout, George Stocking, and Nicholas Thomas, among many others.)
- 41 Féau (2007).
- 42 Desvallées (2008, 128).
- 43 Actually, an unlikely scenario, given that no French publisher has translated Wolf's book.
- 44 President Nicolas Sarkozy, July 26, 2007. Not surprisingly, there was an immediate outcry. For a sampling, see Ligue des Droits de l'Homme-Toulon (2009), which points out, among other things, that Sarkozy addressed the "Université de Dakar" rather than pronouncing the university's full name, "Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar," yet another example of the tendency to erase individual Africans, Oceanians, and Native Americans.
- 45 André Malraux, a voice of great authority in France, asserted that the common property of "the savage arts" was that they exist outside of history, beyond chronological time" (1976, 262). As de L'Estoile comments on Malraux's position: "History is abolished" (2007, 270).
- 46 De L'Estoile (2007, 286).
- 47 Augustin Viatte (2006).

- 48 For specifics, see Price (2007, 122, 147), where several errors in the African American section of the museum are described.
- 49 Examples are taken from Price and Price (2010) and Price (2007).
- 50 It's worth noting that the tendency to treat "the Other" with less care than Europeans or Euro-Americans is found in many contexts besides museums, and that it can run on pure racism as much as on primitivism. In 1897, when African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner was awarded a major international prize, "a Baltimore newspaper passed off a photo of a black dockworker as one of him; not having a picture of Tanner, its editors decided any black face would do" (Bearden and Henderson 1993, 93). And, lest one imagine that this kind of slight is no longer practiced in the West, more recently, on September 19, 2010, *Le Parisien* (one of the most widely read newspapers in France) illustrated its obituary of Guadeloupean singer Patrick Saint-Eloi with a photo of Martiniquan singer Jean-Philippe Marthély.
- 51 Murphy (2009, 289, 15).
- 52 "Au hit parade des musées" (2010).
- 53 Musée de Quai Branly (2007).

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Part IX



Local Expression and Global Modernity

African Art of the Twenty-First Century

Zwelethu Mthethwa's "Postdocumentary" Portraiture Views from South Africa and Abroad

Pamela Allara

Over the past decade or so, the audience and the market for documentary-style art photography from South Africa appear to have grown exponentially. Older, predominantly white photojournalists, known for exposing the violent oppression of the apartheid regime,¹ including Guy Tillim, Paul Weinberg, Pieter Hugo, and David Goldblatt, enjoy international reputations and regular inclusion in international art exhibitions. More recently, as anachronistic tribal or racial categories have begun to yield to more complex or fluid concepts of identity, younger, primarily Black South African art photographers, who after 1994 had greater access to tertiary education, have expanded the range and content of documentary-style, or postdocumentary, photography. Artists such as Zanele Muholi and Nontsikelelo Veleko reference the traditions of street photography and performance art in their portrait photography in order to map this postapartheid cultural territory. Bridging both the older generation of photojournalists and the younger performance generation is the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa (b. 1960, Durban, KwaZulu Natal province). Known primarily for his formal portraits of people in informal settlements (the "Interiors" series, 1995–2005), Mthethwa over the course of his outstanding career has consistently photographed some of the most marginalized members of our global economy, including sugar cane cutters, gold miners, coal miners, and brick workers. Posed in their fragile domiciles or pausing in the midst of their labors, the subjects counter the viewers' scrutinizing stares with an emotionless gaze that reveals nothing of their feelings at that time. These large-scale, color-drenched images draw us into the sitters' home or work spaces, while the consistent use of the title "untitled" signals that the photographs adhere to the twentieth century modernist convention of an artwork conveying its meaning purely visually, and prevents the viewer from prying into their personal histories as well. For example, in *Untitled* (1997) (Figure 24.1), a woman is poised calmly on the edge of her tiny bed, her



FIGURE 24.1 Zwelethu Mthethwa. *Untitled*, from the “Interiors” series, 1997. Chromogenic print, size variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

chartreuse shirt perfectly matching the battered linoleum flooring. At her feet is a small white dog, her well-cared for companion and immediate conduit for our empathy. The charm, peace, and harmony of the composition mute the visual evidence of the disadvantaged circumstances in which she lives.

The question I want to explore in this chapter is how differing contexts, including documentary-style photography, Township Art, or international contemporary art, might matter when viewing these works of art, and what viewers locally and internationally can infer from these untitled, unnamed, unlocatable representations of individual human beings. As tired as the debate about the status of documentary-style photography as art may appear to be, it is worth reopening it in order to illuminate the critical debates surrounding the artist’s work. Is some lingering residue of the engaged artistic practice of the 1980s – a burden of commitment² – somehow expected of South African artists who currently exhibit internationally? And is this also something the South African critics and viewers expect from their artists? Addressing this topic requires some backtracking in order to place Mthethwa’s work in the broad history of documentary-style photography generally, as well as in the context of the specific history of South African art. As will become apparent, Mthethwa’s art has had quite different receptions in the West and in South Africa, and reviewing these critical writings provides a means of recognizing that the interpretation and evaluation of works of art changes according to time and place. Conflicting interpretations can challenge viewers to recognize and perhaps modify their own preconceptions.

Mthethwa in the Context of Documentary-Style Photography and Afrapix

From its inception, Mthethwa's career path has broken ground. During the height of the apartheid era in the early 1980s, he was able to enter and complete a BFA degree at the "whites only" Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, gaining a ministerial consent by arguing that degrees in photography were unavailable in colleges for Blacks at that time.³ In 1984, he was awarded a Fulbright Grant, and completed his master of fine arts degree in image making from the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York, where he studied the history and aesthetics of photography. When he returned to South Africa in 1989, he supported himself by teaching photography and drawing at Michaelis. As he told South African art historian Rory Bester, he worked primarily in pastel for the next seven years:

I found it difficult to take photographs. I didn't want to be a photojournalist. I wanted to be a fine arts photographer, but I wasn't making enough money to keep my photography alive . . . It wasn't until I started selling my drawings that I had money to invest in photography. In 1996, I started taking photographs again.⁴

The following year, in 1997, the prolific Nigerian-born curator and scholar Okwui Enwezor included Mthethwa's photographic portraits made in the interiors of informal dwellings in the townships of Crossroads and Paarl in the short-lived "2nd Johannesburg Biennale." Two years later, in 1999, the portraits, now enlarged to life size, were shown in the *Liberated Voices* exhibition at the Museum for African Art in New York City, curated by Frank Herreman. Shortly thereafter, Mthethwa was taken on by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, and from 2000 on his international reputation was secured. The timing was propitious. After the fall of the National Party's apartheid regime and the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa had attracted Western curators eager to find talent that had been barred from exhibition because of the West's cultural embargo of the 1980s. Mthethwa's breathtaking images were immediately appreciated, and between 1999 and 2009, Mthethwa was given 18 one-person exhibitions in Europe and the USA, and four in South Africa.

For the *Liberated Voices* exhibition's American viewers, the "Interiors" series immediately recalled Walker Evans's Farm Security Administration and *Fortune* magazine images of interiors of sharecroppers' and miners' homes, photographs from the height of the era's socially concerned documentary photography that remain the iconic images of America's Great Depression of the 1930s. For example, in Evans's familiar *Coal Miner's House, West Virginia* (1935), the collage-like, flattened space juxtaposes image with reality; in the series generally, the glossy advertising images used to cover the thin wooden shack walls vie jarringly with the bare arrangement of modest possessions, sharpening one's initial confrontation with the poverty of the shack's occupant. This juxtaposition of dissonant elements within a tightly composed space forms one significant art historical precedent for Mthethwa's "Interiors," one with which he was familiar from his studies at RIT. It is also a reminder for American viewers of early debates over documentary photographers' conflicted relationships with their sitters, a history that would color future interpretations of Mthethwa's work by American critics.

While such debates may help shed light on some of the challenges facing their artist-descendants today, they have been considered less relevant by South African art historians. As a US-born and based art historian, I am aware of the pitfalls of basing my interpretations of South African artwork on an American cultural framework, and of the need for Western critics to school themselves in the culture of the artists they are writing about. Even then, differing contexts will elicit varying responses, in spite of the fact that, in this instance, the influence of a Eurocentric perspective on South African art, art history, and criticism has been exceptionally strong.

In the USA, the discomfort with documentary photography's objectification of the poor who were the subjects of the photographs began as early as the Great Depression. For example, in 1938, the poet William Carlos Williams defended Walker Evans's work against such charges by arguing that the photographer

has shown that the "underprivileged" have a beauty in their lives and, on this count at least may be spared anyone's tears. Evans has returned to them a dignity that welfare workers . . . and liberals of all stripes have too often taken away in hope of promoting their social betterment. He makes his audience respect, not pity, them.⁵

Initially, the poet's commentary would seem equally applicable to Mthethwa's works. In fact, the very term that Williams used to describe Evans' subjects, – a "dignity," is the word Mthethwa has used in every interview he has given, beginning with his conversation with Bongiwe Dhlomo in 1999 and continuing with the recent monograph, *Zwelethu Mthethwa* (Brielmaier 2010):

As a photographer, I have seen most of the photographs that come out of South Africa, whether from photojournalists or from artists. I have found that the common objective is to sensationalize . . . I do not believe that poverty is equal to degradation. For me, color restores people's dignity . . . I think these photographs preserve and show a humanness of the occupants in their private spaces . . . I have been able to restore some of their dignity by acknowledging the spaces in which they live as homes worth recording.⁶

With this statement, with its echoes of the humanism voiced by Williams, Mthethwa staked out what Enwezor would define as a "postdocumentary" approach to contemporary art photography, positioning himself in the process at a distance from the prominent South African documentary photographers of the struggle years, 1950s–1980s.

However, according to recent arguments by South African historians, those very photographers had always engaged with both politically based photojournalism and more personal, documentary-style photography. For example, Annabelle Wienand has argued that the work of the above-mentioned photojournalists was "never tied to exclusively political ends."⁷ Furthermore, South African photographer Paul Weinberg agrees that the distinction between struggle photography of the apartheid years and art photography after the release of Nelson Mandela is a false one imposed by Western critics.⁸ Nonetheless, jurist Albie Sachs's passionate exhortation in 1990 to move beyond the Resistance Art of the 1980s – "What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms . . . ?" – was unquestionably influential at the time.⁹ Certainly Mthethwa must have observed an artistic shift occurring during the

transition to democracy in the early 1990s, and understood that his own art should be clear of any charges of exploiting or objectifying his sitters for political ends.

American critics for the most part have seemed unaware of the complexities of South African documentary-style tradition. Writing for the catalogue of the ambitious exhibition, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001),¹⁰ organized by Okwui Enwezor, American critic Lauri Firstenberg was sharply critical of Mthethwa's work. Her points were consonant with the American critique of the documentary tradition at that time, and important to the understanding of what Enwezor would later define as the "postdocumentary" impulse in Mthethwa's work. Her first point of contention concerns Mthethwa's close ties to the very tradition of photojournalism he was attempting to leave behind. She noted that despite the masking of "details of decay," "Mthethwa's images are dangerously similar to, and could be mistaken for, a variety of 1980s South African photojournalism, which took an activist position at the time . . ."¹¹ Firstenberg then continues to her second point: "In their high gloss, massive format, and lamination, Mthethwa's color photographs have now taken new form for the purposes of the international market, collapsing back into spectacle."¹² A decade later, in 2009, these points would be challenged by two scholars of South African photography: John Peffer (USA) and Michael Godby (South Africa).

In his chapter "Shadows" in *Art and the End of Apartheid*,¹³ John Peffer has placed the first of Firstenberg's points in context by locating Mthethwa's work in the tradition of South African Afrapix photographers, Paul Weinberg, Chris Ledochowski, Paul Alberts, and others, who courageously documented the Resistance movement and its often violent repression by the military. Peffer argues that from the 1960s through the 1980s, the South African photojournalists of the Afrapix group not only supplied images of the struggle against apartheid to radical magazines, but also "engaged in social documentary photography in the tradition of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other Depression-era American photographers . . ."¹⁴ The South African photographers were well aware of this precedent, and Mthethwa, as was noted earlier, has acknowledged the importance for his artistic development of his study of the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American photography at RIT.

At the same time, South African art historian Michael Godby, in "Color in the Representation of the South African Townships" (2009),¹⁵ echoed Peffer's argument. He acknowledges the blurring of the art documentary categories in the 1990s by pointing out the parallels between Mthethwa's "Interiors" series and Afrapix photographer Chris Ledochowski's book *Cape Flats Details: Life and Culture in the Townships of Cape Town* (2003). Like Mthethwa, Ledochowski used color to, in his words, "give the portraits a greater dignity. They became portraits 'for people' – in sharp contrast to the more detached black-and-white photographs 'of people' taken in the documentary mode."¹⁶ Godby then explicitly counters Firstenberg's points (as well as similar arguments by other critics) by clarifying Mthethwa's intentions. Godby writes of:

the artist's acknowledgment of the spiritual dimension within people, as the major part of his project to restore a full sense of humanity to his township subjects. Finally, in light of the ambition of this project, it is simply not possible either that the artist should want metaphorically to liberate his subjects from oppression – both the actual oppression of poverty and the oppression of invariably being represented as victims in the media – only to create a new prison for them in the form of the "commodified

body" or "the processes of globalization" or, even, enslavement to their consumerist fantasies. The point is important because not only do these materialist readings tend to deny the spiritual dimension of Mthethwa's work but also, in doing so, they tend to claim it exclusively for a sophisticated critical audience when the artist very obviously wants it to be accepted and understood by the subjects themselves, in the first instance.¹⁷

Having countered Firstenberg's objections, Godby concludes that "these postmodern readings are blind to Mthethwa's specifically African agenda."¹⁸

Neither Peffer nor Godby then found this relationship between documentary photography and a humanistic outlook problematic, much less in danger of objectifying the sitters; rather, because both scholars were well aware that these photographers could not be narrowly confined to the category of activist struggle photographers, they were interested in discussing the cultural context from which Mthethwa's work emerged, his South African "roots," so to speak.

Whereas in the USA, the distinctions between "art" and "documentary" photography had been bridged by "street photographers" such as Robert Frank in the 1950s, South African resistance politics in the 1980s had kept those artificial distinctions largely intact in the mind of the general public until after 1990. Two anthologies of the work of the Afrapix collective, *Beyond the Barricades* (1989) and *The Cordonaded Heart* (1986), present the two sides of Afrapix photographers' work: on the one hand, the activism characteristic of their efforts as antiapartheid "struggle photographers," and, on the other, their socially concerned documentary. As opposed to the more politically strident works assembled for *Beyond the Barricades*, the images in *The Cordonaded Heart* include sensitive portraits of women in shack interiors (Paul Alberts, *Woman in Her Single Room Mud House, Die Stadt District*, 1984), or sugar cane cutters (Paul Weinberg, *Contract Labourer, Sugar Cane Farm, Zululand*, 1983), that are similar in both subject matter and composition to Mthethwa's work of a decade later. The difference lies primarily in the context in which they were published: the *Cordonaded Heart* photographs were commissioned as part of a study of poverty by the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa.¹⁹ As in Mthethwa's work, the sitters are hardly sensationalized or deprived of dignity; however, the purpose of the photographs was explicitly to form a record, and the use of black and white does lend a necessary veneer of objectivity to images commissioned to serve a specific social cause.

In contrast, Mthethwa's work was made as part of his own, self-sponsored artistic project, and it has been reproduced exclusively in exhibition catalogues and art journals. As he has commented, "Color was chosen over B + W because of it's [sic] contemporary quality. Large scale replaced 8x10 prints. The photos were created for the gallery wall . . ." And he added:

At RIT we visited Aperture. This left an indelible mark in understanding international publishing of Photo books. Also international stars like Barbara Kruger and Peter Joel Wilkin visited our Photo program and gave us as senior students critiques. The influence from studying The History of Photography, Photo Theory and the fact that my class mates came from various countries around the world and had studied diverging degrees before coming to my alma mater has played a role in my art/photo career.²⁰

His graduate studies thus strongly influenced his decision to address his work to an international audience as well as to a South African one more familiar with the tradition from which he was drawing.

Mthethwa's Pastel Paintings in the Context of Township Art

Of course, another reason for the turn to color is that Mthethwa is quite simply an outstanding colorist and is able to use color with great sophistication in order to evoke an emotional response in the viewer. As one would expect, the innovative color harmonies in his photographs are evident in his pastels as well. Given the fact that he has continued to create work in both media, frequently using the same subject matter, one would expect that both the pastels and the photographs would have received equal recognition. However, that is not the case. On the contrary, galleries and publications both in the West and in South Africa have given the pastels short shrift. Whereas his photographs have been linked to both the US and South African documentary traditions, Mthethwa's pastels have been tacitly understood as deriving from the South African tradition of supposedly sentimentalized paintings of township life. Over the past 20 years, the negative criticism of much of Township Art has in all likelihood affected the reception of Mthethwa's pastels and oils. This is initially puzzling, as both Township Art and photojournalistic photography recorded the life in the townships.

It is unclear how familiar Mthethwa was with the tradition of Township Art when he returned to South Africa and settled in Cape Town in 1989. Both the art and the term itself have been roundly criticized, and recently South African art historian Anita Nettleton has suggested that the term be discarded.²¹ However maligned for being repetitious and sentimental, Township Art nonetheless includes in its history some of the most important South African artists, from Gerard Sekoto to Durant Sihlali and Louis Maqhubela and remains a strong presence in South African contemporary art today. The major criticism of the movement is that the growing art market for work by Black artists in the 1970s led to a decline in quality through overproduction. In "Black Artists, White Patrons: The Cross-Cultural Art Market in Urban South Africa," an important essay published the year after Mthethwa's return, South African art historian Elizabeth Rankin made the strongest case for this view. Arguing that, despite the outstanding work of Sekoto, John Koenakeefe Mohl, and others, Township Art could generate "a rather superficial sense of self-pity" that

may have been encouraged by the market, because initially 'township' art appealed to the liberal, English-speaking sector, which apparently experienced a sort of philanthropic gratification in supporting a form of art that emphasized the gap between its own privileged life style and the deprivation of black urban areas.²²

Indeed, the artists themselves spoke of "Township Art" in derogatory terms as early as 1980. In his important exhibition catalogue, *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art* (1988), Steven Sack quotes a Staffrider interview with Fikile Magadlolola on the need to "wash away this whole shit of self-pity."²³

Even if it is occasionally characterized by sentimentality or self-pity, erasing "Township Art" as a movement risks the danger of obscuring the locus of significant

artistic activity. Admittedly Fikile was not the only Black, township-based artist to distance himself from the movement. Black Consciousness artists such as Thami Mnyle and expatriates such as Louis Maqhubela would choose to distance themselves from what they considered to be a declining tradition once their own art moved in a different direction. However, their later developments do not negate the contributions of a movement that was “bold and original” and often political.²⁴ In her recent article, “A Vigil of Departure: Louis Khehla Maqhubela – His life and Work,” Marilyn Martin cites a 3 February 2010 email from the artist stating that “It was not possible for any creative black person living in the South Africa of my youth to be “apolitical.””

In the light of that statement, perhaps one could consider the distinction between the Township Art movement and Resistance Art of the 1980s, when artists such as Thami Mnyle and the Afrapix photographers considered themselves “cultural workers” dedicated to exposing the oppression of the apartheid regime, to be less rigid. After all, the founding statement of the Resistance Art movement, the pamphlet, “To All Organizations and Cultural Workers,” published during the 1986 Cape Town Arts Festival, argued that art has an important role in transcending apartheid “not only in pictures of defiance, the clenched fist and mass rally, but in a committed art which affirms human dignity, compassion and intelligence in an overall programme which is aimed at majority rule.”²⁵ The statement, so similar to the words Mthethwa uses to describe his own work, helps situate the artist’s work, not only in the history of documentary photography, but in the South African traditions of both Township Art and Resistance Art.

Despite the fact that the reputation of Township Art was in decline by the time Mthethwa was studying art in the early 1980s, a new generation of Black artists, living in urban areas, were traveling into the townships or informal settlements to find the subject matter for their art, as were many of Mthethwa’s fellow Michaelis students. Just as Mthethwa’s drawings and pastels from the early 1990s built on the tradition of Township Artists, so did the work of Willie Bester, Peter Clarke, Pat Mautloa, and Sam Nhlengethwa during the same years.²⁶ My own view is thus quite different from South African art historians quoted above who are critical of the Township Art movement, as I believe that the tradition of basing one’s art on the experience of the impoverished majority remained strong, even as some of the older artists had begun to produce some sentimentalized and clichéd images. And it continues today. Community printmaking studios in South Africa, which frequently draw much of their talent from impoverished townships, often encourage their students to base their work on their own experiences. The work of important artists such the late Gabisile Nkosi, trained at the Caversham Press in KwaZulu Natal, or Phillemon Hlungwani, trained at the Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg, exemplifies the ongoing vitality of Township Art.

Arguably, Mthethwa and his friend and colleague Sam Nhlengethwa can be credited with continuing and enlivening this tradition, and providing an inspiration for a generation of artists emerging from community art centers. For example, both Mthethwa’s “Empty Beds” series of photographs (2002) and Nhlengethwa’s “Miners” series of paintings (1990s), which depict vividly colored shack interiors with jackets hanging from pegs, suggest a range of experiences of their absent occupants, from migration, to the hazards of dangerous physical labor, to the possibility of illness and death as a result of HIV/AIDS.²⁷ Indeed, Mthethwa has stated that ambitious pastel,



FIGURE 24.2 Zwelethu Mthethwa. *The Spirit of the Father*, 1994–1995. Pastel on paper. Collection of Iziko Museums, Cape Town, courtesy of Iziko Museums and the artist.

Spirit of the Father (1994–1995) (Figure 24.2) “was drawn directly from the political violence that took place between the ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party in the South of Durban” during the unstable period before the first democratic elections in 1994.²⁸ To the right of this composition, a man’s suit is spread on a mat on the floor, while pressed up against the front plane and cut off by the left edge of the paper are a despairing mother and her sleeping child. The scene is representative of the widespread suffering of South Africans, whether due to political infighting or the HIV/AIDS pandemic. But despite the considerable power of works such as this, their reception has remained muted both in South Africa and in the West. In his essay for the recent monograph on Mthethwa, “Photography after the End of Documentary Realism: Zwelethu Mthethwa’s Color Photographs,” Okwui Enwezor, who has championed Mthethwa’s photographic works from the beginning of his career, dismisses the pastels as follows: “These paintings, and the scenes portrayed in them, employed a kind of picturesque sweetness common to postcards of exoticized places.”²⁹ The curator and scholar does acknowledge their appeal, but echoing the previous critiques of earlier Township Art, he argues:

Their vivid, rich colors evoked the influence of South Africa’s great modernist painter, Gerard Sekoto. But unlike Sekoto, whose paintings were unambiguously political, Mthethwa’s evinced a colorful, figurative style that was politically ambiguous and hewed toward a romantic depiction of black social existence. The subject matter of these pastel paintings offered the viewer an air of soft, proletarian humanism.³⁰

I would argue that Sekoto’s paintings are no more “unambiguously political” than Mthethwa’s pastels are “softly humanist.” Given Mthethwa’s own statement, one might argue that the pastels may be more political than the photographs, where Mthethwa has deliberately distanced himself from any overt political commentary.

Isn't that "softly humanist" approach, one that recognizes the value of every human being, precisely that which contributes to the dignity of his sitters in the photographs? If Mthethwa's humanism, that is, his genuine empathy for his sitters, can be praised when discussing his photographs, it is difficult to imagine why it should be considered negative when discussing his pastel paintings.

American critic Lauri Firstenberg's criticism – that the large scale of Mthethwa's photographs served the international art market – is pertinent here. In 2011, South African curator Emma Bedford bemoaned the fact that South African photography is leaving the country, as it is purchased primarily by foreign buyers.³¹ One can assume that the European or American clientele for Mthethwa's photographs may very well be ignorant of South African history. For these collectors, the photographs would speak generally to the global rich-poor divide that requires no further specific context to be understood, at least in very broad terms. Of course, the museum-going public is rarely informed about who has collected the work, or what their interests are. For this reason, a footnote in Enwezor's essay is revealing: there, he states that as opposed to Mthethwa's photographs, the pastels are mostly shown locally in South Africa, "raising the issue of whether [this body of work] is produced specifically for local audiences, particularly for the consumption of an emerging black elite who perhaps are not yet comfortable with the tougher subject matter of the photographs."³² If not "tougher" in subject matter, the large-scale photographs are more familiar in format and style to patrons of international contemporary art, as the markets for the different media in which Mthethwa works indicates.³³ As the global art market boomed in the 1990s, spurred on by the endless stream of biennials, "postdocumentary" art photography grew proportionately in size, matching the scale of painting and installation art.

Moreover, there is little question that the price of a photograph in the current market is related to its size. For example, Artnet auction records reveal that a print from Mthethwa's "Sugar Cane" series (2003), 124 × 164 cm, sold at auction in May, 2011 for over \$12,000, whereas an untitled work from the "Interiors" series (1996), measuring only 11.5 × 15 cm, went for \$908 in April, 2008. A relatively rare painting in oil, *Before the Football Match* (2007), estimated by Bonham's in 2009 at \$4,000–6,000 did not sell, a telling indication that Mthethwa's international reputation now rests primarily on his identity as a photographer. Just as Township Artists may have been pressured to produce art for white South African patrons in the 1970s, so one can argue that today artists are pressured by powerful market forces to produce work that an international audience can comprehend.³⁴ To his credit, Mthethwa continues to work in pastel and oil despite these pressures, which have long since extended into South Africa. By 2005, as South African art historian Rory Bester has observed, "Money and media [were] fast becoming the subterranean foundations of contemporary South African art's particular place in the public imagination."³⁵

Mthethwa's "Postdocumentary" Photography in a Transcultural World

Because Mthethwa is known primarily for his postdocumentary photography, it is important to return to its content and to expand on the meaning of his sitters' "dignity." When the artist returned to South Africa, hope for the end of National Party rule and the dawn of a true democracy was on the horizon, and so it was only

logical that he should want to put what he saw as the “afro-pessimism” of the anti-apartheid photojournalists behind him. As has been discussed, Mthethwa has consistently argued that black and white photojournalism turned all of its Black subjects into victims, objects in a news story about oppression (in other words, more “self-pity art”), whereas color provided immediacy and presence, providing the space to present “our own kind of history, to let people see their history.”³⁶

In referencing “our own kind of history,” Mthethwa is alluding to a key theme in postapartheid politics. In 1991, South African art historian Colin Richards summarized the issue succinctly: “Colonialism took and kept black people out of history,” and he then quoted poet and critic Mongane Wally Serote’s clarion call from 1988: “We have [as a people] been denied our right to make culture and history as free people. Yet, as we struggle against oppression . . . so we enter history, and as human beings we redefine and create culture.”³⁷ Expanding on these statements in his essay “City and Citizenship,” Rory Bester has argued further that

With over a million black people forcibly removed from the urban areas by the early 1970s, the apartheid system played an important role in turning a large part of South Africa’s work force into one made up primarily of migrant labor. The removal of black South Africans to townships and homelands reflected the apartheid state’s obsession with whiteness within urban space . . .³⁸

Layering the above arguments in his essay for the Aperture monograph, *Zwelethu Mthethwa*, Enwezor quotes Bester’s conclusion: “for black South Africans, the apartheid city, with all its physical allusions to modernity, embodied the denial of any claim to citizenship.”³⁹ While acknowledging that the citizenship status of Mthethwa’s subjects is very much in question, Enwezor’s concluding paragraph contradicts the very line of argument he has followed, in effect extending the artist’s claim that the color itself is liberating to the granting of citizenship status:

His quest to photograph his subjects in color relates at a profound level to the dignity he spoke about: namely, the recognition of the human capacities of his subjects. One such capacity is the right to citizenship, even if it may be in an informal settlement, which is no less a city than any other city in South Africa.⁴⁰

I would argue that Enwezor is claiming too much here for color’s “emancipatory” capabilities. Nor would I agree that citizenship is a capacity; rather, it is a legal right. However, the two are not entirely unconnected. In his 2010 Nelson Mandela lecture in Johannesburg, author Ariel Dorfman acknowledged the notational relationship between dignity (a human quality), and citizenship (a political status), while providing a nuanced definition of the former:

A nation that does not take into account the multitude of suppressed memories of the majority of its people will always be weak, basing its survival on the exclusion of dissent and otherness. Those whose lives are not valued, not given narrative dignity, cannot really be part of the solution of the abiding problems of our times.⁴¹

In order to assess whether or not Mthethwa’s marginalized subjects have a “narrative dignity” that honors “their own kind of histories,” we will have to place the work

in the context of contemporary art rather than the history of documentary-style photography or Township Art. Mthethwa's sitters do become subjects in that because they are life sized, they appear to confront the viewer directly. Museum-goers are thus asked to confront on a general level their own attitudes and preconceptions about people living in poverty. If the very real beauty of Mthethwa's monumental photographs undercuts the supposed sensationalism of print photojournalism, the question is whether it matters that the seductive color mutes the deprivations of the sitters. At the beginning of this essay, I argued that color serves to quiet the evidence of extreme poverty in order for the viewer and represented subject to "meet" on a one-on-one basis. I would therefore disagree with another American art historian, Cassie Wu, who has charged recently that Mthethwa's photographs create "an aesthetically palatable social reality ready for consumer consumption."⁴² Her recent argument thus falls in line with the discussion of the photographs by critics influenced by postmodern theory. Yet, her argument, by extension, would condemn an entire movement in global contemporary art of which Mthethwa is a part.

Mthethwa's series of workers, created over the past decade, joins a strong trend in postdocumentary photography that has been analyzed by US art historian Brian Wallis, among others. In his essay, "Ethnographies of Everyday Life," included in the catalogue for New York's International Center for Photography exhibition *Strangers* (2003), Wallis cites anthropologist James Clifford in arguing that "Living with strangers . . . is part of the general diasporic condition of globalization today," which has resulted in an "ethnographic turn" in contemporary cultural production.⁴³ As part of an endless process of transnational and internal migration, whether fleeing violence, or in search of education or paid labor, the individual stranger comes and goes, but the figure of difference he or she represents is a permanent fixture of contemporary society, undermining concepts of national or localized identity. Appropriately enough, Wallis places Mthethwa's "Interiors" series not within a postmodern or postcolonial group that explicitly critiques traditional documentary's claims to objective reality, but with those, like Rineke Dijkstra, who through portraiture, meticulously detail the accoutrements of everyday life as verifiable signs of transculturation.⁴⁴

Like Mthethwa, Dijkstra (b. 1959), who lives and works in Amsterdam, makes straight photographic portraits on a large scale that record physiognomy, pose, and dress in meticulous detail. And as with Mthethwa's portraits, the sitters are carefully posed, and stare impassively out of the image, the very directness of their gazes demanding that the viewer "meet" them as individuals. At the same time, her individual portraits are grouped into larger series, made in disparate locations such as Croatia or the USA, so that the groupings build to a collective, a representative slice of a given age group in that region. Tellingly, the fact that the sitters are not identifiable by nationality until one reads the title, provides an initial sense of difference that is superseded by a sense of human connection. Dijkstra's own commentary on her work could apply equally to Mthethwa: "I discovered that if you want to give a general impression, you should be very specific."⁴⁵ In one series that has interesting parallels with Mthethwa's concerns with migration and immigration, Dijkstra, over the course of six years, photographed a young Bosnian refugee who had resettled in Amsterdam (*Amerisa*, 1994–2000). The four images track her trajectory from displaced person to acculturated Western teenager.

In 1996, this trend in postdocumentary photography was identified by American critic Hal Foster as the "Return of the Real" in post-postmodern art, a trend that he

saw as a response to the globalization of culture. According to what Foster perceived as "The Cultural Politics of Alterity," "it is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles." Moreover, "the political site of transformation is the site of artistic transformation as well . . . this site is always elsewhere . . . with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural . . ."⁴⁶ While it is doubtful that postdocumentary photographers saw themselves as "ethnographers," the impulse to bridge different cultures through portraiture was broad and deep from the 1990s on. For this reason, Mthethwa's work could appeal to an international audience as well as a South African one, although with widely varying responses, as we have seen.

Despite their individuality, what joins the subjects in all of Mthethwa's series is precisely their marginality. Although viewers are hardly permitted to profile these individuals, we can conclude that the majority are migrants from within South Africa or immigrants from other countries, but whether or not they are South African citizens or have crossed borders as "illegal aliens," their lives are as precarious as their dwellings. Nonetheless, whether sitting, standing or reclining, Mthethwa's sitters are so clearly posed, so settled into their surroundings, that it is clear that they intend to stay put, despite all potential difficulties. In the context of South Africa today, as the ANC government continues the destruction of informal settlements, and "illegal aliens" live under the constant threat of xenophobic violence, the series suggests that these individuals may be temporarily displaced, but they do not go far, and they will continually rebuild their lives. Both their physical scale and the sitters' resolute stances make that clear. To this extent, Enwezor's argument is valid. By merging documentary-style photography with the tradition of honorific portraiture to forge a creative amalgam that became part of a broader international trend, Mthethwa's photographs provide the sense of communicating across enormous economic and cultural divides.

To return to the question of the function of color in these representations of people inhabiting the margins of society, the visual pleasure it offers negates the discomfort the viewer might otherwise feel. Color opens up a prolonged, imaginative engagement with the sitter. And this in turn permits a recognition of the economic conditions in which the sitters are trapped. South African artist and art historian Thembinkosi Goniwe has argued that central to the artist's work are

Mthethwa's reflections on the living conditions and the quality of life endured by many black people who are situated at and circumscribed by the margins of global modernity in the post-colony . . . an examination of a complex socio-economic condition whose engineering is systematic, institutionally vicious and deliberate . . .⁴⁷

For once, there is an American critic who fully concurs with this view. Writing for the brochure of Mthethwa's one-person exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2010, Amanda Alexander wrote:

Although [the photographs] detail a personalized domestic space, the portraits also suggest the many political and economic forces that lie outside their frame. They mark a brutal and relentless history of land dispossession, labor expropriation and physical dislocation, without losing sight of the individuals who find themselves in complicated, contingent presents.⁴⁸

The detailed “workscapes” in which the sitters are located – vast fields of sugar cane, bricks, barren fields, piles of bags of coal – indicate that however self-possessed they may initially appear, they inhabit a world where “no jobs are guaranteed, no positions are foolproof . . . and the entitlement to self-dignity may all vanish together, overnight and without notice.”⁴⁹ How then can Enwezor argue that Mthethwa’s art “highlights [the] civility and citizenship” of these “sovereign subjects”? What is moving in Mthethwa’s work is not the intrinsic dignity of the sitters, but the potential for its loss; given the systematic build-up of detail, the sitter’s oppression and vulnerability is understood physically, haptically.

Contemporary society is being forged out of these cultural differences, all equally subject to large economic trends. Arguably, even the concept of nation and nationality, the basis of citizenship, weakens in the era of global corporate rule. According to Zygmunt Bauman, “the very presence of the stranger provides an occasion for the continuous questioning of the foundations of specific communities and whole cultures.”⁵⁰ It is in this implied questioning of the concepts of citizenship, nationality, and community that Mthethwa’s work may be considered “postdocumentary.”

This systematic exposure of the vulnerability and oppression of marginalized workers’ worlds is a considerable achievement, but does not fully comport with the artist’s own explanation of his work: his emphasis on dignity and his rejection of the tradition of concerned photojournalism. Further, Mthethwa’s rationale for his use of the blanket label “untitled” for all of his series is that “I come from a culture where the collective is more significant than the individual. It is really about who people are connected to . . . So, the idea of labeling work as “untitled” is about keeping the focus on the collective, the idea of unity and community.”⁵¹ But marginality does not necessarily result in community, nor can “community,” or citizenship for that matter, be inferred from the portraits, other than membership in the have-nots of the global economy. Viewers can imaginatively engage with these individuals from their facial expressions, stance, and clothing, but of their connections to any community, other than “the workers of the world,” we learn nothing. Instead, the use of “untitled” underscores the images’ status as contemporary art. Both the photographs and the Aperture monograph are modernist aesthetic objects, destined for the museum and its bookstore.⁵² Unfortunately, the wealth of visual information in these “ethnographies of the everyday” ultimately becomes an item in a patron’s private collection.

A number of Mthethwa’s younger South African colleagues have come to understand that, in such a fluid sociocultural situation, identity must be performed. For example, Johannesburg-based Nontsikelelo Veleko was trained at the Market Photo Workshop, which was founded by David Goldblatt in 1988 to educate young artists to reflect on the experiences of apartheid South Africa. According to its current manager, John Fleetwood, the Market Photo Workshop remains even today “predominantly a social documentary photography school.”⁵³ Yet Veleko chose to break with that tradition by introducing into documentary street photography portraits of a younger generation of hip fashionistas, who were constructing an urban identity – and claiming urban space – through the creative assemblage of Western-style clothes. Her work, *Lesego, Miriam Makeba Street, Newtown, Johannesburg, Gauteng* (2007), exemplifies this postdocumentary of the everyday, a young, urban female coping with insouciance with the inequities of the global economy by transforming varieties of clothing into do-it-yourself high fashion.

Mthethwa’s most recent work, from 2011, has joined this investigation of the performance of identity. The series “The Brave Ones” (2011) consists of portraits of

young men being raised under the strict religious order of the Shemba Nazareth Church, which blends Zulu and Christian traditions, and thus is a prime example of transculturation. Mthethwa has spoken of his interest in the gender ambiguity of the uniforms worn by the younger male adherents for special ceremonies, which consist of skirts, frilly blouses, and bow ties. According to Lloyd Pollack, "Zwelethu's concern with the indeterminacy of sexual binaries is coupled with his study of the construction of identity amongst adolescent males as they come of age, and assume their manhood."⁵⁴ Often posed in small trees, the teenagers are self-conscious and unsteady, and the branches with which their bodies are entwined suggest different paths into the future. As issues of the construction of gender have begun to replace those of racial identity with a younger generation of South African artists, including, in addition to Veleko, Zanele Muholi and Paul Emmanuel, Mthethwa has returned to the underlying themes of his earlier portraits of Zionist church members and the very sensitive portraits he has made of young boys.

In the end, however, the images of the "stranger" continue to be made in the familiar formula of straight, modernist photography, with no obvious manipulation and with an acquiescent sitter. It is only through the fact that the sitters are so clearly posed that we come to understand that we no longer can enjoy the illusion of some sort of objective, essentializing record. Nonetheless, these posed and centered subjects insure that even when performing an identity, and thus in greater control of their representation, we are assured that the person(s) depicted exist and that in the end their performance is staged for the viewer. As Michael Godby has argued, "Mthethwa is never concerned to define his subjects' victory over their material circumstances in socio-historical terms, but simply to present it as a new image of people who, in his thinking, have been badly misrepresented in the world's image economy."⁵⁵

As argued above, Mthethwa's portraits do touch on key contemporary issues of migration and labor exploitation in a global economy, but only in general terms that in the end may reinforce rather than dispel the cliché of Africa as backward and poor. As John-Erik Lundström has written, "Thinking art and politics together is a crucial and urgent task if we are to find paths toward criticality and oppositionality in the face of the brutalisms of global society."⁵⁶ Today, the conventions of Western modernism may no longer be appropriate or adequate for addressing "the brutalisms of global society." With sensitivity and assurance, Mthethwa honors and expands the traditions of documentary and modernist art, but, like other postdocumentary photographers, he does not transform it. His work references both the international trend of "the return of the real," in postdocumentary photography and the tradition of the cultural worker within South Africa, the artist who creates "a committed art which affirms human dignity . . . "⁵⁷ Western viewers may expect some sort of sociopolitical commentary from contemporary artists, but, given his clearly articulated personal vision and the pressures of hewing to a decades-long movement of postdocumentary photographic portraiture, the viewer cannot be surprised when Mthethwa chooses not to provide a message, but rather to present the (brutal) facts.

If contemporary art exhibitions present works from every corner of the world, then at the very least the viewer is tasked with learning something about the specific history and cultural contexts in which the works are embedded. This process will include the challenge of art that forces us to think of content in a new way, by upending preconceptions of how art is created and displayed.

Notes

- 1 Apartheid, the system of enforced segregation instituted by the National Party in 1948, assured white supremacy and absolute rule of the nonwhite majority in South Africa. In 1990, after decades of resistance to the oppressive and often violent regime, President Frederik Willem de Klerk released African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela from prison, and began the negotiations that led to the first democratic elections in 1994 and the establishment of Black majority rule.
- 2 See Casenave and Célénier (2011).
- 3 Brielmaier (2010, 116).
- 4 Bester (1998, 82).
- 5 Stott (1986, 277).
- 6 Dhlomo (1999, 75, 79).
- 7 Wienand (2011).
- 8 Weinberg (2011).
- 9 Sachs (1990, 11).
- 10 The exhibition was shown at the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich, the House of World Cultures in Berlin, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center/Museum of Modern Art in New York. Like many important exhibitions of modern and contemporary African art, it did not travel to museums on the African continent.
- 11 Firstenberg (2001, 179).
- 12 Firstenberg (2001, 179).
- 13 Peffer (2009, 259–260).
- 14 Peffer (2009, 254). As Peffer has argued, photographs of destitute individuals in dilapidated homes could be used for negative ideological reasons as well as for “upliftment.” According to Peffer (2009, 250), during the period of forced removals of the 1950s, “photographs of shacks and slums were used in sociological surveys to bolster the segregationist ideology by illustrating the ‘unsanitary’ and ‘undesirable’ aspects of native life in town . . . justifying the move to the new housing outside of town.”
- 15 Godby (2009, 77).
- 16 Ledochowski (2003, 9–10). Quoted by Godby (2009, 79).
- 17 Godby (2009, 76).
- 18 Godby (2009, 77).
- 19 Badsha, Mendel, and Weinberg (1989).
- 20 E-mail correspondence with the author, September 29 and October 11, 2011. Aperture is a publishing house based in Rochester, New York that specializes in photography books. It also runs the Aperture gallery in New York City.
- 21 Nettleton (2011, 8). See also Robbroeck (1998, 3–14). These strong critiques have obscured the positive view presented by De Jager (1992).
- 22 Rankin (1990, 27). In her conclusion, she anticipates Enwezor’s later argument about Mthethwa’s pastels, stating that the continuing importance of the white market for work by Black artists is due to the fact that the potential buyers in the Black middle class are hampered by their limited exposure to the traditions of Western modernism (1990, 30).
- 23 Sack (1988, 18).
- 24 Martin (2011, 23, 25). Unfortunately, Maqhubela, who emigrated to London in 1976, did not live to see his retrospective. In her definitive biography of Mnyle,

Diana Wylie (2008, 84) states, "Thami accused most Johannesburg art galleries of impressing upon African Artists that they should paint pleasing or pathetic township scenes. Unlike Dumile, whose work was 'an anguished outpouring of revolt' against the system, these 'Township Artists' made 'sentimental caricatures' of primitive people who were satisfied with their way of life."

- 25 Quoted in Younge (1988, 12).
- 26 These artists are included in Younge's important text, published in 1988 at the height of the Resistance Art movement. Because Younge was an instructor at Michaelis when he was studying there, it would be surprising if Mthethwa were unaware of the artist's pioneering research, or of his founding of the Cape Town Community Art Project (CAP).
- 27 Enwezor (2010, 108) does argue that the "Empty Beds" series (2002–2004, pastels), which were created "in the era of the depopulation of black townships . . . by the ravages of Aids [lead] one to wonder whether Mthethwa is concealing, behind the charm of the images, a more portentous message."
- 28 Mthethwa, personal communication, September 29, 2011.
- 29 Enwezor (2010, 101, 114, note 6).
- 30 Enwezor (2010, 101).
- 31 Bedford (2011).
- 32 Enwezor (2010, 114, note 6). It is interesting that, although Township Art was critically denigrated from the 1990s on, the market for the founding artists, torn from their roots and presented as individual modernists, has soared. According to a prominent dealer in Johannesburg, "a seminal painting by Gerard Sekoto titled THE PROUD FATHER (1946–47) was sold at auction in Johannesburg on 11 August 1986 for R 9,000.00. Earlier this year a painting of an equal stature and provenance, titled HOUSES, DISTRICT SIX, painted two years earlier whilst the artist was living in District Six (1944–45) was sold by Bonhams in London for £ 850,000.00 × 12.78 = R10,863,000.00. This gives an idea of how his prices have escalated over the past 25 years" (Warren Siebrits, Modern and Contemporary Art, Johannesburg, personal communication, October 20, 2011.)
- 33 It is possible that in addition the large scale and high-tech printing processes appeal to an international audience accustomed to new media work.
- 34 As one might expect, the paintings have grown in size as well. A recent pastel, *Begging for More* (2010), which has been purchased by the Durban Art Gallery through the Everard Read gallery, is 106 × 156 cm, comparable in size to his photographs. In fact, it is based on one of his "Interiors" series of a woman reclining on a bed. In the oil, Mthethwa has added a man looking moodily out of a window.
- 35 Bester (2005, 44).
- 36 Mthethwa (2010).
- 37 Serote (1999).
- 38 Bester (2001, 219).
- 39 Enwezor (2010, 104).
- 40 Enwezor (2010, 105).
- 41 Dorfman (2010).
- 42 Wu (2010, 76).
- 43 Wallis (2003, 180). The term "ethnographic turn" is Hal Foster's.
- 44 Wallis (2003, 182).
- 45 Dijkstra (2001, 8).

- 46 Foster (1996, 173). Working from the perspective of postmodern theory, Foster anticipates problems with this approach, but the return of meticulously recorded reality was certainly welcomed on the part of the art world generally. He uses the term “ethnographer” to refer broadly to anthropology and sociology – that is, to the social sciences and its “objective” approach to the study of different cultures.
- 47 Goniwe (2011, 4).
- 48 Alexander (2010, 68–71).
- 49 Bauman (2003, 133).
- 50 Bauman is paraphrased in Wallis (2003, 179).
- 51 Brielmaier (2010, 93).
- 52 The Zionist Christian Church series, which does examine the collective by recording group ceremonies or the congregants in their places of worship, is omitted from the monograph, perhaps because their uniforms may make them seem too exotic, too close to another clear precedent for Mthethwa’s portraits, the vivid expressionist paintings of Irma Stern.
- 53 Fleetwood (2008).
- 54 Pollack (2011).
- 55 Godby (2011, 14). In the same essay, Professor Godby makes similar observations about Mthethwa’s depictions of male adolescence that I have made here (2011, 20).
- 56 Lundström (2006, 132). See also Dugger (2010).
- 57 Younge (1988, 12).

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Creative Diffusion

African Intersections in the Biennale Network

Kinsey Katchka

Introduction

In recent years, works of artists from present-day Africa, as well as the artists themselves, have gained greater visibility in biennale exhibitions of contemporary art. These periodic exhibitions recur every two years and take place at sites across the globe, including an increasing number on the African continent. These events have “arguably proved *the* medium through which most contemporary art” becomes known.¹ As such, they serve as important forums for the diffusion of artists’ creative work, through both the exhibitions themselves and the networking opportunities they afford.² With the proliferation of biennales since the 1990s,³ they now number more than 200 events throughout the world, with more than half located in centers outside Europe and North America. This has brought “a plurality of options . . . an art world cartography was born.”⁴ Biennales in Africa and other parts of the world constitute an extensive, interconnected network through which African artists – whether based on the continent or elsewhere – contribute to the globalization of the contemporary art world. As South African artist Sue Williamson has said, “Many travel constantly, making the global trek from one event to the next . . . always on the move”⁵ from one region to another.

Within this kaleidoscopic geography, what is “Africa(n),” and where does it reside? Must it be defined and identified, and, if so, by whom? Regardless, one thing is certain: in the spaces and streams of global biennales, “Africa” as a geographic entity and “African” as an identity are redrawn, understood, generated, and constructed in varied ways by diverse audiences. By no means comprehensive, the modest overview here considers selected biennales, in Africa and elsewhere, where artists sit poised at their intersection. It is intended to engage in and contribute to ongoing discourse and to invite dialogue.

First Words: Global Semantics

Some terms – “international,” “transnational,” and “global” – bear differentiation with respect to the topic at hand, and provide a necessary point of reference when positioning African participation in biennales – as individual artists and as nations – in an intricate international frame. Though they are frequently used interchangeably, doing so may be reductive, given the nuances and the diversity of African and diasporic artists’ engagements with the contemporary art world. As applied here, one can distinguish between international (between and among nations), transnational (across national boundaries), and global (independent of national structures). Many, if not most, biennales are based on national participation, with artists or exhibitions associated with particular countries; in this sense biennales are *international* venues. The lives and experiences of artists engaged in this broad network are inherently *transnational*, as participation often requires travel beyond their country of origin, crossing geopolitical boundaries in the process. Forces of globalization defy such boundaries, and have a momentum of their own.

Examples and Exemplars

In the context of biennales, which are inherently competitive, among nations as well as among artists, selections are often based on regional or national identity. While many artists and exhibitions assert multiple identities or overlapping affiliations, those that do not may instead designate specific terrain. This is the case in Venice, with respect to all the official biennale venues: the international exhibition, national pavilions, regional and thematic pavilions and (in 2007) a single “continental” pavilion for “Africa.” Here, the venerable Venice Biennale (est. 1895), the benchmark for biennial art events worldwide, provides a historical lens through which the representation and participation of Africa emerges in Europe. In Africa, the Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Arts, or Dak’art (est. 1990), in Senegal, the most prominent forum on the continent, offers a compelling counterpoint, while selected other sites presented here offer additional insights. An overview of the foundations of the Venice Biennale serves as an important historical referent for discussion of the intersection of Africa and biennales, in Venice as well as other international sites.

Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale is widely recognized as an iconic forum in the contemporary art world. Established in 1895, it was the first art exhibition to recur on a regular basis and employ the term “biennale.”⁶ The event consists of two essential components: the first, an international exhibition, is by invitation, planned by an artistic director who selects the artists; today this main exhibition is held in the vast Arsenale building, formerly a naval shipyard. The second is an ensemble of national (and some thematic or regional) pavilions in which the countries invited to take part in the biennale hold permanent exhibition spaces where they organize independent exhibition projects for each edition. These national pavilions reside primarily in the Giardini, Venice’s large public gardens.⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italy and

European counterparts took part as national entities, and the number of countries and regions (such as the “Nordic Countries” and “Central Asia”) has expanded over time.

Though renowned as an exhibition forum, the Venice Biennale is equally an economic and political project, as are all biennales.⁸ It was originally conceived as an alternative economic strategy, as this city’s unique geography rendered it ill suited to the rising industrialization of the late nineteenth century. As a cultural event, the biennale was an apt choice, since the city had been a center for cultural tourism throughout the nineteenth century, and was thus already a destination for foreign visitors,⁹ and had been a site of cultural mixing through trade and travel for centuries. It was, and remains, a political and nationalist endeavor as well.

The foundation of the Venice Biennale coincides with the colonial period, when the African continent was apportioned among and governed by European nations. At that time, imperial centers of Europe bonded in “mutual complicity around recent appropriations of Africa,”¹⁰ and the biennale represented a visible forum which demarcated and cultivated the participants as powerful nationalist entities and imperial powers in the era’s competitive political and economic sphere. Well into the twentieth century, the Venice Biennale reinforced colonial cultural policy by inviting only neighboring European nations to participate. The event continues to provide a forum for each to reinforce and project a nationalist identity, both at home and in the international community.¹¹

Africa in Venice

When most of the African continent was controlled by colonizers, its regions were not part of an international nation-based political system, and thus did not figure in the Venice Biennale’s model. With the wave of independence movements throughout Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, nascent nation-states entered the international arena. Though they shared a model of governance akin to that of Venice Biennale participants, African countries (with the sole exception of Egypt) were excluded from its exhibitions until very recently.¹²

Decolonization, along with pursuant global transformations in cultural, economic, and technological realms, represented significant changes not only in Africa, but also for its colonizers and the rest of the world. The Venice Biennale, like the contemporary art world as a whole, has historically been Euro-American in orientation. With societal change comes institutional shift and, around 1990, the “Biennale began showing abnormalities that coincided with [such] changes.”¹³ In Venice, these were manifested in part through greater representation of artists from formerly marginalized regions, such as former colonies. In recent years a greater number of African artists, as well as others from regions previously thought to be outside the international art world, have been represented in both the international exhibition and continent-based exhibitions of the Venice Biennale. This has afforded increased visibility to “contemporary African artists” who, until the relatively recent globalization of contemporary art in the Euro-American sphere, had remained unacknowledged.

Over the course of the 1990s, a few artists from African countries south of the Sahara were included in biennale exhibitions. Their participation took form primarily in two modest exhibitions in the 1990s, one of which, *Fusion: West African Artists at*

the Venice Biennale, curated by Susan Vogel, comprised a special exhibition within the premiere space allotted to the international exhibition, the Arsenale.¹⁴ Another was at the first national pavilion of South Africa in 1993. However modest, these mark a shift in longstanding biennale conventions. Since that time, Africa has maintained varying degrees of representation in Venice, whether at individual, national, or regional levels, though it has remained limited and sporadic, and not without controversy.¹⁵

In 1999, the Forum for African Art was formed with the objective of securing a permanent space for “African self-representation” at the Venice Biennale.¹⁶ Its founders asserted that, since the international exhibition has always been organized by European and American artistic directors, African artists were almost nonexistent there even as they became more visible and worked alongside their contemporaries elsewhere.¹⁷ In response to this lacuna, the Forum organized exhibitions in 2001 and 2003. The first, *Authentic/Excentric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, was part of the official “OFF” program,¹⁸ thus locating it in the biennale framework, even if its site was difficult to find. By contrast, the 2003 exhibition, *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, curated by Gilane Tawadros (the result of an invitation to curate one segment of the international exhibition), was included within the Arsenale. Both represented the first time that African curators had curated exhibitions in the biennale, thus redressing the omission which the Forum had been founded to redress.¹⁹

The 2007 Venice Biennale was marked by a notable increase in the representation of African art and artists, whether individuals, groups, or nations.²⁰ The inclusion of the African pavilion, a sizable space assigned (for the very first and last time) to an entire continent rather than to a nation or region – as well as an unprecedented number of artists in the international exhibition – established the 52nd Venice Biennale as a landmark event for contemporary African art. Whether this leads to the permanent, centrally located presence of an African presence within the biennale framework remains to be seen. Instead, it may be best framed as a shift in the ongoing dialogue and manifestation of participation by African artists in Venice – as well as a larger paradigmatic discourse – rather than a step in a particular direction.

The 2007 artistic director, American art historian Robert Storr, made a deliberate effort to include artists from regions historically regarded as outside the (predominately European and American) international art “mainstream.”²¹ Several artists from Africa were included in the international exhibition organized under Storr’s direction, including El Anatsui’s monumental, prominently placed, and commanding wall sculptures *Dusasa* and *Dusasa II* (Figure 25.1) fabricated from bottle caps and other liquor packaging materials. These were among the most memorable of all the displays for those attending the biennale.

In addition to African (and African Diaspora) artists invited to the headlining international exhibition, Storr made a strong statement by including an “African pavilion” in its midst, positioning work in broad geopolitical frameworks and creative spheres. He saw the African pavilion at the center of, and not peripheral to, the Venice Biennale.²² This comes across both literally and figuratively, as the pavilion occupied a desirable location in the heart of the Arsenale, sharing the space of the main exhibition. With 30 artists represented in *Check List: Luanda Pop* (organized by Simon Njami and Fernando Alvim), the pavilion’s exhibition offered an unprecedented biennale forum for artists from Africa, and for artists who were linked in some way to Africa.



FIGURE 25.1 El Anatsui. *Dusasa II*, 2007. Aluminum liquor bottle caps and copper wire. Installation view at the 52nd Venice Biennale International Exhibition *Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind*, Venice, Italy. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photograph by Diana Hand, courtesy of Diana Hand.

The curators' objective was "to represent the most significant panorama of today's African creation,"²³ and took form in two galleries. One, a more intimate space inviting reflection as well as expression, displayed Bili Bidjocka's interactive installation *Ecriture Infinie*, composed of large, blank books in which visitors could contribute their own thoughts. The other, a larger vibrant gallery filled with the sound and movement of its video and new media installations, as well as work in other media, engaged viewers in a different manner. Work by Kendall Geers, Yinka Shonibare MBE, and Mounir Fatmi anchored the gallery's central space. With so many works of art in many media populating the allotted space, the pavilion itself provided a sense of the frenetic urban environments found throughout the continent, as well as the dynamism of artists associated with that sphere. *Checklist* included well-known and established names as well as accomplished emergent artists, all working in diverse media. Some said this exhibition lacked curatorial vision; others praised its uncompromised will for the continent to engage with the international art scene on its own terms. In any case, it was impossible not to take notice.

Since 2007, there has been no single pavilion dedicated to the continent and no substantial, centralized presence showcasing artists identified, or identifying, as African. However, many artists from Africa and its contemporary Diaspora have been invited for the Venice Biennale's international exhibitions, and they have maintained

a visible presence in collateral exhibitions throughout the city. In addition, new national pavilions were established, including Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2011, while South Africa regained its pavilion the same year.²⁴

Ambiguous Nationalities

Storr's exhibition program in 2007 calls into question the Venice Biennale's staunch nationalist underpinnings. He observed that it has become increasingly difficult to dissect artists according to country, as artists' personal biographies defy the strict nationalist designations on which the biennale was founded.²⁵ Acknowledging the limitations of the format, Storr notes his challenge was to convey a more global reality.²⁶ The fluidity of such global identities is reinforced by the biennale's signature image, Yto Barrada's *Plate Tectonics* (2003), showing a geographic educational model of the continents in tectonic motion, a sculptural global map of sorts. Born in France and currently working Morocco, Barrada's biography is one that Storr cites as a complication to the nationalist structure of the Biennale. It is also one that represents the fluid experience of an artist based on several continents, and residing in none exclusively; this is by no means unique in the present day. Likewise, Odili Donald Odita, whose wall painting *Give Me Shelter* (Figure 25.2) dominated entrance to the Italian pavilion's exhibition of diverse international artists, was born in Nigeria but educated in the USA, where he now works. He also confounds the designation of "African artist." The question of whom or what to consider as constituting "African" participation in the biennale is appropriate



FIGURE 25.2 Odili Donald Odita. *Give Me Shelter*, 2007. Acrylic latex wall paint, colored pigment on wall. Installation view at the 52nd Venice Biennale Italian Pavilion, Venice, Italy. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

considering the often complicated notions of “African” identity in a globalizing world. Storr acknowledges the long-standing underrepresentation of, and disregard for, artists from the erstwhile periphery, marginalized even though “many of them now practice internationally alongside their contemporaries from elsewhere.”²⁷

Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Arts

The relatively substantial number of artists from Africa presented in the 52nd Venice Biennale’s international exhibition, as well as Storr’s decision to include an African pavilion, was informed by his attendance at the 2006 Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Arts. Though a number of biennales have emerged in Africa – some of these regularly occurring art festivals include the Alexandria Biennale, founded in 1955; the Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO), founded in Burkina Faso in 1969; the Cairo Biennale, founded in 1984; the Biennale de l’Art Bantu Contemporain, founded in Libreville, Gabon in 1985; Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine, founded in Bamako, Mali in 1994; and the Cape Africa Platform, established in 2003 – the Dakar Biennale remains the stalwart among them.²⁸ Rather than replicating objectives of many other international events, Dakar tailors the model to fit: it may have a narrower frame, but its targeted arena is no less broad.

Established in 1990, Dak’art celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2010. Located in Senegal’s capital city, the Dakar Biennale is dedicated to the contemporary arts of Africa and the Diaspora. It has been described as one of many “boutique” biennales that have emerged throughout the world: that is, events that are more intimate, specialized, and geared towards particular interests or of a narrower scope than grander events such as the Venice Biennale. Yet the mission statement of Dak’art identifies the domains in which Dak’art positions itself as a leader, and its leading role in those spaces: international, Pan-African, local, and national;²⁹ if perhaps more limited in scale than other venues, its constituency is no less broad. In fact, Dak’art has been criticized on varied fronts because it is virtually impossible for this endeavor to satisfy all invested parties.

Its mission statement asserts that the goal of the biennial event is “to present contemporary African production in Africa by Africans,”³⁰ a continental vision that includes North Africa and all other regions. However, it also has addressed artists in the recent and historical diasporas. Dak’art operates on the premise that “there are still very few African artists in the international market,” and that “the rules in this art market are set outside the African continent by experts whose perception of African art is still circumscribed within reductive thoughts.”³¹ With this in mind, the Dak’art administration presents artwork to a diverse audience – local, national, regional, and global – to redress these imbalances.³²

The Dakar Biennale follows in the steps of the 1966 Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (First World Festival of Black Arts), an ambitious initiative organized under the auspices of Senegal’s first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor. As a poet and ardent supporter of the arts and culture himself, he was fierce in his efforts to legitimate the new Senegalese nation in the international sphere. Senghor cultivated international participation and attendance in the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (FESMAN), to create an international forum in which African countries could project and reinforce new national identities.³³ The Dakar Biennale’s mission statement articulates a similar international, continental, and national orientation.³⁴ In each

case Senghor's Pan-African narrative – a belief in the underlying unity of African cultures and the links between peoples of the Diaspora and their African homelands – serves as a point of reference.³⁵ To this day, rhetoric surrounding Dak'art invokes Senghor's ardent support for the arts, affirming its continuity and anchoring it in cultural and political history. In the international community, Senegal is recognized as a strong supporter of, if not crucible for, the arts. The biennale thus is an essential component of the state's cultural policy and plays a highly visible and fundamental role in the projection of this aspect of Senegal's national identity.³⁶ It continues a long tradition of state support for arts initiative,³⁷ and is thus much like Venice at its origins, when that biennale was conceived of to take advantage of Italy's existing reputation as a destination for the arts.

Successful promotion of the arts, though consistent with Senegal's unique cultural legacy, is likely not the sole reason the biennale has endured. Like all biennales, the Dakar Biennale is an economic initiative. Effective promotion of the arts, then, by extension means the successful promotion of the event itself.³⁸ The desired outcome of the Dak'art is not merely visibility for the artists and the nation, but the economic gain generated by the event throughout the local Dakar community and through the cultivation of markets for African artists, both internationally and within the continent. Promotion that achieves these goals will ensure its viability.

Networking

In addition to promoting African artists internationally, Dak'art also has distinctly *intracontinental* objectives, cultivating development of the arts by "contributing to the development of art critics in Africa, and publications on art and contemporary African artists," to make information about artists working throughout the continent more accessible. Dak'art supports artistic training and art education in Africa, and continental exchange between artists has continued to increase.³⁹

At the opening of the first Dak'art, President Diouf declared it to be "a new expressive framework" for people on the continent and in other countries to meet and exchange ideas, "one of those moments . . . when a civilization creates, thinks about what it is, and prepares [for the] future,"⁴⁰ attributing significance to cultural exchange and creative practice, as well as self-identification. This applies to the milieu that one finds in today's Dakar Biennale, where there is ample opportunity for meeting and exchange, both through structured events and less formal ones. A series of colloquia are programmed throughout the opening week, offering a more formal format for presentation and response, while many other venues allow for more spontaneous encounters.

The success of these goals is demonstrated not only by an increasing number of continental exchanges and exhibition forums, but by the rise of more localized initiatives such as Doual'art in Douala, Cameroon. Indeed, many of the artists selected for exhibitions elsewhere first exhibited in the Dakar Biennale, which brought them to the attention of curators and institutions. Dak'art has played an important role in facilitating exchanges, as Marilyn Douala-Bell and Didier Schaub of Douala'art testified; many of their collaborations have arisen from contacts made when they have traveled to Dakar for the Biennale, either directly or indirectly – that is, through meeting particular artists there or through networking with other curators who suggest artists of interest for Doual'art projects. They have said that "all roads lead back

to Dakar”⁴¹ testifying to the importance of this forum for ongoing continental contacts and practice. For example, after meeting the Cairo-based mixed media painter and video artist Khaled Hafez at the Dakar Biennale, Doual’art invited Hafez to do a residency and project as part of its Salon Urbain de Douala, a triennial forum of urban-based projects throughout the city and within the Espace Doual’art gallery. Hafez attributes his initial professional engagement with a more continent-wide creative community to his first participation in the Dakar Biennale in 2004 and, again, in 2006.

This may be true for any biennale setting, which ideally is “neither exclusively nor even primarily a space of . . . display, but rather a discursive environment.”⁴² The networking opportunities Dak’art affords African artists and art professionals, based in Africa and elsewhere, are perhaps the most dependably rewarding aspects of the event. The importance of such networking should not be underestimated. Dakar is a launching pad for many – even if not immediately into the international “mainstream,” then certainly into one of its streams.

Given the interconnections of biennales throughout the world, entry into one readily provides other opportunities: for instance, Khaled Hafez was awarded the Prix de la Francophonie at Dak’art 2004. Since then, he has been invited to exhibit in several biennales – the 2012 Havana Biennale makes his eleventh – and his work is sold in major auction houses. One of Hafez’s Cairo cohorts, painter, sculptor, and multimedia artist Moataz Nasr, took part in Dak’art 2002 where he won the Biennale Prize for his video installation *The Water*, a video projected in a dark room with water on the floor.⁴³ The following year, Nasr was selected for the 2003 Venice Biennale’s African pavilion exhibition, *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* curated by Gilane Tawadros. Finally, El Anatsui, the Ghanaian artist who has taught at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka for 30 years, exhibited in Dak’art in 2004 and 2006. As described above, in 2007, Robert Storr selected his work for one of the Arsenale’s most show-stopping displays. Though El Anatsui has been well known in African art circles for decades and had received attention for his new body of work, after 2007 he became one of the most coveted artists of the international art world. Though participating in the Dakar Biennale doesn’t necessarily guarantee an artist’s success, for many it serves to facilitate or enhance it. Though the Senegal-based venue cannot claim to represent the entirety of African contemporary arts, it nevertheless promotes the work of artists throughout the continent and worldwide.

Diaspora, Pan-Africanity, and Practicality

The representation of African art and artists at the Venice Biennale has been subjected to ongoing dialogue and debate. Dialogue among those advocating for a permanent space for “Africa” in Venice asserts the need for systematic and secure presence for “African self-representation.”⁴⁴ Is a concept of African self-representation in the guise of an African pavilion even tenable? “Africa” writ large is much too broad to define geographically, yet too narrow to accommodate contemporary diasporic identities that elide continental borders. Because imperial powers conflated Africa into one monolithic territory with no regard for variation among the continent’s diverse regions, cultures, languages, and histories, the use of the term “Africa” to subsume such varied worldviews (or art worlds) has been regarded as problematic. The implied

notion of a singular African identity (i.e., as opposed to individual African regions and nations), contextualized in an *international* forum, sits awkwardly and runs counter to the concept preferred by those advocating for a more nuanced representation of the continent.⁴⁵ At the Venice Biennale, to which the colonial project and its discursive nationalist frame adheres, “Africa” writ large is an uneasy moniker. The African pavilion, a supranational entity amidst national participants, recalled the ghost of another era, difficult to dismiss even in the present day.⁴⁶

Whether the orientation and presentation of artists is national or continental, the representation of African artists at the biennale is in part a practical matter. National pavilions in Venice are funded by the participating countries; there is no single continental body to underwrite an “African” pavilion. Where each nation’s representation is concerned, participation is predicated on a country’s ability and willingness either to fund, or to secure funding for, the project and this is seldom the case;⁴⁷ many politicians on the African continent do not place great value on the arts and, even if they do, economic factors may be prohibitive.⁴⁸

Dissecting Diaspora

The role of the Pan-African narrative in Dakar differs from that created for Pan-Africanism in the context of the Venice Biennale, where overarching assertions of a singular African identity are articulated in opposition to a European establishment. In the context of the Venice Biennale’s history, that polarity must be problematized and deconstructed. There it may also seem problematic and reductive in that it folds the continent together with sites of other interactions. In contrast, despite its international missive, in the Africa-oriented context and site of the Dakar Biennale with its deliberately diasporic scope, the African-oriented narrative reads as Pan-Africanism, but framed in terms intended to unify, not conflate.

In the Venice Biennale’s *Check List: Luanda Pop* gallery, the identification of artists on their labels referred to the African countries with which they were associated rather than to the nations in which they resided. Chris Ofili, a British citizen, was identified by the nationality of his parents (Nigeria); Ingrid Mwangi, a German citizen, by the country of her father, where she was born and often visits (Kenya); Ghada Amer, raised in Europe and working in the USA, was identified by the land of her birth (Egypt). By identifying only their links to Africa, the exhibition glossed over lives spent abroad that were highly relevant to their work as artists, as well as to discourse on African art and representation. Could this perhaps be read as deference to the Venice Biennale’s nationalist framework?⁴⁹

African artists working today are included in international exhibitions and regionally specific ones. This is fitting, as artists from Africa are part of the contemporary art world’s mix. At the same time, there is a certain continental and regional partiality that international exhibitions may not permit, apart from the manner in which they are identified in label or catalogue text. What label is attributed, as we have seen, is not necessarily a given. Some prefer not to be labeled as African, considering it a marginalizing label. Khaled Hafez is very conscious of this:

In all the biennales, I move with labels. As African artist, Egyptian artist, Mediterranean artist, Arab artist and just “artist,” I do not mind at all because I am

all of the above, and I have no sensitivities [to] labels, as long as they are actually “me” – geographically, by passport, or by anything else, as long as I do not tailor my work or change any element of my daily praxis/practice. And as long as the show in question is curated [so that there is a concept behind it].⁵⁰

With respect to origins, one may distinguish between national affiliation (an ideological space) and geographic entity (a physical place), overlaid with cultural components. For many years the default identifier has been linked to national affiliation or citizenship, with the assumption being that it is the same. But this cannot be assumed today when many artists live and work between continents and cultures, and it is not uncommon for “African” artists to hold citizenship off-continent, dual citizenship, and mixed heritage.

Art professionals and critics, both those based on the continent and elsewhere, question whether artists from Africa who live and work abroad are too far removed from the everyday realities of African experience⁵¹ to be considered as “African,” and argue that such expatriates represent “Africa” too often in widely visible exhibition forums. They may discount the fact that many Diaspora artists return to their country of origin on a regular basis – Lalla Essaydi, for example, returns to Marrakech, Morocco for weeks at a time throughout the year. Youssef Nabil, well known for his hand-colored photographs, is based in New York, and must print his photos in Paris, but often works in his native Cairo. At the same time, some artists based on the continent travel so often for exhibitions, events, or residencies that they spend less time at home than away.

“When artists, curators, and researchers are constantly on the move, they carry with them a conception of the world which is transmitted and adjusted by contact with other peoples”⁵² a history of “diversity founded on multiple borrowings linked to the migrations sparked by exploration, conquests, wars and natural disasters.”⁵³ This recalls Okwui Enwezor’s view that “place and placelessness, nationality and home, citizenship and exile” characterize diasporic experience, but are also universal, the human friction of which art is born. They just happen to define particularly acutely the condition of Africans.⁵⁴

Questions of Africanity also apply within the continent: for example, North Africa has commonly been associated with the Middle East rather than the continent in which it is located.⁵⁵ Exhibitions and discussions about North African artists’ work have often glossed over the African aspect, privileging instead an “Arabic” aspect.⁵⁶

Though some professionals, especially those based on the continent, distinguish between Diaspora and African-based artists, not all art professionals hold a reified view of Africa. Ivoirian (Abidjan-based) curator and scholar Yacouba Konaté addressed this as artistic director of the 2006 Dakar Biennale, whose program: “Africa: Agreements, Allusions and Misunderstandings,” probed the vexed issues of “identity” and the stereotypical representation of artists from Africa, the African Diaspora, and the developing world.⁵⁷ At the heart of this lies the familiar trope of authenticity, one that has underpinned discourse on “traditional” African art since the era in which the Venice Biennale was established. It evokes the specter of debates that have dominated studies of African art for decades, but in a twenty-first-century permutation. Intellectuals, scholars, and others have taken strides to deconstruct notions of *Africanité*, and for many, African authenticity has proven untenable as we acknowledge histories that exist outside of current geopolitical structures. Both “Africanity/*Africanité*” and “authenticity” are still highly subjec-

tive, situational, and debatable, particularly in the contemporary world. African artists read the world through local, regional, and global lenses rather than through European or American problematics alone,⁵⁸ all of which are ever changing. All artists assert and claim multiple identities. To what degree this reflects “Africa,” “Africans,” or individual artists or countries, lies in the eye of the viewer, critic, and participants themselves.

(S)Panning Regions: A Pan-Africannial

While art professionals on the continent appreciate the visibility that Dak’art has afforded “contemporary African art” writ large, those who are more (or at least equally) interested in the event’s intracontinental possibilities find this aspect of the event to fall short. From this perspective, Dak’art serves more effectively as an international forum⁵⁹ drawing visitors from abroad⁶⁰ rather than a way to address intracontinental concerns. Discontent with the lack of more accessible venues for meeting, exchange and expositions informs a recently proposed Pan-African project addresses the lacuna: the Pan-Africannial.

Based on a roving exhibition model, it is inspired by the Pan-European Manifesta: The European Biennial of Contemporary Art, established in 1996. Rather than taking root in a single city, the event would be pan-continental and nomadic, so that the site changes with each edition, purposely striving to keep its distance from the dominant art centers of artistic production.⁶¹ Like Manifesta, the Pan-Africannial would “investigate and reflect on emerging developments in contemporary art . . . seeking fresh and fertile terrain for the mapping of a new cultural topography.”⁶²

The Pan-Africannial, then, would be Pan-African not only in content, but in location. While observant of nation-based entities and affiliations, mobility inherent in this model arguably allows for more fluid boundaries within a continent. It responds to the call of many art professionals in Africa for more forums on the continent that permit exchange and dialogue. Should it materialize, it would also spread out the economic rewards that come along with biennales.

At a symposium introducing this proposed project, N’Goné Fall, a Senegalese curator, art critic, and consultant in “cultural engineering,” outlined both positive and negative considerations of a Pan-African biennale, as did other participants. In doing so, she centralized a wider discourse and provided insight into larger considerations fundamental to the topic of Africa and biennales. On the positive side, a roaming biennale would certainly allow for greater access and participation, both for art professionals and general publics. This would benefit art professionals in terms of providing a space for exchange. It would also have the potential to cultivate a more diverse audience and market for contemporary African art within the continent. On the negative side, it is debatable to what degree it would facilitate interactions and meeting among artists and art professionals in Africa. Regardless of one’s financial resources, travel within Africa is expensive – often more so than between Africa and other continents. That said, there would be wider circulation and visibility of artwork.⁶³ Fall also noted that the project would depend on funding from a sponsoring country –such as the host country – or a Pan-African body (such as the Organization of African Unity, OAU), but this may be an unrealistic expectation, recalling the same obstacle African initiatives face in Venice.⁶⁴ Though it is uncertain whether the project will ever be realized, it provides fodder for dialogue on Africa and biennales. Displacement applies not just to artists and artwork, but to the event itself.

Community Upsets: Biennale Politics

Biennales are not purely forums for presentation of works of art, but also political and diplomatic objectives. Inclusion and exclusion can depend on conflict or alliance in these domains, and serve to sanction or protest policies, practices, and more. At the international diplomatic relations level, for example, at the Venice Biennale, South Africa lost its pavilion in 1995 in protest at the government's apartheid policies. In 2011, after the decline of the apartheid era, the country regained its privileges.

Though biennales commonly articulate a missive of unification, this belies the competitive aspect that characterizes them. Points of contention between countries may have impact on biennale events as well as on individual artists. At the 2010 Biennale in Alexandria, Egypt the Algerian Pavilion was cancelled and the well-established Algerian artist Zineb Sedira (selected to exhibit in the pavilion),⁶⁵ was disinherited by the Egyptian government following two hotly contested qualifying soccer matches between Egyptian and Algerian teams in a World Cup competition. They led to violent clashes in both countries, and Sedira was notified that her work would be excluded due to the “recent incidents committed by Algerian supporters” following the match.

In theory Sedira's multifaceted identity and artwork embodied varied elements of the Alexandria Biennale's stated missive. Sedira's personal background – born in France to Algerian parents and based in London at the time – was especially aligned with the biennale's missive of fortifying dialogue and exchange among Mediterranean countries and culture. However, in this case, the government sponsoring the event effectively undermined its own objective.

African Intersections

Though only an overview of the intersection of “Africa” and biennales, this chapter underscores the complex confluence of politics, economics, creativity, and identity, in the continent and beyond, among those who claim (or for whom others have claimed) an African identity as artists.

Creative practice, including curating exhibitions for biennales, serves as a critical means of asserting and diffusing that multifaceted identity in a wider realm, one that museum bureaucracies must someday reckon with, despite the long-standing infrastructures that underlie their foundations. It is not accidental that the displays in Venice and Dakar are of an ephemeral nature; conventional categories of traditional museums have proven remarkably immutable and resistant to transformation. For example, there is an undeniable current in creative practice – among artists, curators, academics – that challenges the bifurcation of the African continent into “North Africa” and “sub-Saharan Africa,” even though this remains deeply embedded in museums' institutional structures.

Following her disinhibition to the Alexandria Biennale, in her response to the Egyptian government, Sedira wrote that she remains open to future proposals, “as long as they remain purely within an artistic context.”⁶⁶ But given the genesis and role of biennales in politics and diplomatic relations, one must question the degree to which this “purity” is possible. What is certain is that the biennales, individually and as a group, provide an international, transnational, and global network for the dispersion of art, artists, and audiences across time and place. The complex identities and

identification of artists, particularly among those from the erstwhile “periphery,” complicate their representation. Discourse on biennales and Africa thus bears relevance beyond Africa, begging (re)consideration of geopolitical, cultural, and ideological boundaries and distinctions – not just in the present day, but in shaping our understandings of the past and future as well.

Notes

- 1 Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne (1996, 2).
- 2 Compare these with the networks artists build through their participation in Triangle workshops, discussed in Kasfir, chapter 26 this volume.
- 3 See Jones (2010) for a detailed history of the development and significance of biennial exhibitions.
- 4 Fall et al. (2010).
- 5 Williamson in Czekelius (2002).
- 6 Niemojewski (2010, 89).
- 7 As the biennale expanded over time, eventually no space remained in the Giardini, and additional national exhibitions are sited elsewhere in the city.
- 8 See Mesquita (2003).
- 9 Mesquita (2003, 63–64).
- 10 McEvilley (1993, 15).
- 11 See Paul Greenhalgh (2011) and Harvey (1996). In the mid to late nineteenth century – coeval with the rise of industrialization and nationalism – world fairs and exhibitions became popular and may have influenced the Venice Biennale. Thank you to Monica Blackmun Visonà for this observation.
- 12 Egypt obtained a national pavilion in 1952. As noted below, South Africa was granted a pavilion in 1993, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2011.
- 13 McEvilley (1993, 15).
- 14 McEvilley (1993).
- 15 Berns (2007).
- 16 The Ford Foundation contributed to the project’s initial phase in 1999. The initiative and resulting exhibition at the 49th Venice Biennale were funded by the Ford Foundation.
- 17 The Forum for African Arts was formed “to promote and document contemporary African art, and includes curators, art critics, artists and scholars” invested in the field (Hassan and Oguibe 2001, 8).
- 18 Though participation in the official exhibitions is limited to selected spaces, exhibitions organized to coincide with biennales are often promoted alongside the official venues, expanding opportunities for exhibitions.
- 19 It is interesting to note that each of these curators shares common ground with many artists discussed in this chapter – namely, their diasporic lives and mobility.
- 20 For a discussion of past participation and some of its intricacies, see Pensa (2007) and Okeke-Agulu (2007). See also Katchka (2008) for a review of African participation in the 52nd edition.
- 21 The Venice Biennale is organized by an appointed creative director who orchestrates the international exhibition, the central event. Creative directors may also select

collaborators to assist with development of the project or delegate selected components. In 2007, *Check List Luanda Pop*, curated by Simon Njami and Fernando Alvim, was selected from submissions for an Africa pavilion. The process was the subject of much controversy. See Morgan, Bonami, and Enwezor (2008); Storr (2008a and 2008b) for the ongoing, complex discourse not only on Africa and biennales, but also on patronage, ethics of collecting practice, and contemporary arts of Africa as a “genre.”

- 22 Storr (2007). This viewpoint recurs throughout his texts on this Venice Biennale, and is not limited to a single source.
- 23 Njami (2007). The curators’ commentary on the project recurs throughout texts and dialogue on the exhibition.
- 24 Originally established in 1993, the South African pavilion was banned in 1995 in protest at apartheid policies.
- 25 Labels in the international exhibition identified all artists by city and country, allowing for some nuance or differentiation within the geographic hierarchy.
- 26 Storr (2007).
- 27 Hassan and Oguibe (2001, 7).
- 28 This list was taken from Enwezor and Ockeke-Agulu (2009, 344–345). Though the Alexandria Biennale is the oldest of these, for the discussion here I look to Dakar as a counterpoint to Venice, as their discourses on Africa and biennale representation intersect.
- 29 This mission statement was accessed June 30, 2009, on the Dak-art official website, but has since been removed.
- 30 See note 29.
- 31 See note 29.
- 32 For more detailed information on Dak’art and its significance, see Filitz (2011); Grabski (2008); Harney (2004); Katchka (2001); and Konaté (2010).
- 33 See Grabski, chapter 14 this volume.
- 34 The Dakar Biennale was underwritten in large part by foreign partners until 2010, and is now funded by the state.
- 35 Konaté (2010, 115).
- 36 In this context, national identity refers to how the nation-state is viewed by other members of the international community rather than by the Senegalese population itself.
- 37 See also Grabski, chapter 14 this volume for a discussion of alternatives to state patronage.
- 38 Mesquita (2003).
- 39 Silva (2007, 85).
- 40 Konaté (2010, 115).
- 41 Marilyn Douala-Bell and Didier Schaub, personal communication, 2007.
- 42 Hoskote (2010, 308).
- 43 Nasr also participated in the 2004 and 2012 editions of the Dakar Biennale.
- 44 See Hassan and Oguibe (2001).
- 45 Of course, national boundaries themselves are problematic given their artificial nature, especially in Africa, where many divisions were imposed by European colonizers. See Fanon (1963); Pakenham (2003).
- 46 Bradley (2003).
- 47 Zimbabwe hosted its first national pavilion in 2011, curated by Raphael Chikukwa; it was well positioned at a location near the Arsenale and Giardini. Funded by the

- government in partnership with the Prince Claus Fund, its continuing presence and location is assured (Chikukwa, personal communication, 2012).
- 48 Fall et al. (2010).
- 49 More recently, in the 2011 edition of the Venice Biennale, artists in the international exhibition were identified by both current residency and country of origin.
- 50 Hafez, personal communication, 2011. Hafez states here his own position, and it is not intended to apply to all artists.
- 51 Because “Africa” and “African experience” are frequently used in the singular (stressing unity rather than diversity), I use the singular in keeping with those articulating this perspective.
- 52 Fall (2007, 19).
- 53 Fall (2007, 13–14).
- 54 See Enwezor (2006).
- 55 Note that the concept of “Middle East” is also problematic.
- 56 Observation by Lalla Essaydi, personal communication, 1999.
- 57 Konaté (2006).
- 58 Nabil Boutros, personal communication, 2008.
- 59 This is understandable considering the biennale, established under the aegis of former president Abdou Diouf, descends from the 1966 Festival.
- 60 Among the visitors were Robert Storr, preparing for the 2007 Venice Biennale, as well as Robert Buergel and Carol Noack, directors of Documenta XII.
- 61 Manifesta (2012).
- 62 Manifesta (2012).
- 63 Fall et al. (2010).
- 64 Hassan and Oguibe address this same point with respect to the Venice Biennale, suggesting that “the paucity of African national pavilions in Venice may be explained by economic reasons or the lack of consistent national policies that prioritize culture” (2001, 7).
- 65 The Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries is hosted by Egypt. Organized by the government, artists from the Mediterranean region are invited to represent their home countries.
- 66 Barbieri (2010).

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Lacuna

Uganda in a Globalizing Cultural Field

Sidney Littlefield Kasfir

This chapter addresses what has been called “the other contemporary,”¹ that is, the art currently being produced by practitioners who live and work on the African continent for a primarily local, regional, or national audience.² This stands in marked contrast to the contemporary art which is in essence transnational and diasporic, created by artists of African ancestry who since the 1960s have migrated to Western capitals with increasing frequency for political and, more recently, career reasons. Due to a series of changes in the larger art world³ beginning in the late 1980s, most importantly the ascendance of the role of independent curator and the expansion of the biennale system through a globalizing art market and exhibition scenario, it is this latter, relatively small, cadre of artists who have come to represent the leading edge of contemporary African art in Western exhibitionary spaces.

On the other hand, the work of many, perhaps the majority of, artists who continue to reside in African countries is little known outside their national boundaries. (South Africa with its own stable of critics, curators, scholars, and institutional support is one important exception. Nigeria is a second, though quite different, and Senegal a third.)⁴ For this majority, their patrons are not often international collectors or investors (more on this later), but local elites and expatriates who in fact are usually looking for art which is pointedly not “international” but recognizably tied to local tastes and aesthetic choices. These artists are not averse to travel (though they often don’t earn enough to afford it), for example, to workshops or occasional residencies abroad. Most of these artists would be only vaguely aware of such events as the Venice Biennale or Documenta, since they have defined the parameters of their spectatorship differently. Their audience is primarily located in the African cities where they live.

There is one other major difference which matters here: the diasporic art world is by definition porous and is constantly changing. Everyone is from somewhere else, whereas the art worlds in African countries are composed mainly of people who have spent their lives there, were trained in the same schools or workshops or streets, and

subjected to the same politics and economies. They are therefore deeply invested in a sense of place, of memory, and of their current struggles. This is not to suggest that diasporic artists do not also work within these parameters, but that for them these experiences are filtered through a transnational present which constantly refigures their past kaleidoscopically.

The reasons for the “Othering” of art made in Africa, effectively making it a subtext to the main story, is not hard to explain. International curators do not operate out of African cities, they are based in the West.⁵ The best known and most influential of these, such as Okwui Enwezor, Salah Hassan, Simon Njami, Olu Oguibe, and Chika Okeke-Agulu, are diasporic Africans themselves, who quite understandably are engaged by the aesthetics of diasporic artists who share the complexities of their exilic condition.⁶ These are also the African artists directly in their purview: they are visible, not difficult to contact and frequently available for interviews. Their work is accessible. Diaspora artists are also in the communications loop; they know what is current in the larger art world and are au fait with the way the Western-based art market works. They have fashioned a practice based in both an awareness of this larger world and a hybrid subjectivity based at least in part in an African *ecumene*. In short, they are, or strive to be, part of a growing transcultural art network while maintaining their distinctiveness within it.

International curators do periodically go to Africa as what Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera called “postcolonial explorers on voyages of discovery” (for example, André Magnin in his pursuit of Seydou Keita, described below). But their visits tend to be brief for practical reasons (the expense, the time, the long flights, enervating weather, language issues, difficulty finding people). Unless they are in their home or adopted countries, their explorations are conducted the way certain African art dealers claim to “field collect,” from a hotel in the capital. Or a project is conceived (back in Paris or New York) and needs to be populated, in which case the visit is a kind of talent recruitment trip aimed at younger, previously undiscovered, artists. Curators from faraway places can then build networks of connectivity of their own. This of course sounds promising, and sometimes it is: the problem with absentee curation is that it tends to be layered on top of the already existing networks, of which there are many (and I am thinking of Nairobi here). These externally initiated projects are rather like the work of well-meaning international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who want to “help” African farmers or pastoralists by asking them to forget everything they know and start a new path toward success under their tutelage.⁷ Whether about art or holding back the desert, both tend to fail after a few years because they are not successfully embedded in local ways of doing things (which also shift over time, but have more resilience).

What is wrong with a diasporic focus if we are discussing Africa? In one sense, nothing at all. But it masks what amounts to a superficial reading of African art in its broader contours. To use the sports metaphor, big budget exhibitions, usually in Europe or America, but increasingly in Asia as well, are conceived of as the major leagues. African cities are marginal to this process and serve, in this scenario, as recruiting pools for artists who habitually play on minor league teams in a kind of provincial imitation of what happens in the big leagues, with a few lucky individuals discovered and plucked from obscurity every year, but the major leagues’ main players are the migrants, exilic or nomadic or variously diasporized.

Ironically, this representation of a huge corpus of a continent’s work by a small subset of artists is closely parallel to the way in which precolonial African art is usually

represented in textbooks and art museums by a small subset of sculptural artifacts (including the wooden portions of masquerades) from West and Central Africa, while sidelining the continent-wide genres of aesthetic practice from metalworking to body arts, ceramics, textiles, and other artisanal traditions, which do not conform to Western high art notions.⁸ In both cases the filter is the Western art world itself which, especially in Europe, is still actively dealing with its colonial past.

Current scholarship, especially concerning the aforementioned three countries, posits that many African cities are complete art worlds in themselves, with their risk-taking as well as comfort-zone artists, complicated local art histories, patrons both loyal and fickle, audiences both naive and cosmopolitan, institutions which offer conditional support, and often governments that prioritize sport teams over artists, but which come through for the occasional big public commission. Despite the broad outlines, which are usually similar, there are obviously important disparities between one African country and the next which have affected the formation of these art worlds: the presence or absence of a precolonial image-making tradition is perhaps the most influential, though long periods of civil war or political violence and economic deprivation also figure heavily, as well as a country's particular colonial experience.

One might expect the presence of an earlier image-making tradition to be a clear advantage, but in fact it has been a double-edged sword: How do artists intent on embracing modernity in the essentially urban spaces developed under colonialism and then in the postcolony deal with such a presence? Do they embrace it? Ignore it? Emulate or synthesize it in some way? Nigeria is perhaps the paradigmatic case: the presence of ancient sculptural traditions which have persisted well into the colonial and sometimes postcolonial period can have the effect of flattening creativity in new areas, as counterintuitive as that may seem. To overcome this, artists have to possess an active engagement with both the past and the future. There have, of course, been particularly well-documented instances of Nigerian artists synthesizing aspects of both a modernist practice and of Yoruba or Igbo culture successfully. In the Yoruba case, described elsewhere in this volume by Peter Probst, young underemployed primary school leavers joined two-week workshops run in Osogbo by Ulli and Georgina Beier where they were encouraged to make use, not of the by now world-renowned Yoruba sculpture genres, but of Yoruba myths and storytelling (including the fantasies in novels by Amos Tutuola) reimagined in the new media of linocuts, gouache, and bead mosaic. In the Igbo case, university-trained artists in Nsukka, led by Uche Okeke, attempted to develop a synthesis between modern painting and Igbo women's *uli* designs worn on the body and painted on sanctuary walls, as well as, eventually, Cross River *nsibidi* script.⁹ In a kind of bitter irony, in this second case the violence of civil war actually promoted the desire to integrate Igbo tradition into new genres, creating what might be understood as a war zone subjectivity similar to what I will describe for Uganda later in this chapter.

In fact, one might argue that the majority of Nigerian artists were not, at the end of colonialism, about to appropriate modernist practices precisely because they owned a rich visual past. For example the famous Adugbologe family workshop in Abeokuta continued to produce the art they had formerly made for local *orisha* worship even as demand for that art was shrinking due to increasing Christian and Muslim influence. Previous patronage was being replaced by commissions from Hausa traders who carried this type of art far beyond its original intended audience.¹⁰ What is the negative consequence here is not that traditional genres were becoming art market commodities – so

were the modern paintings after all, even if for a different audience – rather that many Nigerian artists were unable to make the transition and to begin to create something which was based in a tested knowledge but also embraced the new conditions. The exceptions, a kind of colonial-traditional art, are sometimes strikingly original (especially between the Niger and Cross Rivers where Mami Wata¹¹ and Jesus competed for attention on such things as mask headdresses), but they are few in comparison with the number of what the traders call “copies,” replicas of older works, which grace mall boutiques in the USA and African hotel lobbies across the continent. A similar story can be told in other countries where precolonial masks or shrine sculpture were widely used.

Conversely, some of the countries with the most vibrant contemporary art had very limited forms of image making before the onset of modernity: South Africa and Senegal bear witness to this. Neither could claim precolonial sculpture traditions of anything comparable to Nigeria, but their post-1950 genres are as rich and varied as anywhere in Africa. In Senegal, 20 years of highly instrumental art patronage underwritten by Léopold Senghor as president, and in South Africa, the politicization of art as part of the anti-apartheid struggle, each served as a set of conditions which overrode the lack of a strong precolonial image-making tradition.¹² In addition, both of these conditions were well known in Western cultural circles, Senghor’s through his links with a Parisian avant-garde of writers and artists, and South Africa’s through the Western and Eastern-bloc censure of apartheid. So, while not rich in sculpture, Senegal and South Africa were rich in connectivity and it is in connectivity, or the lack of it, that the real explanation lies for the obscurity of some artists and the international visibility of others.

A substantial part of the reason for this lies in the way curators conceive and carry out their projects, but behind international curators is money, since prominent exhibitions must be organized with the backing of corporate, foundation, or government sponsors, as well as the occasional wealthy collector seeking to bump up the market value of certain artists whose work he owns. Beginning with the economic realities, the Western art world situates the David and Goliath position of African artists competing for recognition on this international stage. Art dealers and dealer-collectors are the go-betweens in this transactionary process.

But there is a vast difference between the Hausa trader visiting the Adugbole compound (though he is also an “art dealer”) and, say, the highly successful New York dealer Larry Gagosian who in the 1990s began to sell the work of Seydou Keita after the photographer’s work had been shown anonymously in the *Africa Explores* exhibition in 1991, tracked down by André Magnin in Mali, and eventually exhibited in Paris. We might say that Gagosian’s beginnings were not so different from the Hausa trader’s: he started by selling posters of kittens to fellow students on the sidewalks near UCLA. But as his career took shape, he acquired a client base that purchased high-priced art for its investment potential. “Larry made it a business deal and business guys were more comfortable with that,” said Maurice Tuchman, the former chairman of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “It was like they were buying a building, or shares of IBM. No rigmarole.”¹³

Equally powerful are collector-dealers such as Jose Mugrabi, a former textile merchant in Colombia, and his sons Alberto and David.¹⁴ Their modus operandi is to corner the market by buying up a large number of the works by big name contemporary artists, so that they can then create scarcity and drive up the market value. They

have done this most prominently with the works of Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol, but also with the work of Diaspora artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. As a friend of Jose Mugrabi said to journalist Eric Konigsberg, “He had the belief, the capacity to assimilate, compute all the inputs, purify it, get rid of the fat and keep the caramel. He was buying Basquiat for \$8,000 a picture . . .” – paintings that now sell for as much as \$6 and \$8 million.

Thus the cost of one painting by a prominent Diaspora artist sold on the Western art market can exceed the value of all the art transactions in a year in most African countries – from the big city galleries to the tourist outlets and itinerant traders. Despite the comparatively modest selling prices in most places, wealthy Africans have been slow to warm to the idea of spending very much money on art.¹⁵ One Nigerian chief of my acquaintance, the owner of a private hospital in Abeokuta as well as a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud and a 14-carat gold-plated bed, once stated flatly that he would never consider paying more than the naira equivalent of a few hundred US dollars for a work of art. Although he had expensive tastes, he saw a painting as in the same category as a nicely upholstered chair in his sitting room (not unlike corporate boardroom art in the USA, chosen to match the decor). That was 20 years ago, and now there are indeed wealthy Nigerians who collect serious art.¹⁶ But unlike the case of Gagosian’s New York real estate magnates who buy art as an investment, this kind of commercial acquisition is not yet commonplace in the majority of African countries.

By contrast with Western metropoles, a typical largish African city, let’s say Kampala or Harare or Lubumbashi, will contain a handful of reliable collectors of whom the majority may be expatriates, business elites, and local artists and intellectuals.¹⁷ Expatriate patronage is usually drawn from the ranks of the British Council, Goethe Institute, French Cultural Center, and various embassies, NGOs, and universities. There are at least two problems with this: the best art eventually disappears with its collector to Europe and America, and, whenever there is serious political instability, expatriates usually vanish, leaving artists and their galleries in very vulnerable positions. In extreme cases, such as civil war, patronage may dry up altogether, as it did in Uganda during the war years.

The Case of Uganda: An Art World Lacuna

Uganda provides a revealing instance of how an entire country can remain beneath the radar of international curators, collectors, and scholars despite the presence of a major art school at Makerere University in Kampala, which regularly turns out new artists and which played an important part in training early modernists back in the 1960s. I’ll explore the reasons for this, which have to do with being, first, historically and geographically enclaved on the art world periphery, second, holding a strongly national, and often Kiganda, sense of artistic identity, and, finally, a simple lack of art world connections. I have chosen Uganda because it is a country I lived in for four years, which I return to nearly every year, and which has a plethora of underrecognized artists. But my argument will be that Uganda is actually rather typical of post-conflict societies, of which there are many in Africa, so more than a few of the main points apply to a range of countries.

Uganda’s lack of connectivity is due to both its history and geography: East Africa has been an artistic “periphery” to West Africa’s “center,” though Uganda, at 1,000

miles inland, is actually squarely in Central Africa both culturally and geographically. The leadership arts in the centralized kingdoms in the region of Lake Victoria involved elaborate music and dance traditions as well as fine royal architecture, but almost no sculpture: another reason for its obscurity to art historians. On the other hand, the Buganda kingdom attracted the interest of Sir James Frazer, comparative religionist at Cambridge University.¹⁸ Accordingly he sent out his disciple, the missionary John Roscoe, to write an ethnography while armed with a long and detailed questionnaire, "Questions on the manners, customs, religion, superstitions &c. of uncivilized or semicivilized people,"¹⁹ which would allow Buganda to be added to his scholarly comparisons in *The Golden Bough*.²⁰

Because of the visits of John Hanning Speke in 1862 (who was searching for the source of the Nile) and the journalist-adventurer Henry Morton Stanley in 1875, Kabaka Muteesa I, the king of Buganda, was "a familiar person to the literate Englishman of 1885."²¹ Victorian England's popular literature constructed an image of the Baganda²² which, on the one hand, compared them favorably to the Chinese and Japanese but, on the other, emphasized their cruelties, such as the regular practice of human sacrifice by Muteesa I and Mwanga, whom the British had to deal with during the late nineteenth-century scramble for Africa. Unlike Asante, Benin, and the Sokoto caliphate in West Africa, Buganda was never attacked and defeated militarily by the British: it remained a "special case" as a protectorate. This special status is important in grasping the strong hold that Buganda identity has been able to sustain for more than a century and its consequences for the manipulation of symbols in the processes of artmaking.

In the Buganda Agreement of 1900, the British promised the autonomy of Buganda kingdom within the larger Uganda Protectorate, which the Baganda themselves had helped bring under the British sphere of influence.²³ This special, and sometimes embattled, status has instilled in the Baganda a sense of entitlement for more than a century, and has set them against various postcolonial Ugandan heads of state. It has also created an ingrained belief in the resilience of their culture, with its complex mythos and multitude of ritual trappings. It was this array of representations – and their seven centuries of historical depth – which has provided a continuing source of themes to Kiganda artists through civil war and upheaval, up to the present.²⁴

Kampala has both formal art schools (now several, in fact) and workshops, which initially made it an important center in the early days of political independence (1962). Makerere University, which the British had established to train the country's elite, had the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art, named for the British artist, curator, and teacher who trained the first cadre of modern Ugandan artists.²⁵ In many ways the position of Kampala in the late 1950s and early 1960s was closely parallel to the University at Zaria and then Nsukka in Nigeria, where art schools were centers of creativity amidst growing political turmoil.²⁶ In both, a small cadre of artists was determined to usher in a kind of African modernity which also drew upon local sources of artisanal knowledge. At Makerere this happened first with artists such as Gregory Maloba working under Margaret Trowell, then from 1959 under Cecil (Sweeney) Todd, a committed modernist who previously taught at Rhodes University in South Africa, who took what was happening on Polly Street in Johannesburg into the more formally structured situation of a university classroom in Uganda.²⁷

But the major difference was that the civil war which engulfed Nsukka, horrific as it was, was over in three years (1967–1970). In Uganda this was just the beginning,

and the chaos and bloodshed wore on for 20 years from 1966 to 1986. It was ended only by a successful guerrilla war waged from 1981 to 1985 in the Luweero Triangle in Buganda, only miles from Kampala. No group of artists could hold out against such odds for so long.

The Art School is at the bottom of Makerere Hill only a few hundred feet from the Main Gate of the university, the site of heavy fighting. When I returned after a long absence in 1987, the walls of the Art School were riddled with bullet holes and there was no electricity or piped water on this once beautiful campus. The widely respected sculptor Francis Nnaggenda told me how he had preferred to work at night in his studio on campus and one night was seized by soldiers for this “suspicious activity” and brought to the notorious Makindye Prison where, as a rule, no one came out alive. He survived because an army officer recognized him as a university lecturer and took pity on him. But many other people did not survive. Other artists and intellectuals fled to neighboring Kenya, or further afield to England or the USA or Canada. At one point so many academic staff had fled that in order to stay open Makerere began to hire its own BA and MA students to teach classes as soon as they graduated, this in a university that prided itself on its “British” standards.

While Nsukka reinvented itself in the 1970s after the civil war, Makerere was barely functioning. The lack of a functioning print or photography studio or working kiln and the very limited supplies of paint deprived students of a chance to work with a variety of media. They also had no idea what was happening in the art world beyond Makerere’s doors, since the library no longer had new books or subscriptions, the Internet had not yet been invented, and no one came to Uganda during those years unless they absolutely had to.

By the time Kampala had been liberated by the guerrilla fighters of Yoweri Museveni (now President Museveni) in 1986, artmaking had, by necessity, been shifted toward practical ends such as government commissions for the design insignia on army uniforms. In returning to more expressive forms, Nnaggenda was an important role model for the students – his massive sculpture *War Victim* (1982–1986) was on display in the library, and the mere fact that he was not cowed by the regime displayed a special courage – but he works on a very large scale, taking years to complete a piece, and so was difficult to imitate.²⁸ His most successful students have been Namubiru Rose Kirumira, Kizito Maria Kasule, and Lilian Nabulime, who now teach in the School and have active careers as artists.

The effect of the wartime necessity of going back to traditional material and techniques was to reintroduce a move toward conservatism, in the sense of celebrating and using materials such as barkcloth (which is associated with Ugandan national identity, as well as with the Buganda kingdom, where it is associated with the kingship, with burial, and all levels of ceremonial).²⁹ At this point one might say, isn’t that essentially the same thing as Nsukka artists in Nigeria using traditional *uli* and *nsibidi* designs in modern media and compositions? Yes, but importantly, that was not all that happened in postwar Nsukka.

By this time (early 1990s) in Nigeria, Obiora Udechukwu was training a group of young artists at Nsukka (Chika Okeke, Sylvester Ogbechie, Olu Oguibe) who would also become, like him, critics and curators as well as practitioners. Makerere by contrast did not produce a cluster of writer-curators, but only artists.³⁰ While both groups of artists were exhibited at the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale and at the *Seven Stories* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London the same year, it was telling that the

Nsukka group was self-curated while the Ugandans were curated by expatriates, a German (at the Biennale) and a Kenyan (at Whitechapel), who had no long-term connection to them.³¹ The critical writing and curatorial talents of the young Nsukka artists has turned out to be a major factor in projecting their work into the international arena, underlining the fact once again that discourse about art often plays as crucial a role as the art itself in garnering critical attention.

In October 1997, Simon Ottenberg organized a major symposium and exhibition of art from Nsukka at the National Museum for African Art in Washington, including works by the above artists as well as Chike Aniakor, Tayo Adenaike, Barthosa Nkurumeh, and El Anatsui. The effect of all this exposure on both sides of the Atlantic was to propel them onto an international stage where they have maintained that visibility 15 years later, several by living and practicing in the USA, that is, by their own diasporization. Several exhibitions and books or catalogues later, the Nsukka phenomenon and its formative *uli* movement stand as a prime example of an episode in African art history which has been renarrated successfully in the Western art world.

To extend the comparison, Ugandan art was also included in the *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* project but the works were mainly complicated metaphors about dictatorship – President and Field Marshal General Idi Amin commanding an army of insects, and so on, which were executed in the old, prewar monster-slaying style first popularized by the students of Margaret Trowell. It disappeared without a trace in the Africa 95 smorgasbord.³² Similarly their work in the 1st Johannesburg Biennale had little aftereffect. The European curator who organized their show later retained ownership of their work in order to cover expenses and only returned it to them when threatened with a lawsuit. When I asked the artists in 2008 why they had not participated in other biennales, such as Dak'Art, since then, they cited this “disappearing artwork” problem (which African artists everywhere complain of) and perhaps inevitably, given the ludicrously small Makerere lecturer salaries, and their inability to pay the cost of sending work to foreign venues on their own.³³

But more than money, it is the absence of cultural brokerage, especially by high-profile curators, collectors, and dealers, which keeps countries like Uganda peripheralized in the international arena.³⁴ Zarina Bhimji, a critically acclaimed British photographer who left Uganda at the age of 12 during Amin’s mass expulsion of Asian families, has come to “represent” Uganda in major exhibitions such as *The Short Century* and *Documenta 11*. As well known an artist as she is, it is but an example of Uganda’s lack of international connectivity that no one at Makerere Art School had heard of her when I first brought up her name in 2008.

While a lack of connectivity with the larger art world is probably the major reason for the peripheral status of Uganda’s artists, it is not just a problem of visibility of their own art; equally important, most Makerere artists are unfamiliar with what their counterparts are creating abroad, in say, Nigeria or southern Africa, in francophone Africa, in Europe and America. When one inquires further, one discovers that exhibition catalogues from abroad, where students might have seen the work of various African artists, never reach the Art School, unless in the suitcase of an artist who has recently traveled. Needless to say, these are carefully protected and do not circulate except among good friends. This problem is actually continent-wide, even in relatively well-connected countries.

Some Sketches of Contemporary Ugandan Practice

The problem with exposing the particular frailties of Makerere stemming from years of isolation is that they are more than compensated by the vitality of Kampala as a place where art is continuing to happen. The most recent art initiatives include the opening of several small but vibrant new galleries, such as Afriart and Umoja (besides the old Nommo, the Makerere Art Gallery, and well-established Tuli Fanya),³⁵ the ambitious 32° East project of the Ugandan Arts Trust, along the lines of the Kuona Trust in Nairobi;³⁶ the continuation of the lively online arts and culture magazine *START*,³⁷ financed through the German Embassy; the new Austrian Government-funded Ndere cultural complex; the emergent Weaverbird art community starting up near Masaka; KLA ART 012, the Kampala Contemporary Art Festival in October 2012;³⁸ the annual “Controversial Art Project” public exhibition; the Sadolin construction site mural project; the European Union shared grant to the Uganda Museum and Tanzania National Museum; and many other art and culture initiatives. Kampala is quite the opposite of a dead zone when one looks at the level of creative ferment in and around the city but, if one only sees the catalogues of big international exhibitions in the West, one would never guess that any of this is happening.

At this point I want to switch from speaking in generalities to examining the practices of several Kampala artists in order to uncover the specifics of their allegiances and connections to local and international networks. When I began the interviews for this research I imagined three basic types of artist: the one who travels regularly to foreign countries attending workshops and residencies (a small handful of midcareer artists); the artist who is interested in a Ugandan audience and doesn't care much what is going on elsewhere (primarily older, established artists); and a third type who in theory would like to know about what is happening in international art but is basically clueless about how to do it (probably a lot of people, mostly young). However, this overly simplistic scenario was subject to alterations and revisions every time I talked to someone. I had left out artists like Maria Naita who specialize in large public sculpture commissions. I had also omitted artists who have found a specific patronage niche and work within those parameters, as well as the immigrant artist trained abroad somewhere whose work reflects other visual cultures. In the brief sketches that follow, I include examples of some of these.³⁹

Pilkington Ssengendo

Now in his early seventies, Ssengendo is perhaps the epitome of what I mean by an artist consumed with Kiganda culture as an inexhaustible source of imagery. Describing him as the second type of artist based on his intended audience actually misses the main point: Ssengendo and others like him are traditionalists in that they see a bottomless well of things Ugandan – myths, craftsmanship, materials – to be excavated and used, but this is strongly centered within the context of modern media, primarily painting. For many years he passed on these proclivities to Makerere art students. He now divides his time between a house and studio in town, and his farm a short distance away in the verdant rolling hills of *matoke* plantations which characterize Buganda: Winston Churchill's “pearl of Africa.” He tells me, in his measured, slightly oratorical style, why should Ugandan artists *not* be interested in their own culture first

and foremost? If they don't care about international art, so what? He says art can be about two things: "art for art's sake," that is, personal expression, or "art as cultural knowledge," and its transmission. It is this second category which motivates him. In one of his works, chains, padlocks, keys, and a beadwork Maasai necklace hang from the clotted impasto of a king's robes. ("The king collected everything, including riches from abroad which were kept locked up.") Figures loom in spaces which cannot contain them. He has developed a way to weave barkcloth by combining it with a cotton warp, and its rich ochre surfaces, when painted, provide the tactile quality of the background to his figures.⁴⁰

Transmission of cultural knowledge: it is not only older Ugandan artists who think this way: when Rose Kirumira studied Triangle Workshop artists in Zambia, South Africa and Uganda in 2005, she found that the substance of most so-called motivational letters which artists wrote to participate in a workshop cited the importance of transmitting their own cultural knowledge to other workshop participants. It is a kind of *idée fixe* of these encounters.

Francis Nnaggenda

If Ssengendo is the epitome of the Kiganda artist ensconced in tradition, his age mate Francis Nnaggenda is his opposite: passionately independent, even in the twilight of his career, despite his strong cultural ties to Buganda. His massive figures almost always conjure universal themes: the *War Victim*, refers, he once insisted, to all wars and all victims and, while it is a headless, armless and one-legged torso, it is meant to be triumphant.

Unlike Ssengendo, Nnaggenda is not a Makerere Art School graduate himself. He studied in Germany and believes that the size of the sculpture department at Munich Academy of Fine Arts was what made it possible for him to find the right experimental sculptor, an artist he now remembers only as "Jacobson," who encouraged him to work with nontraditional materials such as welded scrap metal – a kind of search for a compatible role model which he says isn't really possible at Makerere because of its smaller faculty. During the Amin period he spent two periods abroad, in Kenya and in Indiana (where he later returned for a second residency). In 1995 he went to the UK (Yorkshire) at Robert Loder's invitation to participate in the Pamoja workshop, when he also saw for the first time Henry Moore's works installed in the Yorkshire landscape.

For him, these travels extended his reach as an artist – the Indiana work is almost all painting – but since he was already well into his career they did not represent major turning points. Always a committed modernist, he nonetheless laments the loss of cultural knowledge among the present generation of students: "Today you'll find a young fellow, when you talk to him in Luganda [language of Buganda], he will tell you that I don't understand what you're saying, please speak in English . . . even you may say a certain proverb and he has never heard of it."⁴¹ Although much of his work is nonfigural (nowadays reassembled from discarded computer parts), it still contains deep cultural referents: he is a religious person, a Catholic, and also a traditionalist collector of Kiganda spears and other royal symbols. Nnaggenda is not possible to typecast, holding both modernist and traditionalist values, European-trained but a Makerere and national icon for a generation of students.

Namubiru Rose Kirumira

Namubiru Kirumira is probably Nnaggenda's best known student, receiving her BA, MFA, and PhD from Makerere and teaching as a lecturer there since 1987. Like Nnaggenda she keeps Kiganda culture close to hand as a possible resource, but not as the genesis of her ideas. These come from an active personal relationship with her materials, as well as from her exposure to the work of other artists she has met in various places, because almost alone among her colleagues she is constantly travelling abroad to workshops and residencies. In addition to attending a festival for women artists in Sweden in 2009, she has gone to Denmark annually for several years now to the same workshop which has started an onsite museum for its output. *Harem*, a work she completed there, consists of metal keyholes recycled from old Danish houses, plus a single old key from her own house at Makerere. She also created a pair of tall sentinel-like figures in a garden there overlooking the sea, in which the heads have been replaced by smooth stones which the owners can remove at will. These sentinels have an immediate resonance with those Nnaggenda created long ago when he returned to Uganda from Germany.⁴² She has been to Chang Chun, China to a one-month symposium supported by their ministry of culture, in which her sculpture, not considered large enough by the Chinese authorities, was then quickly copied on a larger scale by a team of eager young Chinese art students. She also has been to residencies in Winnipeg, Canada, New York, and Washington.

But perhaps most importantly for her career, she has been both participant in and organizer for several Triangle Trust Workshops in Africa. After meeting Robert Loder in 1995 when he first appeared at Makerere, she became interested in the Triangle philosophy – an intense two-week encounter of 20–25 artists organized by artists themselves, from no address, no office, essentially existing in a briefcase, or “on someone’s memory stick.”⁴³ That year she attended the Mbire workshop in Zambia for the first time, later returning twice more. The Uganda workshops that she organized after attending Mbire were named Ngoma, a dance with drums, and the first, held at Namasagali in 1998, focused on recruiting regional artists within Uganda instead of the usual international model.

The second Ngoma workshop in 2000 was a risky idea: she decided to locate it at the Buluba Leprosy Center in order to provide the artists with an unusual audience. (Lack of audience feedback is one of the weaknesses of the Triangle Workshops since they are usually held in out-of-the-way or enclosed spaces.) At first many of the participants were uneasy being around people usually shunned, but after seeing the intense interest of the patients day after day, they began to interact and ultimately the workshop was a great success. At the same time it chose to ignore one of the Triangle principles, that a workshop should have no expressed “theme.” The de facto theme was of course the social isolation of the patients and the ability of art to break through it.

In 2005, she attended both the Insaka workshop in a Zambia game reserve, and the well-established Thupelo workshop held at Greatmore Studios in Cape Town, this time as a researcher collecting material for her PhD. Recently I asked her how all this frequent workshop interaction has affected her own work. In two ways, she told me. First she takes more time at the beginning of a project thinking through what she is doing, a practice she learned from the more conceptual artists she has met, especially

from Western countries. Second, and this is closely related, her work now has more “finesse,” – it is more “finished,” not in the sense of the surfaces themselves, but more completely conceptualized.

Lilian Nabulime

Lilian Nabulime, another former Nnaggenda student who teaches at Makerere, has found her metier through her activism as a feminist artist and simultaneously through the personal tragedy of her husband’s death from HIV-AIDS. This in turn forced her to reassess her life and career so far and to move out from Makerere and Nnaggenda’s larger-than-life shadow to study abroad for her PhD.⁴⁴ Her doctoral thesis from Newcastle, England is in two parts, her own artwork in which she develops imagery which can be used to talk about AIDS, and her study of HIV-positive African women living in London. To overcome African women’s reluctance to discuss the normally taboo subject of their sexuality, she developed a series of small sculptures modeled from translucent white soap, semiabstract but still suggestive of human body parts. She also combines larger sculptures from wood with baskets of cowries in small installations, combining references to sickness and health with female sexuality. In 2011 she was awarded a Robert Sterling Clark Fellowship for African Artists, which brought her to the USA, followed by a Commonwealth Fellowship in the UK in 2012.

Kizito Maria Kasule

Kizito Maria Kasule, who teaches painting at Makerere, is also the founder and director of a new art school on the Entebbe Road between Kampala and Lake Victoria. He has named it Nagenda International Academy of Art and Design (NIAAD) after his former teacher and role model, Francis Nnaggenda, though Nnaggenda is not involved in its operation. Its mission is to admit artistically talented students who would have no chance of getting into Makerere, based on their academic credentials. So far he has kept it afloat with foundation support and his own money, and has already purchased land in Masaka, Buganda’s next largest town, for a second campus. Kizito is a charismatic personality, and this project allows him the full range of his ideas about pedagogy: among other things, the students are producing a substantial amount of political art in their painting and graphics classes. In 2010, it was the fire at the Kasubi Tombs. Next it was election campaigning. NIAAD is a tabula rasa insofar as the curriculum is at its beginning stage, so unlike at Makerere, anything seems possible.

Meanwhile, Kizito continues to attend to his own career. He is the type of artist whose lyrically figured, somewhat Matisse-like canvases find a ready market here and abroad in what might be called an interior design niche. But he is an artist of many parts, and is willing to try the political and experimental while continuing to produce his sensually appealing paintings. After a year in Ireland he returned to introduce installation art to a skeptical Kampala audience in the Makerere Gallery in 2006. One piece, a pit of charcoal with a small fire smoldering in the center, likened fractious multiparty politics in Uganda to pieces of charcoal in a sack and invoked the fear that it would once again be engulfed in flames. (Unfortunately this has come to pass, in

the violent demonstrations of 2011.) A second was a visual joke: a huge heap of garbage called *Please Mr Mayor* displays the ineffectiveness of political promises to “clean up” the city. The third, a thick carpet of leaves, refers to the endangered Mabira Forest, a large stretch of mahogany forest being cut down for export, but also the place where bodies were thrown during the days of ethnic and political killings, which gives it the aura of a mass grave being disturbed.

Kizito was invited to residencies in Namibia, Israel, Denmark, and Ireland in 2012 but, with his round-the-clock schedule of two jobs, didn’t have time to take any of them. He has been to all four countries before: in Ireland he did an MA, following his MFA and PhD at Makerere. He had an exhibition in Israel a few years ago, also one in New York, in short, like Kirumira, he is well connected to an art world outside East Africa and in that sense is anomalous among Ugandan artists.

Bruno Sserunkuuma

Like Kizito, Bruno Sserunkuuma seems to be in several places at once. A fine ceramic artist, he has developed a narrative style which is muted in color and abstract in its figural composition. Because of the ambiguous status of ceramics as both “art” and “craft” he has participated in a variety of international competitions. The invitations to these have usually been serendipitous, coming as they usually do as announcements to the ministry of gender and social development, which also includes “culture.” Of the Makerere artists, only Kirumira, Nabulime, and Sserunkuuma make a regular habit of checking ministries for these opportunities and are willing to go through the tedious paperwork of applying, and as a result they travel more.

His first opportunity came in 1998, when he entered the 4th Cairo International Biennale for Ceramics. As it happened, he was the only participant from sub-Saharan Africa, and went on to win two medals, one of them for “most upcoming young artist.” It was a revealing moment for him because it was his first exposure to conceptual approaches and installation formats, but the organizers told him to maintain his “African” approach and not to change to new styles (an interesting commentary on how the Egyptian art establishment views the Upper Nile). The award resulted in an article in the Kampala newspaper *New Vision* and a television interview, to the great excitement of his mother and other people from his home village.

In 2000 he participated in the 7th International African Arts and Crafts Exhibition sponsored by UNESCO in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Although his work arrived ahead of him, he had difficulties finding the airfare and arrived, after five flights, in the midst of the awards ceremony. Not understanding French, he was uncertain what was happening until he heard his name called: he had won second prize in the decorative objects division. This resulted in an invitation to exhibit in Paris in the International Exhibition for Designers the following year, and more orders for his work than he can possibly fill even now, more than a decade later.

In addition to his dedication to teaching and his own pursuit of the now required PhD, Sserunkuuma has devoted a major portion of his time to revitalizing women’s crafts in Uganda through a proposal which has been funded by UNESCO; he is the principal coordinator of a related research project on the craft industry with Middlesex University, UK, and a second research project on textile practices and entrepreneurship. Practicing what he preaches, he augments his modest Makerere salary with a

crafts stall adjacent to the National Theatre in Kampala, one of dozens promoting women's crafts from around the country (basketry, pottery, mat weaving, beadwork, as well as knitting, tailoring, etc.).

Kampala Artists Not at Makerere

Although Makerere Art School has continued to train the largest number of Kampala artists, it graduates many more than can be absorbed onto its teaching faculty. Nonetheless several have developed specialized practices which work within a particular patronage niche, such as Maria Naita, who executes large-scale public sculpture. Naita is a very intense young artist (Makerere BFA 1992, MFA 2000), part of a highly creative family: her brother David Kigozi is a painter and her sister now studies fashion design in the US. She is primarily a sculptor, casting large-scale works in copper, bronze, and fiberglass.

The first of these big commissions, executed with colleague George Kyeyune, her brother, sister, and various helpers, was for the Kabamba Barracks monument in 1995, commemorating Tarehe Sita ("February 6th"), the beginning of the 1981–1985 war of liberation.⁴⁵ It is a naturalistic image of Museveni, wearing battle fatigues and striding with a Kalashnikov rifle in hand. Major government-awarded commissions are an economic lifeline for many African artists who work on large-scale projects in expensive materials.⁴⁶

At the inspection by a group of generals, including General Elly Tumwine (also a Makerere-trained artist and a close comrade of Museveni during the guerrilla war), somebody pointed out that the figure was made of fiberglass, and if hit by lightning it would disappear in smoke. Maria, ever the practical artist, suggested they drill a hole in the top of Museveni's head and insert a metal rod. The generals were aghast – you can't do that to his head! – since they viewed it not only as a representation but as an embodiment of their leader. Such are the misunderstandings engendered by sculptural realism and the more literal military worldview, though it has helped local artists immeasurably that Tumwine has been a very effective mediator between them and a fairly art-immune head of state.⁴⁷ In this case he not only mediated but helped with the work on the monument itself.

This was not Naita and Kyeyune's only encounter with high officialdom. In 2007, the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) were scheduled to meet in Kampala and they were again awarded a commission and given only a little over two months to complete their proposal: a copper casting of a man, woman, and child walking, to be called *Stride* (Figure 26.1a and Figure 26.1b). They had to work seven days a week, up to midnight most nights, and at the end they were sleeping in the park on mattresses, eating takeout, and working nonstop. On the morning before the opening of the CHOGM conference, they cleaned everything up, President Museveni and his entourage came to inspect, he was very pleased with the result, and immediately invited Naita and Kyeyune to attend the state dinner and opening ceremony with Queen Elizabeth II of England that night. There were no seats left at the table but they were graciously served as honored guests in the courtyard at State House.

There are also expatriate artists practicing here. Like Maria Naita, Ahmed Abushariaa is in his early forties. He comes from south of Khartoum, has lived in Uganda about 10 years and was trained at the College of Fine and Applied Arts of Sudan, University



FIGURE 26.1 *from left to right*: a. Maria Naita and George Kyeyune. *Stride* (CHOGM Conference Monument), 2007. Cast bronze, Kampala. Photograph by Charles Naita. b. Detail of *Stride* with child model, in Naita's studio, Kampala. Photograph by Maria Naita, 2007.

of Science and Technology (formerly Sudan Polytechnic). Sudanese painting began to appear regularly in Kampala in the late 1990s, at Tuli Fanya gallery.⁴⁸ For a while, some Ugandan artists began to emulate their style, but gradually went back to their previous ways of working. Abushariaa works in a windowpane or grid structure of composition, each section a small, spare scene of flat, tiny elongated figures with scratched-in details (Figure 26.2).

White-clad men and women inhabit a sparse landscape first seen in the early 1960s in the drawings of Ibrahim El Salahi. The grid style of composition is also found in the painting of Issam Abdhlafiez, another Sudanese artist exhibited at Tuli Fanya.⁴⁹ Abushariaa works primarily in acrylic, but his latest exhibition at Tuli Fanya featured compositions in brown ink on paper. He frames some of his paintings with architectural elements such as columns, drawn from his visualizations of the town of Suakin on the Red Sea. Not only an actual site,⁵⁰ it is also a place of the mythopoeic imagination. Here, it is said, there is a fabled palace of 365 rooms, built in such a way that full sunlight enters only one room each day of the year. Because Uganda itself is so tropically verdant, these Sudanese paintings of desert landscapes and towns are a constant reminder that what an artist “sees,” particularly as an exile, is more an interior than an exterior reality – an observation made by El Salahi himself many years ago.⁵¹



FIGURE 26.2 Ahmed Abusharriah. *Crisis*, 2011. Acrylic. Collection of the artist, AfriArts Gallery, Kampala. Photograph by Sidney Kasfir.

The Connected, Disconnected, and Never Connected

In a seminar discussion at Makerere in 2010, I asked a group of PhD candidates to each name one or two artists – not Ugandan – whose work they admired: one replied, “Leonardo da Vinci and Damien Hirst.” Leonardo did not surprise me, since everyone at Makerere has to study European art history, but Damien Hirst? In fact, this art world superstar had actually visited the Art School the previous year, and this appearance had made an indelible impression. But unlike the well-traveled few I’ve already discussed (Nnaggenda and his most accomplished students), the great majority of Ugandan artists, while part of a local and national art world, neither strive to be – nor lay claim to be – members in a global network of exhibitions and markets. In contrast, for example, with the 50-odd artists in the New Museum in New York’s 2012 Triennial, of whom only four were born in the USA,⁵² they are neither exilic nor nomadic. At the same time, comfortable in their own skins, an energetic cadre of younger and mid-career artists and activists are bringing Uganda out of its long postwar night of recovery, starting galleries, community art ventures, making their mark in public spaces, and interacting with one another more or less constantly. Art from Uganda (and various other African countries with similar histories or geographies) exists at present beneath the global art radar. But one hopes the time is nearing for a larger audience of scholars, critics, collectors, and curators who profess an ongoing interest in art from Africa, whether territorial or extra-territorial, to begin looking at its Ugandan aspect more assiduously.⁵³

Notes

- 1 Ogbechie (2010).
- 2 An earlier version of parts of this chapter was given at Stanford University, CA, in 2009 and the remainder is based on fieldwork conducted during 2008, 2010, 2011, and

2012 in Uganda, for which the Emory University Provost's office provided travel support. I'd like to thank Sunanda Sanyal, Peter Probst, George Kyeyune, and Chika Okeke-Agulu for commenting on earlier drafts.

- 3 I use the term art world to mean the entire edifice of art production, exhibition, collection, and the curatorial and scholarly industry of those who write about it, as well as the audiences who come to see it and the institutions which exist for its collection, preservation, and sale. For an early treatment of the concept see Becker (2008) and a recent one, applied to Dakar, in Grabski (2009, 7–23).
- 4 Currently the most internationally known artist residing in Africa is El Anatsui, who is an exception in almost every way: a Ghanaian living and working for his entire career in Nigeria, a part of the former *uli* movement mentioned below, and the former teacher and mentor of several important diasporic Nigerian critics, artists, and curators, and the subject of a documentary and prominent interviews in Western media. Senegal, on the other hand, has become the most popular African destination for younger Western scholars in recent years and has become very visible due to the increasingly influential Dak'Art Biennale. The South African art world, larger than both Nigeria's and Senegal's, is a world of its own and at the same time historically as migratory as, say North America's.
- 5 There are of course gray areas, for example, when international curators are asked to serve as consultants or on selection juries at events such as the Dak'Art Biennale and the Trienal de Luanda. As an example, in 1997, Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian, was invited to be the artistic director of the second Johannesburg Biennale, a move that proved to be controversial within South Africa's indigenous art world. See Katchka, chapter 25 this volume.
- 6 See jegede, chapter 18 this volume.
- 7 For the way in which existing Nairobi networks interact, see Gerschultz (2012). An example of an “absentee-curated” network there would be Simon Njami's two-year initiative, called “Amnesia,” for which he recruited the local artist and arts administrator Jimmy Ogonga as facilitator. The publication of the same name brought out three issues. See Adjaye (2010, 354–360).
- 8 The fine art museums with trained Africanist curators have responded to this problem, though it is still typical for African displays to consist primarily of sculpture. While curators are increasingly including masquerade costumes as a way of enlivening an otherwise monochromatic installation, the Western-style art–craft boundary is still not easy to negotiate.
- 9 Okeke had actually begun these synthesizing experiments while still an art student in Zaria, but the coalescing of these ideas into what became known as the *uli* movement could not happen until the reopening of the University at Nsukka at the end of the civil war, when he became the head of the art department there.
- 10 Wolff (2012).
- 11 See Drewal, chapter 2 this volume.
- 12 See Grabski (2009) and Ukpokodu, chapter 21 this volume.
- 13 Segal (2009).
- 14 Konigsberg (2009).
- 15 \$400–600 is currently (2012) the most common selling price for a painting in galleries in Kampala, though a few artists can fetch four or five times this amount, and the price scale obviously would be different if they were exhibiting abroad, or even just over the border in Kenya.
- 16 See Ogbechie (2012) on the private collection of Femi Akinsanya.

- 17 By expatriates I do not mean tourists, who are usually averse to spending serious money on artworks.
- 18 The following three paragraphs appeared, in slightly different form, in Kasfir (2012, 57–59).
- 19 Frazer (1887–1889).
- 20 Frazer (1911–1915); Roscoe (1911).
- 21 Richards (1994, 161).
- 22 The Baganda are the subjects of the Buganda kingdom and their culture (in adjectival form) is Kiganda while the language is Luganda.
- 23 Mutibwa (2008, 5).
- 24 Makerere was founded to educate the Uganda elite, primarily the sons of chiefs and other higher functionaries. Due to its location in Kampala the student body has been disproportionately Kiganda, including the Art School. The leading secondary schools such as King's College, Buddo were also located in Buganda and served as the preparatory stage for entering Makerere.
- 25 Its official name has changed several times over the past half-century, as has its place within the university. Most recently, in February 2011, it merged with the technology and engineering faculties at Makerere to form CEDAT, the College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology. It is still too early to tell how this will affect pedagogy but it seems likely that cyber art will be one outcome.
- 26 The art department of the Zaria Institute of Technology became a part of the new Ahmadu Bello University. That of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, closed during the civil war but reopened in 1970.
- 27 See Sanyal, chapter 13 this volume.
- 28 Kasfir (2012, 58, fig. 4); Visonà, Poynor, and Cole (2008, 462, figs. 13–52).
- 29 Sanyal (2000).
- 30 I am not including here the unpublished PhD theses of Namubiru Rose Kirumira and Lilian Nabulime, or that of Angelo Kakande, since they appeared a decade later and are just now beginning to be read outside Africa. The first PhD-level artist-curator, Margaret Nagawa, is currently completing her thesis at Makerere after gaining curatorial training at Goldsmiths College, London, following art training at Makerere.
- 31 I am grateful to Chika Okeke-Agulu for reminding me of this difference. See, for example, his curation of the Nsukka section of the *Seven Stories* exhibition in London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1995 (Okeke-Agulu 1995).
- 32 During 1995, a "Year of Africa" was celebrated in many London museums and galleries, modeled on the resounding success of the "World of Islam" exhibitions held there in 1977. See Picton, chapter 16 this volume.
- 33 This has been largely due to the massive devaluation of Uganda's inflated postwar currency.
- 34 The main exception would be Robert Loder, the art collector and entrepreneur who has been the driving force behind the vast Triangle Arts Workshop network in Africa and elsewhere. Loder came to Makerere in 1995 and invited several artists including Nnaggenda and Kirumira to participate in workshops abroad, as well as purchasing several works for his private collection.
- 35 Recently renamed AKA Gallery but still known as Tuli Fanya by the art community.
- 36 32° East | Ugandan Arts Trust, like the Kuona Trust in Nairobi, is a communal artist space with studios, workshops, and an experimental exhibition space. The trust is

- located in Kansanga, Kampala (Rocca Gutteridge, personal communication, October 14, 2012).
- 37 *START Journal of Arts and Culture*, Kampala Arts Trust (<http://startjournal.org/>).
- 38 Held to coincide with Uganda's fiftieth anniversary of independence and organized by 32° East and seven other arts organizations, the multisited installation consisted of 12 shipping containers scattered throughout the city, each containing an exhibition curated by one artist. The projects ranged widely from dresses assembled from neckties in a secondhand clothing market (Stella Atal) to the use of elephants as an artistic language (Wasswa Donald) to photographs of an abandoned site on the shore of Lake Victoria where Polish refugees were sent during World War II (Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa) and the reimagining of Nakayima, an important local tree shrine and deity, as a series of metal sculptures (Bwambale Ivan Allan).
- 39 Several important artists have not been discussed because of space limitations; these include George Kyeyune, Ronex Ahimbisibwe, Joseph Ntensibe, David Kigozi, Ismael Kataregga, Donald Wasswa, Sane Eria Nsubuga, Daudi Karungi, and Edison Mugalu, as well as many others. Kampala is an artists' city.
- 40 Kasfir (2012, 59, figs. 6–9).
- 41 Kasfir (1999, 151).
- 42 Kasfir (1969).
- 43 The first workshop in a place would be organized by TAT (Triangle Arts Trust) and subsequent ones by artists who had attended the first. For some of the complications this caused, see Kirumira and Kasfir (2012).
- 44 The faculty senate at Makerere, in an attempt to adopt more consistent standards, decreed in 1999 that all Makerere lecturers must hold PhD degrees. The studio art PhD, while still uncommon in the USA, has begun to gain ground in the UK and in anglophone African universities such as Nsukka, though it is presenting numerous difficulties in its implementation at the Art School. The most prominent of these are a lack of PhD-level seminars and faculty with the experience to teach them.
- 45 Kasfir (2012, 62–63, figs. 14, 16).
- 46 In countries such as Senegal and Tunisia in the early independence period, Senghor and Bourghiba focused on tapestry commissions; in many other countries it has been large public monuments. In Uganda, as elsewhere today, there is brisk competition from the North Koreans for these commissions. See Kirkwood, chapter 28 this volume.
- 47 "The NRM [National Resistance Movement] that came to power in 1986 was inspired by a strong developmentalist ethos and considered the humanities of marginal significance at best and an inexcusable luxury at worst" (Mamdani 2007, 47).
- 48 Sudanese dissidents, artists, and intellectuals have long used Kampala as a refuge and diasporic staging ground for activism. Sudanese Nubians are also a particular presence since the days of Amin, when he gave them favored status as immigrants.
- 49 Tuli Fanya (2000).
- 50 See Um (2011) and Greenlaw (1995).
- 51 Beier (1993, 23–30).
- 52 Cotter (2012).
- 53 This finally began to happen in the fall of 2012. Kampala hosted its first major travelling exhibition, *Visionary Africa: Art at Work*, co-curated by architect David Adjaye and Simon Njami. Timed to coincide with Uganda's fiftieth anniversary jubilee, it

included *Urban Africa*, Adjaye's personal photographic survey of architecture in African capitals, selections from Njami's *A Useful Dream: 50 Years of African Photography*, and a host country section, *My Country . . . My Histories*, of Ugandan photographic archives and contemporary photographers, co-curated by Katrin Peters-Klaphake and Margaret Nagawa.

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Painted Visions under Rebel Domination

A Cultural Center and Political Imagination in Northern Côte d'Ivoire

Till Förster

Introduction

Rebel domination¹ is often thought of as arbitrary and associated with volatile environments that leave little space for anything beyond necessities and immediate survival. The provision of public goods may legitimate insurgents' domination without resort to expensive and often ineffective use of violence as the only basis of their domination.² At times, rebels implement cultural policies and fund cultural institutions, refuting the common assumption that military insurgents exclusively invest in power. The city of Korhogo in northern Côte d'Ivoire may serve as an example. Military insurgents captured it on September 19, 2002.³ The military actions were part of a nationwide insurgency that mainly aimed at overturning the regime of President Laurent Gbagbo, who had continued his predecessor's nationalistic policy of excluding citizens of northern origin from political participation. The notorious ideology of *Ivoirité*, literally "Ivoirianess," was a major driving force of the conflict. Because of its opposition to that ideology, the rebellion enjoyed significant popular support in all parts of the country that were affected by the exclusive policies of Gbagbo. However, the rebels were not able to overturn him as sitting president and had to establish some sort of governance in the areas under their control, which was roughly the northern half of the country and its center. The first few months of rebel rule were rather chaotic because they had not anticipated that their coup would fail. Step by step, they then set up new institutions as rebel commands in 10 zones of administration, among them the city of Korhogo and its vicinity. In 2005, the then newly appointed rebel commander of zone 10, to the surprise of many who had known him only as an arrogant and demanding, if not a brutal man, decided to (re)build a cultural center. It opened in February 2006, after local artists had embellished it with murals that covered interior and exterior walls. They were at liberty to paint whatever they thought best. The outcome was a remarkable series of murals to be appreciated by all citizens.

Painted by 15 artists, the paintings encapsulated how the urban population imagined its past, its present, and a better world yet to come. Many of the murals were cast in conventional genres as, for instance, scenes of traditional village life, but some paintings did not fit any of the existing modes of representation. When the center was repainted in 2009, artists took the opportunity to articulate the public's political sentiment towards both the rebel command in Korhogo and the sitting president in the southern half of the country. To do so, they developed a new repertoire, replete with new genres, but they also retained some of the existing paintings. This paper asks how the tension between the experience of past violence and the imagination of a better future informed the formation of these new genres. It asks how their creative transformation generated a cultural space that allowed the artists to address new social and political issues. The art that was created was an expression of the modern life-world with all its intricacies and complexities. It was the visible side of an expressive culture that embraced all aspects of the modern: its promises and its failures. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the relationship between the visual imagery and the popular imagination, claiming that there is no memory of the past unless the imagination can project an alternative to the present social order.

Picture, Image, Imagery, and Imagination

My basic heuristic tool, building on W. J. T. Mitchell's "picture theory,"⁴ is a distinction between material pictures and mental images. Pictures are not merely the material side of mental images; there is a constant tension between the two. The materiality of pictures and their perceptual character endows them with a sort of inner logic that may become visible as "style" and whose content becomes "genre." Style and genre both address similarities shared by pictures generated in the same cultural context. These similarities, however, also shape the spectators' understanding of what a particular picture should look like. As normative expectations, they become part of the spectator's mental image when perceiving a picture.

Usually, images are not stable mental representations of something out there – though they are sometimes perceived as such. Images bring to mind a possible future. While they actually fuse sensory perception and projections into one, they retain the illusion of a purely sensory experience; they have a quasi-perceptual character.⁵ Because of this, images can be very persuasive, at times even seductive. Unsurprisingly, this power of images is a well-established trope in art history, though less so in the social sciences. They may acquire a certain stability because human actors make – implicitly or explicitly – use of them in social life to communicate with others. A constant mutation and questioning of shared images would render regular communication almost impossible. As social beings, we rely on shared visions of our world that we hold in common.⁶

However, images are also subject to the mental activity of those who "see" them. Because an image does not exist as a material object, it can be modified and transformed at will. Images grow out of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. I will call this constant process *imagination*. This process has two aspects; one is individual, the other thoroughly social. Artists, for instance, may focus on their individual subjectivity to generate images that mirror their own projections, their "visions" that then turn into artworks. Imagination, however, also emerges from intersubjectivity, from

encounters with others. It often embraces large parts of society – and it can move entire societies. Utopias, as one example, are the result of a collective imagination.

In general, an image does not exist in isolation. It has to compete with other images, or, more precisely, the process of imagination breeds more than one image. Because of the power of images, the process of imagination has a political dimension. It is not separated from other political processes, though its precise relationship to other discursive formations needs further theoretical clarification. To address the multifaceted societal formation of images, I will use the term *imagery*. Imaginaries consist of images that occupy a particular place in the social world. Imaginaries are not closed systems; they are embedded in ongoing processes of social, political, and cultural articulation. It therefore does not come as a surprise that a cultural center, and in particular one that is founded by a rebel movement, engages in the formation of an imagery that addresses the past, the present, and the future at the same time as it deals with the urban society of Korhogo.

Korhogo as the Heart of Senufoland

By the end of the nineteenth century, Korhogo was a marketplace at the crossroads of two precolonial trade routes that linked the middle Niger to the southern forests. But, once the colonial administration established their offices there, it gained regional importance. Korhogo became a fast growing city and remained so until the outbreak of the military insurgency of 2002. However, because of the division of the country into two halves, Korhogo was then cut off from the southern parts of Côte d'Ivoire and from Abidjan with its harbour. Though the rural hinterland still looked at Korhogo as the dominant marketplace in the region, attracting traders from all over West Africa, the city's population actually stagnated after violence broke out.⁷ The city lost its significance as a hub for the national government of Côte d'Ivoire. Many well-paid civil servants and their families left Korhogo when the state administration ceased to function. The loss of their buying power was a severe blow to the city's economy; it was partially replaced by trade in inexpensive Asian commodities, most visibly motorcycles from China.⁸

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, however, Korhogo was much more than a provincial town with a few offices and a market. It was perceived as the cultural stronghold of the Senufo, an ethnicity that was largely a construction of the French colonizers, but is still spoken of in postcolonial political discourse as the biggest ethnic group in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The mayor of the city was always a direct descendant of Péléforo Gbon Coulibaly, one of the most powerful intermediary rulers of the French colonial empire and himself a Senufo. The French made him the *chef supérieur Sénoufo*, a position that did not exist in precolonial times. It was intended to provide the white colonial administration's intermediary some cultural legitimacy. *Le vieux Gbon*, “Gbon the old,” as he was called locally, dominated urban and regional politics to a degree that left little space for the ambitions of others. Cooperating closely with the French administration, his entire family became very wealthy and many Coulibalys held influential positions in various parts of the administration. In the 1950s, when it became apparent that the French would give up their colony, Gbon forged an alliance with the incoming leader of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Gbon became a member of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire – Rassemblement Démocratique

Africain (PDCI-RDA), later the single party of postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire until 1990. His successors engaged in political careers on that ticket and were repeatedly elected members of parliament or ministers in PDCI governments. The Coulibalys claimed that they represented the entire North with the Senufo as the rightful first settlers of the area. They were able to sustain an image of their family as the chiefly, even "royal" dynasty, deeply enrooted in local Senufo culture as well as in Islam, presented as the genuine religion of the North. The many Muslims of foreign origin, living as traders or as other types of merchants in Korhogo, accepted both claims, too.⁹

This cultural unity was staged during ritual and ceremonial events, particularly funerals. If an elder died in a village, the Coulibalys sent delegates to participate in the mourning rites and, in accordance with Islamic precepts, distributed alms among the family of the deceased.¹⁰ Such acts renewed the patrimonial ties that were threatened by the death of the elder and re-produced the image of the Coulibalys as both conscious of what was cast in French terms as "tradition" and as pious believers of the one true religion.

The Katana Festival and the Foundation of the Cultural Center

In 1983, and again 10 years later, in 1992, the mayors and dignitaries of the family decided to organize a festival that would bring the entire population of the region together in Korhogo as the capital of the Senufo. In 1983, Mayor Lanciné Gon Coulibaly held the first festival.¹¹ He introduced the name "Katana," meaning "good thing" in the language of the Senufo.¹² It had many faces, being a feast for the urban population of Korhogo and at the same time a highly political event that aimed at making claims at the national and even at the international level. For the ordinary population, it was a kind of trade fair accompanied by a lot of entertainment. Along the main road that linked the administrative center to the market, there were stands of companies presenting such products as agricultural engines, TV and stereo equipment, and household appliances. Besides the officially invited companies, small business people set up countless stalls, trying to sell bits and pieces of whatever they had to offer. There were musicians, coming from throughout the region, who performed more or less spontaneously wherever they could find an audience.

The mayor had invited foreign embassies and ambassadors to attend the festival, which took place at the end of January. Besides the former colonial master France, Canada, Belgium, Japan, and the neighboring Guinea sent delegations. Each nation was offered a special day to perform. The choice built at least partially on the mayor's existing social networks. The Ivoirian ambassador to Guinea was Lazéni Namogo Poto Coulibaly and hence from the same family. Apparently, Sékou Touré, then president of Guinea, wanted to leave a mark on the political landscape of Côte d'Ivoire. On good terms with the Coulibalys, but not with Félix Houphouët-Boigny, he decided to send the National Ballet of Guinea.¹³ The festival closed with a gala banquet in the prestigious hotel Le Mont Korhogo.

This first edition served as model for the second in 1992. Again, it was scheduled in mid-February, and, again, it had a commercial side. This time, however, the cultural aims were much more prominent. The former two-storied house of Péléforo Gbon Coulibaly – his "palace" in popular opinion – was refurbished and

transformed into a museum. Funded by the International African Institute's West African Museums Program, it was integrated into a larger scheme aimed at endowing the major provincial cities of Côte d'Ivoire with museums, where their cultural heritage would be preserved and displayed to tourists and the local audience.¹⁴ The choice of Coulibaly's former residence, despite it having been inhabited by homeless and mentally ill people since the death of the patriarch in 1962, was a direct reference to the former glory of his "kingdom." When the national minister of communication and culture, at the time Henriette Diabaté, decided to incorporate the dilapidated building in her program of Musées Regionaux, it was clear that its renovation would be a tribute to the mayor and his family. The mayor, again Lanciné Gon Coulibaly, tried to profit as much as he could from the external funding and opened the museum together with the minister. In addition, three days later, while the festival still went on, he received the official visit of Henri Konan Bédié, then president of the national assembly and a promising successor to the senescent sitting president of the nation. It was an occasion to renew the alliance of the two families, the Coulibalys and the Houphouëts, as the two pillars of PDCI power after independence. The event was a visible reconfirmation of his superiority in urban politics and made "Senufo culture" a sales argument of possible future campaigns.

Foreign embassies' participation was less prominent than in 1983. As Guinea had done almost 10 years earlier, another neighbouring country, Mali, sent its national ballet. The spectacular performance was scheduled for the last evening of the festival in a modest structure right opposite to the hotel Le Mont Korhogo, where the closing banquet would take place. In 1992, this site, which would later become the rebels' cultural center, was still an unroofed but walled multipurpose courtyard, constructed as an annex to the neighboring post office and known locally as Centre de la Jeunesse (Youth Center).¹⁵ A flat, cemented ground showed traces of coloured lines demarcating playing fields for basketball and hockey games and gave rise to a platform and doors leading to changing rooms. On occasion, it became an open-air discotheque that attracted the youth from all quarters of the city.

In 1992, the university crisis in Côte d'Ivoire had already gone into its third year. As the national university in Abidjan declared one *année blanche* after the other, many students were left without any chance to complete their studies.¹⁶ Bands such as Les Parents du Campus, "The Relatives from the Campus" or Sur-Choc, "Over-Shock," had created a novel musical style, the Zouglo.¹⁷ The term, borrowed from the Baule language, tellingly meant "mixture" or "trash." It decried the suffering of the students, their difficulties in making a living in the midst of underfunded institutions and harassment by state authorities. Their battle cry proclaimed: *Ceux-là, Houphouët ne pourra pas les commander!* "Houphouët will not be able to boss these guys around!"¹⁸ The unruly texts were not sung in good French, a marker of bourgeois identity in the postcolony, but in street slang. For the first time in history, the youths were proud of deviating from the dominant French culture.¹⁹ Zouglo was also a dance that developed its own movements called *coupé décalé*, "cut [and] shift." It soon spread over most of West and Central Africa and was also appropriated by the African Diaspora in Paris. When the director of the ballet moved on stage, he said he would never wrench his arms and legs like "Zougloists." This raised laughter. Both the words of the director and the laughter that they caused were political statements in the highly loaded atmosphere of the time.

From Katana to Fofié Kouakou Martin's Cultural Center

After 1992, the site of the Katana was more or less abandoned and only used sporadically for sports. The sports equipment deteriorated, and the little that had survived somehow disappeared over the years. When the rebellion broke out in 2002, the fighting brought all remaining activities in the youth center to an end. The iron entrance gate disappeared; the walls lay partially demolished; the yard was filled with debris, shrubs, and garbage from the surrounding houses. Fragments of bricks and cement were lying on the sidewalk of the main street that once linked the main market to the residence of the French commanding officer, the *commandant de cercle*. The avenue with trees whose trunks were painted white, as in southern France, never lost its representative role in the city. In 1964, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of independence, it had been one of the first streets to receive a tarmac surface. The former French offices then became the new prefecture, but the avenue remained the central axis of the city.

Rebel governance in Korhogo was heavily influenced by one strong man, the *comzone* Fofié Kouakou Martin, a former sergeant of the regular army. He had already participated in the coup against President Gbagbo's predecessor in 1999 and then again in a coup attempt against Gbagbo himself in 2001. Fofié was subsequently detained in cell 110 of the Fansara prison near Abidjan, where he was tortured. Released in 2002, he participated in the insurgency and set up a powerful militia, which became known as "Fansara 110." First in charge of security, he was appointed "commander of zone 10" (hence *comzone*) by the rebels' headquarters in 2005.²⁰ Being in charge of the second largest city under rebel control, a big challenge, was a chance to show that the rebellion could govern more effectively than the former state administration.²¹ Fofié developed a program to rebuild the city. Immediately after his nomination, he started an *opération ville propre*, urging all inhabitants, and in particular shop owners in the city's center, to clean the space around their houses. It was followed by numerous activities to renew the neglected or destroyed urban infrastructure.²²

His plans to renovate the city went beyond the economic agenda and included popular as well as cultural goals. Refurbishing an abandoned public garden – Fofié himself planted a tree – involved establishment of a bar and a restaurant and invitations to musicians and actors to perform under the soft shade of established acacias. Fofié further organized feasts for the children of Korhogo and their mothers. His most visible achievement in the field of culture was, however, the reconstruction of the cultural center where the dances of the last Katana had been performed. Fofié decided to construct a new, entirely roofed tribune on one side of the courtyard and to enlarge the existing small rooms, which were transformed into offices and equipped with computers and printers, on the other side. A ticket counter was embedded in the wall next to the entrance.

The construction material was officially "donated" by the big merchants and businessmen of Korhogo. De facto, however, it was requisitioned from them, often under dubious circumstances. Whoever wanted to do business in Korhogo at the time had to contribute. If the person did not do so voluntarily, Fofié could become quite unpleasant. Some merchants remembered the requisitions years later as involving tough negotiations with Fofié. As commander, Fofié insisted that he had

to bring a certain rigor to urban governance; something that the former civil administrators – who according to Fofié were preoccupied with filling their own pockets – had failed to achieve. The citizenry, as one might imagine, applauded Fofié for this.

The new center was to some extent built on the old one, but also broke with the past. Fofié gave it a new name, Womiengnon. The term, borrowed from local Senari, the language of the Senufo, literally translated, means “good for us all” or “beautiful for us all.”²³ The rebels translated it into French as *le bien commun*, “the common good.”²⁴ The opening of the new center on February 18, 2006 was a public event.²⁵ As a representative of the very few Europeans still living in Côte d’Ivoire, Catherine Delon, a French citizen and owner of the only bookshop that persisted in the rebel-held part of the country, was invited to act as patron and to attend the opening ceremony. Local dignitaries, including members of the Coulibaly family, also attended the celebration. After an inaugural speech, the *comzone* took his guests around to have a look at the center and in particular at its walls. They all displayed murals that were, he said, related to the history of the North, the Senufo, and the “city of Poro,” their famous secret society.²⁶ It was now that the public saw for the first time the murals that the rebel leader had commissioned from the artists in Korhogo.

2006 – Sapéro de Farafina and the First Image Program at Womiengnon

The murals were all painted in the two or three weeks that preceded the opening of the new cultural center. Fofié contacted Issa Koné, an artist whose works he had already been collecting and with whom his administration cooperated from time to time. Issa Koné is better known as Sapéro de Farafina,²⁷ his stage name. He has a weekly radio programme and at times a TV show on the local private radio and television station. He spells his name also as Sap-Héro, “the hero of Sap,” referring to SAPE, the Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo.²⁸ The movement is, he says, a truly African way of being modern, and it has created a contemporary African culture.²⁹ His own way of dressing, however, does not fit SAPE. He neither dresses up in expensive European clothing nor does he have dandified hairdos. Instead, Sapéro has long dreadlocks and often wears the very wide “traditional” trousers or the short, brown shirts of the peasants with pockets on all sides. Sapéro was and still is an eye-catching person in Korhogo. Because of his radio show and his unusual appearance, he is known all over the city.

Sapéro calls his studio Safarim *maison*³⁰ and sees it as a center to promote all crafts and arts in the North. He regularly invites other artists for strategizing sessions focused on launching new projects, gaining the attention of new clients and patrons, and advertising artists’ activities in the city and beyond. As a result of Sapéro’s unsuccessful application to turn this loosely bound network into a formally recognized nongovernmental organization (NGO) with access to the *chambre de métiers* (chamber of handicrafts) (part of the ministry of tourism and crafts), Safarim *maison* has a written mission statement that defines its purpose as an association of artists fostering development, including “capacity building,” “efficiency training,” etc. Aside from working with artists who run independent workshops elsewhere in the city, Sapéro has apprentices who do preparatory work for him, but also paint on their own account.

One of them, Chigata Coulibaly, has a website that displays excerpts from the program of Safarim *maison*.³¹

Sapéro received the commission to cover the walls of the cultural center with murals quite late, less than four weeks before the inauguration in January 2006. Partly because of the restricted time frame, but also because he saw an opportunity to advance his plans for the association of Korhogo's artists, he invited all artists of the city to contribute to the project. Even artists living on the other side of the de facto border in the southern city of Abidjan were encouraged to participate in the joint effort. In all, 15 painters and 5 sculptors responded. The wall panels at the center were numerous – they consisted of rectangles roughly 3.5×2 meters in size and were defined by the spurs that subdivided the walls. Artists and their apprentices each had two, at times three or four, tableaux to paint.

The choice of the subject was largely up to the artists, although Fofié had told Sapéro he wanted them “to respect” the purpose of the place, that is, “culture.” Besides, he said, he would like to see something about the new Korhogo, the new era that had begun with the rebellion of 2002. The rebel leader did not intervene directly in the execution of the painting. Yet he inspected the progress of the work regularly and rigorously saw to the provision of material – as he had also done with regard to the construction material for the roofed tribune, which was almost finished when the artists started to work.³²

The walls were covered on both sides with murals. As the structure faced Main Street, and those on the exterior wall and those surrounding the entrance occupied a prominent place in the city, no local artist refused to join the project. The ticket counter left to the entrance was but a narrow slot in the wall, hardly visible from the street. Here, on the first quite prominent panel, appeared a typical scene from “Senufo culture.” It showed a *kpoye* group, an ensemble of three xylophone players with two drummers engaged in praising a person through song and dance. Such groups are owned by villages and town quarters and their performances relate to identity. The *kpoye* bands articulate belonging and simultaneously generate social space, the social space of a unified community. They are seen by many as a primordial expression of Senufo culture.

Other panels also displayed scenes from Senufo culture and from rural life. Scenes depicting masks and dancers performing in front of circular huts with thatched roofs were obviously borrowed from a genre of easel painting on canvas, “the village in the times of old.”³³ As a narrative genre embedded in a discursive formation about the past and the present, idyllic scenes functioned as a critique of the selfish attitude that had, said many, brought Côte d'Ivoire to the present economic, social, and, above all, political disaster. The imagery therefore constituted a political statement, not a retreat from the public sphere, as Western spectators might have suspected.

Interestingly, this visual genre revealed how tourism, which had ceased to exist before the outbreak of the civil war in 2002, had left its traces on the collective visual memory. Paintings represented primarily canonized crafts, masks, and dances, those formerly proffered to tourists; for instance, the “holy dance” of the *boloï* and the *wābele* masks were depicted as performances in a village setting, even though such masks are not central to Senufo culture and do not belong to Poro, the most important institution of the segmental social order. If anything, these witch hunting masks, which exist in a comparatively small part of Senufoland, are a sign of how villagers tried to cope with the malcontents of modernity, rather than being a living testimony

to the peaceful “times of old.” The imagery of tourism also shaped the pictorial style. Masks were prominently displayed in the foreground and all iconographic details were made explicit, to a certain degree reproducing the way the masks were depicted in coffee table books and on posters for the tourist market. In the local setting, the masks perform only late in the day and at night, and the spectators cannot see much more than a fuzzy shape moving through the village.

Further attention needs to be paid to this population’s shared visual awareness of what paintings should look like. The murals in the cultural center were accessible to many, as were the paintings in restaurants, big hotels, pharmacies, and, sometimes, offices. While the mural painting was in progress, knowledgeable bystanders brought their opinion on the scenes into play; they often pointed out missing features they associated with an ancestral lifestyle. More precise criticism came, however, from the artists themselves. Sapéro remembers animated debates about how to depict a particular figure and how to design a panel so that it fulfilled the purpose of the center. The artists found it difficult to decide because they could not imagine clearly the center’s only nebulously defined purpose. Finally, they chose a combination of different genre paintings.

A second genre, its roots also in urban visual culture, consisted of pictures of sportsmen and women. Football, handball, and other games were most prominent. Wrestling and the martial arts came next as they were very popular in the city, which accommodated five big clubs of that kind. Unlike the first genre, the sports genre was not appreciated by tourists or by other outsiders, such as expatriates working for development agencies or international NGOs. Before 2002, they had been an important clientele for the artists living in Korhogo. This second genre was seldom reproduced on canvas. Sports paintings existed in public places such as schoolyards, the municipal swimming pool, and in private sports clubs. The artists reproduced pictures of that genre in part because they assumed that the center would primarily house sports events after its completion.

Picturing the Experience of the Past

Though the two genres were not labelled by name by the ordinary urban populace, most visitors and passersby were familiar with these pictures and related them to their experience of urban visual culture. However, several artists produced paintings that did not fit either conventional genre. Sapéro was the most courageous. He painted the most prominent panel inside the court, right opposite the entrance and the stand of honor. All visitors entering the center were bound to look at his tableaux before becoming aware of the other panels.

Sapéro’s painting showed a cityscape with a broad street in the front and a skyline of modern houses in the background (Figure 27.1a). To the right of the roadside stands a troop carrier marked FANCI. The acronym stands for Forces Armées Nationales de Côte d’Ivoire, the national army of the first republic and the Gbagbo government.³⁴ Soldiers of the oppressive regimes and civilians on the street are clearly distinguished; the former wear uniforms, while the latter are dressed in *boubous*, the long caftans that Muslims usually wear in northern Côte d’Ivoire, or in ordinary cloth. Three interactions between soldiers and local people are depicted. On the left, a soldier with a gun grabs a young man by the shoulder. The trembling man tries to

(a)



(b)



FIGURE 27.1 *from top to bottom*: a. Sapéro. *Crise d'identité* (*Identity Crisis*), 2006. Detail of mural, paint on cement wall. b. Sapéro. *Transitions de l'histoire* (*Historical Transitions*) (alterations made to this section of the mural in 2009). Paint on cement wall. Photographs by Till Förster.

hold the soldier off by pushing him back with his hand. A tableau in the background shows a fleeing man pursued by a soldier, again with a gun in hand; the civilian drops a tiny card behind his back, a national identity card.

The third scene in the middle of the panel is more brutal than the other two and captures the viewer's attention. An unarmed soldier assaults an old man, dressed in a light yellow *boubou*, and a pregnant woman, dressed in an ordinary wrapper and a simple yellow blouse. The elder with white hair and beard falls backwards on the ground and loses one of his sandals. He is captured as he apologizes: *padon misié*

(“excuse me, sir”). The two words, written in Ivoirian French, are indicative of the old man’s lack of formal education. The soldier simultaneously batters the pregnant woman, hitting her belly with his left hand. She reacts by contorting her face in pain.

In a fourth and last scene (right foreground), a soldier shown with a machine gun inspects the identity card of another old man, this one dressed in a white *boubou*. The passport photo is clearly visible. The elder quivers and gestures in despair, lifting his right hand to his chin as he looks at the soldier in front of him.

A crowd of people close to the houses in the background witnesses these events without daring to intervene. A white thundercloud rises in the sky and lightning descends on the houses. In the upper right corner of the tableau, another soldier, this one larger than life, shakes his fist and shouts, “Stop!” A cap with a star identifies him as a rebel. He has a strong, long black beard – he is Fofié Koakou Martin, the chief rebel of Korhogo. He holds a Kalashnikov in his left hand; the sound of the firing gun is indicated through writing, *ya na marrrr!!* Sapéro’s painting is a plain and unequivocal image of what fuelled the rebellion of 2002: the constant harassment of the ordinary populace in the North by arrogant and brutal men in uniforms from the South. It is an image of the collective experience of second-class citizenship. As such, the tableau is not a depiction of an actual event, rather, it casts that collective experience into a visible picture.

Sapéro signed the panel in the middle, right behind the sound of the machine gun. He knew that his representation of this crucial historical moment could entail considerable personal risk. While he was still working on the painting, the rebel commander showed up to supervise the artists’ progress. Sapéro, unaware of Fofié’s presence until another artist alerted him to have a look around, reacted with fear when he saw the commander. Fofié’s question as to the identity of the man in the back could have been threatening to Sapéro, who had not sought permission to portray the rebel leader and Fofié was known for his arbitrary and rude dealings with people who did not meet his expectations. Sapéro later told me that he believed he had seen a frown on Fofié’s face, but, he explained, “There was nothing . . . This is a man who wants to rebuild the city.” Fofié told him to continue and to attend the center’s opening.³⁵

Other panels featured political content. The head of Ernesto Che Guevara, whose cap bore a star similar to those of the insurgents, filled the panel to the left. It adopted the usual style of Che Guevara portraits based on the iconic photo taken by Alberto Korda on March 5, 1960. The artists at Safarim *maison*, who were unfamiliar with Guevara’s name, explained to me, “This was a man who fought for the poor – in some other part of Africa.”³⁶ When I identified Guevara as a Latin American revolutionary who had mainly fought in Cuba, the artists agreed that it did not change anything, as long as he was fighting for the rights of the suppressed. His iconic portrait stood for the will to give a voice to those who suffered from an unjust regime.

Closer to the artists’ own past were two other tableaux. The first, a scene from colonial life, shows two French officers and six *tirailleurs sénégalais*, “Senegalese Rifles,” the African auxiliary troops of the colonial army, as they are arresting three men in a village.³⁷ Here the style is naturalistic. According to Sapéro, the scene was inspired by pictures in history textbooks.³⁸ The French officers, dressed in blue uniforms, try to separate the captured men from their wives and families; the African soldiers, seen in dark green attire with white caps, assist them and push the captives onto a truck. Some of the details are remarkable, for instance, one of the French officers is backed by an African soldier who pushes him from behind. Such acts would not have been permitted by the French colonial army.



FIGURE 27.2 *from left to right*: a. Sapéro. *La tour de Babel* (*Tower of Babel*), 2006. Portion of a mural, paint on cement wall. b. Sapéro. *Le commandant des rebels construit la ville de Korhogo* (*The Rebel Commander Constructs the Town of Korhogo*), 2006. Another portion of the same mural, paint on cement wall. Photographs by Till Förster.

Yet another panel is dedicated to the more recent, postcolonial history of Côte d'Ivoire (Figure 27.2a). It shows a meeting hall with well-dressed men sitting on the right. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the founding father of the nation, is seen on the left. He wears a black suit, his chest embellished with medals, his left hand raised. A table in the center holds a kind of bowl decorated with the emblem of Côte d'Ivoire, the contour of the country, and two ivory tusks. A picture on the wall, subtitled *Tour de Babel* (*Tower of Babel*), shows a crowd of people surrounding a pyramid. Sapéro, who painted the panel, explained that the men in this scene are all talking without listening to each other. They all speak different languages, sowing confusion in the manner of the first president, who constructed a Tower of Babel that was bound to crumble.

Such a negative statement about the founding father was exceptional – even under rebel domination. The status of the “old man,” as he was usually called by ordinary people, was sacrosanct, and even after his death in 1993, many politicians still legitimized their own ambitions by claiming that they would just do what “the old man” would have done. As such, the panel can be seen as a statement about the continuity of political attitudes, although by Sapéro’s admission this may not be immediately obvious to spectators. At the time of painting, politicians were still fighting amongst, rather than listening to, each other. The assumption that the panel was designed to honor the former president later affected its destiny.

Imageries of a Better Future

A third group of panels addressed the future of Korhogo as a modern and “developed” city. On the exterior wall of the center, the rebel commander was depicted, also by Sapéro, with a hammer and a chisel working hard rocks (Figure 27.2b). A few thatched houses visible behind him on the left indicated that he worked for a rural Senufo “community.” A basket with utensils stood on the right and a small figure on a pedestal, reminiscent of wooden Senufo statues, watched Fofié at work on the “foundations” of



FIGURE 27.3 *from left to right*: a. Sapéro, *Place de l'Indépendance* (*Independence Square*), 2006. Portion of a mural, paint on cement wall. b. Samson, *L'avenir de la ville* (*The Future of the Town*) (alterations made to this section of the mural in 2009). Paint on cement wall. Photographs by Till Förster.

a new Senufo village, explained the artists. Sapéro, who had previously painted this scene on canvas, had used a small wooden statue in his studio as a model.

Another mural on the exterior wall, again by Sapéro, showed Independence Square, not far from the cultural center. Every person living in Korhogo associates this square with two aspects of history. During colonial domination, when it was lined by the building of the prefecture on one side, and the town hall on the other, it had served as a ceremonial arena and a small traffic island with a high flagpole displayed the French *tricolore*. After 1960, the latter was replaced with the postcolonial version of this flag, the *tricolore de Côte d'Ivoire*. In an attempt to show that times were changing, the *comzone* had invited the fine artists and the architects to submit plans “to develop” the city, that is, to refurbish the buildings around the square and other prestigious places in town, and to design monuments. But aside from a monument to the unknown rebel soldier, realization of these projects only went as far as building pedestals and bases for future projects; since then, a concrete base has graced the middle of Independence Square.

Sapéro, who had submitted plans for a monument for consideration, now used the exterior wall of the cultural center to visually articulate his vision of a future Independence Square (Figure 27.3a). In the middle, he painted his proposed monument, on the left, the building of the prefecture and on the right, the town hall. The square itself showed a fine black tarmac and architectural elements that had recently been completed or were planned, for example a wall that separated the two buildings from the square. Sapéro’s painted monument resembled his original plans; added features, however, included the prominent display of the date of the military insurgency, September 19, and a disproportionately small man dressed in a waistcloth who climbed up the monument’s support pole. The artist briefly commented that it signified the persistence of an old way of life in a new environment.

Other murals addressed contemporary life or showed a future replete with men sitting in offices equipped with various business machines, in particular computers, and landline and mobile phones. A few paintings commented on the present political situation of the country. A mural by the painter called Kassem showed Côte d’Ivoire as an egg flanked by ivory tusks that were topped by seated elephants blowing their

trunks. A human hand arose out of the egg. The picture was subtitled *La renaissance*. Other murals showed the contours of Côte d'Ivoire with a bleeding heart, or the country carried by a sweating elephant. Another painting was titled *L'Afrique se meurt* (Africa Commits Suicide). The apparently more critical attitude of the artist, who signed the mural as Cooleess, was not well received by the public. His was the only mural that was mutilated.³⁹

The Renewal of 2009

As the paint used in 2006 was of poor quality, the murals, affected by the weather and visitors' urge to touch them, deteriorated. When the rainy season of 2009 ended, Fofié Kouakou urged Sapéro, who functioned as an intermediary, to organize the artists and to repaint the entire center. Some of the artists who participated in 2006 were either no longer in town or dropped out because there was no promise of payment. As a result, the 2009 group of artists was significantly smaller than that of three years earlier.

The social and political setting had changed, too. At the time, in the second half of 2009, a strong majority believed that the time of rebel governance would soon come to an end. Another widely shared conviction was that the country, at long last, needed some kind of reconciliation. Fofié was still commander of zone 10, but he had been ordered to organize the transition from rebel governance to state-run public services. The central rebel command very reluctantly engaged in this process, suspecting that this transition would give the Gbagbo ticket better chances in the upcoming elections. Still, in mid-2010, when the 10 zones of the rebel administration were officially dismantled, Fofié controlled most of the public services provided in and around Korhogo, albeit that his ability to maneuver was more restricted.

The genres of 2006 were maintained but entailed shifts in regards to subject and signification. The most stable genre was that of the "old Senufo culture." The existing murals showing masks and dances were renewed or, more often, replaced by similar paintings. Thus, xylophone players now praised an old man sitting in front of them, the *boloï* dancers now performed in front of a long row of thatched houses, and the *wâbele* performance was replaced by another masquerade. Yet, there were differences in how such images were framed.

A bucolic landscape, a sunset over the sea with trees in the foreground and birds in the sky, caused a debate among the artists. The painters, Florent and Alf Décor, were accused of plagiarizing someone else's work and of evading what was at stake in Korhogo today. The two unconnected allegations came from an artist who had specialized in landscape painting. But, as many artists in Korhogo were producing such paintings, Sapéro, as intermediary patron of the cultural center, in the end decided that this allegation was invalid and the mural remained. More interesting was the artists' reaction to the second allegation. They claimed that the idyllic landscape, devoid of traces of human existence, was a statement about what had been lost. It was intended to direct spectators' attention to what was once a better world.⁴⁰ Landscape panels by other artists combined visual reference to "the times of old" with reference to contemporary life. Kora harps, for example, were displayed in front of multistoried houses, while electric guitars were shown in "traditional" village environments.

The sports genre also did not change much. The wrestlers were still there, but now they had an audience. The kung fu fighters were still the same, but they were painted more brightly. Footballers still played ball, and athletes ran and jumped as they had done in 2006.

What really changed were the murals about history and the present political situation. Many of them disappeared. President Houphouët-Boigny constructing the Tower of Babel was replaced by an old man playing the *kora*. The colonial scene with the truck and the capture of the villagers was covered by a painting featuring a sports event. More interesting was the fate of Sapéro's mural, which depicted the roots of the Ivoirian conflict (see Figure 27.1a and Figure 27.1b). In the process of reworking this centrally located mural, Sapéro gave it a completely new meaning. The entire tableau is now divided into two parts. The right half of the mural retains the grey background of the tarmac street and the nearly white clouds above. The soldier still examines the identity card of the trembling old man in the lower right corner, but the artist repainted the old man's face to make it look more realistic. An additional soldier now stands behind the old man and grabs him by the throat. He holds a gun and shoots it in the air. The soldier, who formerly harassed the old man and the pregnant woman in another scene, now points a pistol at the heart of another old man dressed in a blue *boubou* in front of him. Other scenes of violence are sketched in the background. Tusks demarcate a light space hovering above the scene. In it, Sapéro wrote in big letters *Hier!*, “Yesterday!”

The left side of the tableau is now completely different. It is titled *Pour 2Main* (For 2Morrow) at the upper margin of the wall. The violence has ceased. Two scenes of compassion both revolve around a soldier. One is a member of the rebel army, indicated by the letters FAFN, Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles, on his cap. The other belongs to the troops loyal to the Gbagbo regime, FANCI. Both attend to civilians. The FAFN soldier supports an old man with a walking stick. The FANCI soldier threatens a thief, who has stolen the bag of a woman standing behind him, but merely arrests the young man whose arms are raised. Bystanders raise their arms and shout in praise. Parts of the former cityscape are still visible, but the sky has turned into a dark grey. Fofié's face is no longer visible.

The message was clear. After a time of violence and civil war, everybody longed for a peaceful, united Côte d'Ivoire, a just and nonviolent social order. Sapéro's optimistic vision of the future had an immediate impact on the imagination of the center's visitors. According to the artist, visitors almost always stopped in front of this particular mural and commented upon it. Some voiced doubts: “Will that ever happen?” Others saw it as normative statement: “Yes, It should be like this.” Still others complained about the recent past's lack of social cohesion.

The cohesion of the postcolony, in fact, figured prominently in what emerged as a new genre, one preoccupied with the present state of Côte d'Ivoire. In one panel, a long narrow strip of fabric, woven by an old woman, illustrates the “common thread” that should run through the society and signify unity. Another tableau showed three men sewing the three colored bands of the Ivoirian flag together; an elephant watches over them. The most impressive mural was, at least for the members of Safarim *maison*, a broad panel that showed two rows of people holding a giant egg in their midst. SAM, the artist, explained that the egg stood for Côte d'Ivoire – simultaneously precious and fragile. Only when the people consciously embrace the enormous task ahead of them, would the egg survive.

Not all artists subscribed to a positive vision of the future. The painter known as Samson painted a darker, sinister view in quite somber, darker shades of grey. It depicts a cityscape with highrises (see Figure 27.3b) and three young men dressed in local varieties of hiphop fashion. A young, muscular man sings into a microphone. Another, in the middle of this trio, wears a jacket with a hood that partially covers his head; *Dony's LX* is written across his belly, the name of a Parisian rapper.⁴¹ On the left, a young man rides on a skateboard, also hiding his head under a hood. Of the artists of Safarim *maison*, only Chigata said that the mural was about the future of Korhogo as a modern city.

Imagery and the Political Imagination of Past, Present, and Future

Comparing the murals of 2006 and 2009 raises basic questions about their character as pictures, as popular imagery, and as imagination of an alternative social order. However, first, a word must be said about their status as artworks. The majority of the painters saw themselves as artists, not as mere craftsmen. All of them were running workshops that also executed purely decorative orders. Many of them made a living as painters of signboards and other advertisements.⁴² Nonetheless, most of them aimed at more, complaining that there were just no connoisseurs and art collectors in Korhogo – with the notable exception of the rebel commander. They participated in the mural painting to attract new customers and perhaps a patron from the international art world. To this end, they painted a panel close to the center’s entrance with their artist names followed by their mobile phone numbers.

All distinguished between commissioned works and their “real” artworks painted on canvas in their studios. The murals were conceptualized in the same vein as commercial work and their longevity did not matter. Nobody saw a need to preserve the initial paintings of 2006.⁴³ What seemed to be a disregard for their former artwork, however, opened a space for critical review by the artists as a professional group. It allowed them to pick up the images that had grown out of the popular imagination since 2006. In other words, the process of imagination became visible only through the shifting imagery, the painted and repainted pictures on the walls of the cultural center.

A closer look at the murals reveals not only a shift in the imagery, but also alludes to the persuasive power of images. The 2006 mural paintings were mainly images of the past. But they did not simply replicate the former, dominant discourse about the nation by visual means. They offered, for instance, a critique of Houphouët-Boigny, the once sacrosanct *père de la nation*, “father of the nation.” Instead of praising him as having brought independence, he was depicted as a man who had destabilized the nation. The painting bestowed history with a new meaning. And the fact that this chapter of Ivoirian history was no longer cast into a stable image meant that other chapters could be more ambiguous, too.

The most prominent panel of the 2006 murals had no dislocating effect in the societal context of the rebellion. It displayed the then widely supported interpretation of the historical situation that caused the insurgency: ordinary people were harassed by the soldiers of the national army, and the rebel commander brought an end to what the vast majority of the population had experienced as outright discrimination.⁴⁴ As an

image, it was an expression of the political imagination of the entire society in the North. As a picture, it was approved by the rebel commander himself – not least because he wanted to foster this image among the general populace. It showed that the insurgency was a legitimate act against oppression. The mural did not stir any debate. With very few exceptions, everybody I talked to stated that this was an appropriate depiction of the injustice and the suffering that they had to go through under the Gbagbo regime.

In 2009, however, the imagery had changed. The very same panel became a statement about a possible future state of society. Rebels and national soldiers working hand in hand had not yet occurred – regardless of all attempts by the United Nations and other international bodies to bring the two militaries together. Spontaneous comments often conveyed doubt that such cooperation would ever become reality. On the one hand, the spectators judged the situation very appropriately as *pas encore mûre*, “not ready yet.” But, on the other, the image of an alternative social order was also not rejected.

As its counterpart in 2006, the newly painted picture related to the political imagination of the population – though now rather as a reversal of the current state of society. It projected a normative image of an alternative social order onto the walls of the center. The visitors as spectators were not sure if it would ever become reality, or if it would always remain a dream. But as a political image of a possibly peaceful future, it attracted their attention. Nobody said that they did not want such a peaceful society to emerge. The projective element of the image became a difficult, perhaps illusory, but nonetheless attractive element of the picture on the wall.

Between 2006 and 2009, the popular imagination had worked on the political imaginaries. The images that were then transformed into pictures had increasingly turned into normative statements on how the social world should be. They articulated societal aims – aims that were perhaps still unrealistic, but that were increasingly to inform the political agenda. More precisely, the visual imagery and the political imagination dialectically related to each other. The presence of the murals in the cultural center nourished hopes that these images of a better future would one day become reality.

Notes

- 1 Rebel domination is understood as the more or less permanent occupation of a part of a state’s territory by groups or forces that are not controlled by the state or its subsidiary organisations (in general, Mampilly 2011).
- 2 The concept of basic legitimacy is adopted from von Trotha (1995, 2000) who builds on Popitz (1992).
- 3 On the Ivoirian crisis in general see Poamé (2007), who also provides a chronology of the major events.
- 4 Mitchell (1995).
- 5 An appropriate phenomenological term for this capacity is German *Appräsentation*, usually translated into English as “appresentation.” The term was introduced by Edmund Husserl in his *Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität* and later elaborated by Alfred Schütz (1966). For a sociological and anthropological perspective, see also Soeffner (2004).

- 6 An outstanding, seminal work was Freedberg (1989). A more recent influential publication is Mitchell (2005). From a social science perspective, the theme is elaborated by Castoriadis (1998) and other authors. See also Jewsiewicki, chapter 17 this volume.
- 7 There are no reliable figures. The present population is estimated at 170,000 to 212,000 inhabitants (Populationdata.net 2010).
- 8 The trade in motorcycles was perhaps the most visible aspect of the economic transformation. Many other commodities were imported from China, India, and other Asian countries through the ports of Guinea, Ghana, and Togo and sold back to residents of other neighbouring countries. As there were no custom fees, the North had attracted many traders who profited from the low prices in that stateless area.
- 9 The only group that questioned the “good faith” of the local political elite were the few reformists such as the Wahhabis (Launay 1992, 121–125).
- 10 Förster (1995).
- 11 Coulibaly (2004, 330–332).
- 12 The term has a subtle connotation in Senari, a vernacular language, as it may also mean “sweet thing” or “joyful thing.”
- 13 Coulibaly (2004, 147–148).
- 14 Savané (1994).
- 15 Youth in Ivoirian French does not necessarily mean that a person is young in physical age. It means that the person has not lived up to his or her social ambitions. An unmarried man who does not have a family yet is still considered young, even at the age of 40 or over.
- 16 Literally “white year,” it meant that no courses were given. Officially, the university never closed completely and continued to organize exams – which the students regularly failed because there was no teaching.
- 17 Other bands were Magic System, Les Garagistes, Mercenaires, Yode et Siro, and Espoir 2000. For a general overview see Konaté (2002).
- 18 Unfortunately, the rhythm of the French slang does not translate into English. The sentence sounds almost like a song and invites the listeners to join.
- 19 Touré (1981).
- 20 The territory under rebel domination was, until summer 2010, divided in ten administrative zones. See Heitz (2009) for another mode of rebel domination in the West of Côte d’Ivoire.
- 21 Sapéro, personal communication, February 5, 2009. Sapéro was heading the group of artists that negotiated with Fofié on the renovation of the cultural center. According to him, Fofié stated repeatedly that he wanted to show that they, the rebels, were performing better than the former “functionaries” of the state.
- 22 All his activities were put on the website of his administration, which carried the name of the prison where Fofié had been detained and his cell number, www.fansara110.com. The site displayed a visual and verbal documentation of his works and a biography of Fofié. It has not been visible since the official end of the rebellion in autumn 2011.
- 23 Senari does not distinguish between “good” and “beautiful.” The modern autonomy of the arts and aesthetic experience does not exist in these cultures (Förster 1997).
- 24 This was posted on the now defunct www.fansara110.com website of the former rebel leader, Fofié Kouakou Martin.
- 25 The opening ceremony was documented on the now defunct www.fansara110.com website.

- 26 Sapéro, personal communication, January 10, 2010.
- 27 Farafina means “land of the Blacks” or, freely translated, “Black Africa” in Jula, a dialect of Manding serving as market language in Korhogo.
- 28 Martin (1995).
- 29 All personal information on Sapéro and his studio was collected in January and February 2009, and in January, February, and August 2010.
- 30 Safarim stands for *Sap-Héro Farafina Images*.
- 31 Chigata (n.d.).
- 32 He requisitioned the material from the wealthy Muslim merchants of the city – an act that granted him much support among the urban youth but less among those who were directly affected. One of them told Fofié that he would not be willing to give 10 sacks of cement. He was fined and had to give a truckload instead.
- 33 I adopt the term from Fabian (1996, 17, 193–211).
- 34 The regular army of Côte d’Ivoire was commanded by the president and remained the military backbone of the Gbagbo regime throughout the rebellion. It was complemented by armed vigilantes groups called *les jeunes patriotes* under the command of Charles Blé Goudé, who was also a follower of Gbagbo.
- 35 Sapéro, personal communication, February 2, 2009.
- 36 Group discussion on the occasion of a guided visit to the center on January 14, 2009.
- 37 Despite the name, the Senegalese Rifles were not only recruited in Senegal. They came from all parts of Africa under French domination (Michel 2003).
- 38 As the artist was not living in Korhogo, I could not inquire directly but had to rely on what I was told by the members of Safarim *maison*.
- 39 At the time of my documentation in January 2009, the picture had almost vanished, but the title was still visible.
- 40 Unfortunately, I could not inquire among possible visitors of the center if they interpreted the landscape painting in that sense.
- 41 His stage name is actually Dony S. He is the founder of the Rap Contenders. See Dony S (2009).
- 42 A few mainly drew script in big letters on cars, lorries, and public buildings. The other painters did not consider them to be artists.
- 43 Almost nobody understood my surprise when I saw the repainted centre in January 2010.
- 44 When I used photos of this painting in a conference on the experience of the past at the Goethe-Institute in Abidjan in February 2009, many listeners in the audience jumped up and shouted that the picture showed how they had suffered under the old regime. It demonstrated how powerful images are.

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Postindependence Architecture through North Korean Modes

Namibian Commissions of the Mansudae Overseas Project

Meghan L. E. Kirkwood

"I believe that our art forms an important component of our national identity. It is the expression of our culture, our traditions and our value systems. Our art identifies who we are."

Sam Nujoma, 50th anniversary of the National Art Gallery of Namibia, November 26, 1997

Introduction

In September 2009, construction began on the Independence Memorial Museum in central Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. The new museum represents the fourth major architectural tender awarded by the Namibian government to a single design firm, the Mansudae Overseas Project,¹ within the past 10 years. In addition to the Independence Memorial Museum, this firm designed and built the Heroes' Acre Memorial (2002), a memorial cemetery located 10 km south of Windhoek; a military museum (2004) situated 70 km north of Windhoek in the city of Okahandja;² and the new Namibian State House (2008). Art historians have not analyzed North Korean-designed works in Namibia,³ nor have they considered the practice of hiring North Korean architects (over professionals from their own or other nations) as an assertion of authority and modernity by postcolonial regimes in Africa. This chapter, which draws from field experience in Namibia and study of North Korean art under a specialist, aims to do both.⁴ Furthermore, this chapter will add to the growing body of literature that seeks to dispel suggestions that Europe and Eurocentric cultures constitute the sole sources of modernity.

Namibia is not the only African nation to award commissions of public monuments and government buildings to the Mansudae Overseas Project. To date, the firm has also completed projects in Senegal, Angola, Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Benin,

Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Mali, Zimbabwe, Togo, and Ethiopia.⁵ Namibia, however, is the only African nation to commission the firm for four separate public works. Projects completed by the North Korean firm for African nations include commemorative statues of important figures in postcolonial governments. Examples are in the Democratic Republic of Congo (portrait of Joseph Kasavubu in Kinshasa, 2010) and in Zimbabwe (portrait of Joshua Nkomo, formerly installed in Harare). Other Mansudae projects create memorial spaces for revolutionary heroes (Heroes' Acre near Windhoek, Namibia, 2002),⁶ represent historical figures (Three Dikgosi Monument in Gaborone, Botswana, 2005)⁷ and celebrate postcolonial self-determination (Monument to the African Renaissance in Dakar, Senegal, 2010).⁸ Works by the Mansudae Overseas Project also provide new spaces for postindependence administrations (New Namibian State House in Windhoek, Namibia, 2008). The iconographic programs of Mansudae monuments and buildings in Africa differ from nation to nation, yet the works of this design firm remain formally similar and express a socialist realist aesthetic characteristic of the art and architecture of Pyongyang, the capital of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.⁹

The Namibian commissions parallel monuments and edifices in Pyongyang to such a degree that they appear as Namibian translations of a North Korean design vernacular rather than as original, site-specific interpretations. The direct formal relationship between the Namibian sites and extant works in North Korea prompts the question: Why would postindependence governments, such as in Namibia, select designs that so clearly foreground a foreign visual culture for architectural works that symbolize and celebrate their own independence?

The hiring of the Pyongyang-based art studio is often explained as necessary given a lack of domestic technical or architectural expertise in Namibia. However, the prevalence of experienced professionals associated with the Namibian Institute of Architects indicates that such a rationale is unfounded.¹⁰ Moreover, African governments typically award the Mansudae Overseas Project no-bid commissions, bypassing required open tender procedures. Other outside observers suggest that financial concerns motivate postcolonial administrations to hire the North Korean firm. For example, the *Wall Street Journal*, reporting on the completion of a Mansudae project in Dakar, Senegal, ran an article under the headline "Monuments to Freedom Aren't Free, but North Korea Builds Cheap Ones."¹¹ Contrary to popular perceptions, Mansudae monuments are neither inexpensive nor necessarily cost-effective. Moreover, the cost of Mansudae projects often exceeds original estimates. Ultimately, all of these observations too narrowly characterize the appeal of North Korean designed works for African leaders, and represent a limited understanding on the part of outside observers about Pyongyang and its visual culture.

Clifford Geertz argues that the task of conceiving a nationalist self for postcolonial states shifts between pre- and postrevolutionary periods. Whereas prerevolutionary nationalistic sentiment builds upon an "easy populism" of freedom and self-determination, the postrevolutionary state faces the task of defining "a collective subject to whom the actions of the state can be internally connected."¹² Thus, the need to foster a collective self within the national unit motivates postcolonial governments to seek out means of articulating this self, such as through architectural building programs.¹³

I argue that the postindependence government in Namibia interpreted the bold, dynamic, and monumental works characteristic of the Mansudae Overseas Project as a decisive, modern, and authoritative means of asserting their nationalistic self. As I

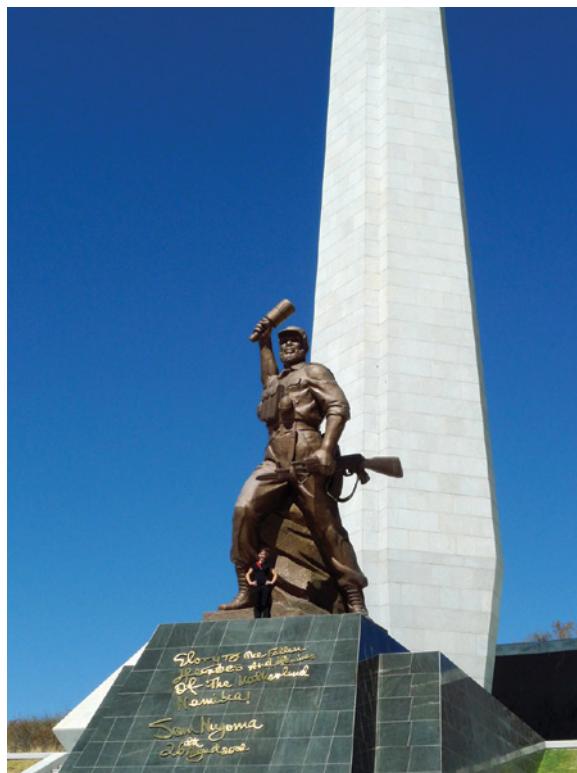


FIGURE 28.1 Mansudae Overseas Project. *Unknown Soldier*, detail of Heroes' Acre Memorial, 2002. Outside of Windhoek, Namibia. Photograph by Meghan L. E. Kirkwood, 2010.

will discuss through an analysis of two completed Mansudae Projects in Namibia, the Heroes' Acre Memorial (Figure 28.1) and new Namibian State House (Figure 28.2), I believe that postindependence leaders, in the spirit of “South–South” cooperation,¹⁴ have turned to the Mansudae Overseas Project to establish their political legitimacy, express their triumphs over outside rule, and to inscribe historical narratives favorable to the ruling regime. Also, through an examination of the circumstances surrounding the most recent Mansudae commission, the Independence Memorial Museum, I assert that postindependence governments, led by leaders like former president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma (president 1990–2005), use Mansudae monuments to formulate and assert a break with a colonial past.

The Mansudae Art Studio, and Nujoma’s Firsthand Knowledge of Pyongyang

The Mansudae Overseas Project represents the international division of the Pyongyang-based Mansudae Art Studio, which is responsible for nearly all official monuments and buildings of significance in Pyongyang. Founded in 1959, the studio employs 3,700 workers, one quarter of whom are artists, mostly graduates of the Pyongyang



FIGURE 28.2 Mansudae Overseas Project. *New State House*, 2008. Windhoek, Namibia. Photograph by Meghan L. E. Kirkwood, 2010.

University of Fine Arts.¹⁵ Along with monumental sculpture, the Mansudae Art Studio specializes in mosaics, bronze reliefs, and landscape paintings, and characterizes its works as clear and legible commemorations of Korean resistance against colonization by the Japanese (1910–1945).¹⁶ The prominence of the Mansudae Art Studio cannot be overstated; indeed, its plethora of works within Pyongyang makes it effectively synonymous with North Korean visual culture.

The visual culture of Pyongyang is broadly described as being socialist realist, but it is important to note that North Korean socialist realism differs from its predecessors in China and the Soviet Union. The near total destruction of Pyongyang during the Korean War (1950–1953) meant that North Korean planners had a tabula rasa on which to ideologically inscribe the physical landscape on a grand and unified scale.¹⁷ Major avenues, government buildings, and large-scale monuments were conceived more or less concurrently and by a relatively small group of government officials; as a result, the city exhibits a high degree of central control. Therefore, socialist realism within North Korea connotes a similar aesthetic to that found in China and the former Soviet Union, but its contemporaneity and cohesion within the city of Pyongyang distinguishes it from these predecessors.

Outsiders have interpreted the Pyongyang cityscape as a metaphorical mirror for the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung (“supreme leader” 1948–1994), conceived solely to fuel his personality cult. Suk-Young Kim suggests comparisons between modern Pyongyang and Albert Speer’s unrealized Germania, and argues that Pyongyang functions as a theatrical set, where inhabitants exist as props in an endless production glorifying Kim Il Sung.¹⁸ While the visual character of the city is arguably one-tracked, it is overly dismissive to perceive the modern city of Pyongyang as simply a stage with a central actor and an audience. In his book *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans*

See Themselves – And Why It Matters, B. R. Myers comments on the popular misconceptions about Kim Il Sung's personality cult:

The regime in Pyongyang is often accused of “brainwashing” its subjects, as if the former secretly believed something very different, and the latter were passive or even unwilling victims of indoctrination. Perhaps this misconception derives from the mistaken belief that the personality cult . . . forms the basis of the official worldview. In fact . . . the personality cult proceeds from myths about the race and its history that cannot but exert a strong appeal on the North Korean masses.¹⁹

Myers' observations suggest that, rather than interpreting the visual landscape of Pyongyang as a mirror for the sole benefit of its leadership, Pyongyang can be described as an orchestrated system supported by a unified, omnipresent visual culture, in which monuments and visual references to the Great Leader serve to remind citizens of their leader's legitimacy and achievements towards North Korean self-definition after a period of Japanese colonial rule.

As noted above, North Korean socialist realist works are noteworthy for their emphasis on commemorating the revolutionary past, specifically the achievements of the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, who fought to end Japanese colonial rule. The Juche Tower, a tribute to Kim Il Sung and his Juche philosophy of self-reliance, offers one example. The commemorative work exemplifies the ways in which North Korean socialist artworks incorporate symbolic references and are meticulously conceived to convey a programmatic agenda. Built by the Mansudae Art Studio on the occasion of Kim's seventieth birthday in 1982, the obelisk-shaped tower is covered with 25,550 pieces of granite, one for each day in the life of the Great Leader. The sides of the tower are decorated with carved representations of kimilsungia flowers, a pink hybrid orchid cultivar. Emblematic flowers such as the kimilsungia, kimjongilia, and the magnolia, the national flower of North Korea, are frequently incorporated into Mansudae designs.

Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia and orchestrator of the Mansudae commissions in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia, is among a cadre of African leaders with firsthand knowledge of how Mansudae artworks function within the visual culture of Pyongyang.²⁰ Nujoma traveled to North Korea in November of 2000 on state invitation from Pyongyang, and descriptions of this goodwill visit indicate that he was exposed to important Mansudae-designed works and their associated devotional rituals.²¹ This was not Nujoma's first visit to Pyongyang: he traveled to the North Korean capital during his time in exile through his capacity as head of the South West Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO),²² though information on the nature and duration of his travels have not been made public. The 2000 official visit represented a continuation of relations between Nujoma, the governing Swapo party,²³ and the North Korean government, which provided material aid and military training to exiled freedom fighters during the liberation struggle.

While in Pyongyang, Nujoma visited the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery on Mount Taesong, which commemorates over 170 revolutionaries who died fighting against the Japanese occupation forces.²⁴ As is customary for visiting dignitaries, Nujoma laid a wreath at the pedestal before the monument and, along with Korean officials present, observed a moment of silence in memory of the anti-Japanese revolutionary fighters.²⁵ It is important to emphasize the significance that this monument

and ritual would have had for Nujoma. Like Kim Il Sung, who as a young man assumed a leadership role of a guerilla group in the Northeast Anti-Japanese Army, Nujoma also led a revolutionary struggle through his position within SWAPO. Nujoma was likely aware of these parallels, and might not have seen the devout treatment given to the anticolonial revolutionary dead as mere motion, but as meaningful practice for any nation born out of struggle.

The Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang was constructed by the Mansudae Art Studio in 1975 (expanded in 1985) and predates both the 2002 Namibian Heroes' Acre and its African predecessor in Zimbabwe, which was erected in the 1980s. The Mansudae Overseas Project had designed and built the earlier monument in Zimbabwe²⁶ as a project cosponsored by the Zimbabwean and North Korean governments. The Zimbabwean site closely mirrors the layout of the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang, and Namibian government representatives acknowledge that the Zimbabwean memorial helped inspire plans for a similar site to celebrate Namibia's heroes. Though this chapter does not analyze the Zimbabwean Heroes' Acre in relation to the Namibian memorial, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge its role within the context of non-Western influences for the Namibian Heroes' Acre.

Importantly, this chapter does not insist on an unmediated line from North Korea to Namibia with respect to the Mansudae projects. Rather, I suggest that the familiarity with Pyongyang Nujoma gained during exile and through his goodwill visits to North Korea as president of Namibia provide critical insight into the Namibian government's decision to commission the Mansudae Overseas Project for four major public works that have significantly altered the memory landscape of the Namibian capital.

Certain features of the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang figure prominently in the later Namibian Heroes' Acre, which I will discuss in detail below. For example, to access the Martyrs' Cemetery a visitor must pass through a 19 meter high Korean gate. The gate frames a series of 348 stone stairs that ascend Chujak Peak and symbolically mark the passage from the urban environs of Pyongyang to the sacred, reverential space accorded to the Martyrs' Cemetery. At the top of the stairs a wide stone avenue, flanked on either side by sculptures of soldiers emerging from rusticated stone, leads to the base of a terraced cemetery. On the left side of the avenue a stone placard displays an inscription in Kim Il Sung's handwriting that proclaims: "The noble revolutionary spirit displayed by the anti-Japanese revolutionary martyrs will dwell forever in the hearts of our Party and our people. October 10th, 1985."²⁷ The Cemetery's gravestones are spaced evenly in rows that conform to the terraced hillside. Taken together, the ascension to a monument honoring revolutionary heroes, the defined passageway between city and the sacred space of the cemetery effectively invite a ritual interaction with the site, and underscore the ongoing veneration of revolutionary fighters in contemporary Pyongyang.

Another official excursion took Nujoma to Kumsusan Memorial Palace, a former palatial assembly hall reconstructed as Kim Il Sung's mausoleum upon his death in 1994.²⁸ At the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, as well as other Mansudae buildings such as the Grand People's Study House, Nujoma viewed flamboyant interiors that feature brightly colored, floral-patterned terrazzo floors, extensive use of colored marble, decorative bronze reliefs, gaudy crystal chandeliers, and epic landscape paintings. These interior elements are all definitive markers of the opulent sensibility of North

Korean visual culture and came to be prominently featured in the new Namibian State House.

In sum, Nujoma's 2000 goodwill visit to Pyongyang further familiarized him with the particularly potent, still-living brand of socialist art and architecture common to North Korea. He observed firsthand how monuments and buildings can be combined on a grand scale to glorify the legacy of the nation's founders and their resistance to colonial forces, and how they enable the performance of a shared national history. Visiting the various Mansudae-designed monuments and buildings, Nujoma observed a tightly controlled visual regime used to construct a national memory favorable to the ruling government, apparently propagated willingly by the North Korean people. While others might dismiss Pyongyang's built environment as serving the personality cult of Kim Il Sung, Nujoma might have perceived it more positively as a city remembering its past and honoring a great leader. Whatever his personal response, what he saw was soon echoed in the building projects his government initiated and supported in the years following his return to Namibia.

The Namibian Heroes' Acre and the Performance of History

In his writings on collective memory and public monuments, James Young argues for a relationship between a state's desire to forge a common, national memory and the creation of monuments that serve as a naturalizing locus for that memory. According to Young, these places of memory, or to borrow Pierre Nora's term, *lieux de mémoire*, cast a state's martyrs, founding myths and ideals as naturally true as the landscape they inhabit.²⁹ Furthermore, invoking Halbwachs' assertion that memories are recalled through membership in national, religious, or class groups, Young argues that "both the reasons for memory and the forms memory takes are always socially mandated, part of a socializing system whereby fellow citizens gain common history through the vicarious memory of their forbearers' experiences."³⁰

Young's identification of monuments as socially mandated, naturalized loci of national memory provides insight into the creation of the first Namibian work designed by the Mansudae Overseas Project, the Heroes' Acre memorial. Completed over a period of 13 months, at a cost of approximately 60 million Namibian dollars (up from an original estimate of 34 million), it was inaugurated on Heroes' Day, August 26, 2002.³¹ The Namibian government hired the Mansudae Overseas Project for the commission without accepting other bids, and the public had no input into its design.³² The monument features a 35 meter high obelisk, an 8 meter high bronze statue of an unknown soldier, a continuous semicircular bronze relief depicting Namibia's struggle for independence, an eternal flame, and 170 gravesites.³³ The 732 acre memorial complex, which also includes a restaurant and an amphitheater, emerges at the foot of the Auas Mountains, 10km south of Windhoek's downtown area. The placement of the monument within the arid desert hills, away from the city environs, forges a connection between the memorial to the revolutionary fighters and a landscape characteristic of the Namibian territory. This juxtaposition invokes Young's notion that monuments are often situated within a particular natural environment to invoke a truth and legitimacy associated with the objective and impartial land.³⁴

Foremost among several formal parallels between the Heroes' Acre in Windhoek and the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang is that the Heroes' Acre

replicates a ritual viewing experience reminiscent of the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery. Connerton argues that national elites often construct ritual spaces and initiate commemorative ceremonies as a way to manage social memory. He writes: "Both commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices . . . contain a measure of insurance against the process of cumulative questioning entailed in all discursive practices. This is the source of their importance and persistence as mnemonic systems."³⁵ The Heroes' Acre memorial, as evidenced in its design, is intended to direct social memory of the liberation struggle, and is not, as its sponsors would suggest, merely a site for contemplation.

As with the Revolutionary Martyr's Cemetery in Pyongyang, visitors to the Namibian Heroes' Acre monument must pass through a monumental entrance gate, which is flanked on either side with relief sculptures of two kneeling young women holding bouquets of flowers. One source suggests that the young women symbolize "the fertility to reproduce future generations" and the sunflowers they hold reference "the passing legacy of past and future generations."³⁶ After passing through the gate, the visitor encounters a fountain with a column at its center, whose upper portion gives way to a sculpture of a young married couple who stare up towards the buried heroes and heroines. The fountain is said to contain "cleansing and soothing qualities [that] symbolize freedom after a long and bitter struggle."³⁷

A short drive up the hill brings the visitor to a pavilion at the base of the monument, which purportedly can hold up to 5,000 persons. An eternal flame sitting before a large platform at the base of the monument pays tribute to the memory of the fallen heroes and heroines. Here, the visitor is invited to lay a wreath in honor of the deceased soldiers, a devotional act that is now performed by nearly all representatives of foreign governments who travel to Windhoek.³⁸ A long straight stairway climbs upwards from the pavilion, and leads the viewer through the tiers that contain the gravemarkers. The memorial can accommodate up to 172 graves, a number that harkens back to the 170 gravesites at the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery, though only a few "heroes" have been buried at the site.³⁹ A kinetically poised statue – reminiscent of the focal sculpture at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Memorial in Pyongyang – stands at the base of the obelisk, and holds a grenade in one hand and an AK-47 in the other. Though the bronze statue represents an unknown soldier – specifically a People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN – the military wing of SWAPO) combatant – its chiseled features bear a striking resemblance to Nujoma himself and the likeness is often read as such.⁴⁰ Indeed the plaque below it, which recalls the written inscription in Kim Il Sung's handwriting at the Martyrs' Cemetery, displays a bronzed sentence in Nujoma's own script that reads: "Glory to the fallen heroes and heroines of the motherland Namibia! Sam Nujoma, August 26, 2002." Anthropologist Heike Becker notes that the statue of the unknown soldier has facial features that correspond to what many Namibians associate with Owambo people.⁴¹ This parallel, she argues, reinforces the suspicions of many Namibians from the central and southern regions, who believe they have been marginalized by the Owambo-dominated Swapo party.⁴²

Taken together, the location of Heroes' Acre outside the city, its passageway between city and sacred space signaled by the entrance gate, and the ascension made by all visitors to the cemetery, echo the experience of a visitor to the Pyongyang Martyr's Cemetery. As a monument to honor Namibia's revolutionary heroes in a manner that inspires reverence and ritual, Nujoma described the Heroes' Acre as

being “built in the true African tradition of bestowing honor to our forefathers and mothers.”⁴³ However, to the degree it invokes local values it does so through an aesthetic and ritual that is distinctly North Korean.

It is important to note that Mansudae designs not only work to motivate the shared performance of history, but they also provide a modular, transferable language of bold kinetic forms through which variant forms of history can be collapsed into a singular, structuralist interpretation of the past. Monuments and other public works in North Korea are designed to communicate a state-sponsored narrative clearly and without nuance, one that will be absorbed without question. This narrative, wherein great leadership restores sovereignty to an oppressed citizenry through armed struggle, is at the heart of Mansudae-produced works and provides a simplistic strategy for representing the struggles of other nations. Becker argues that the Namibian Heroes’ Acre gives expression to a nationalist history demonstrative of what Terence Ranger dubs “patriotic history,” wherein the total history of a nation is reduced to a sequence of revolutionary resistance.⁴⁴ Becker writes,

while ostensibly [the Namibian Heroes’ Acre] is a burial ground, the site and the ceremonies for which it provides a physical and social space do not facilitate mourning the dead as a process of identification. Instead, the monument imposes a narrative of triumphalist victory.⁴⁵

The role of the Mansudae design in relaying a narrow, triumphalist interpretation of Namibia’s history is evident in the bronze mural situated behind the obelisk at the Heroes’ Acre. The mural chronicles Namibia’s liberation struggle in a continuous narrative and consists of five scenes that depict the journey towards self-rule. The narrative begins with “the awakening of the independence ideal,” continues through the “political mobilization of the masses, start of the armed struggle, intensification of the struggle,” and ends with the achievement of independence. The final scene depicts a flag-bearing soldier (Figure 28.3), who closely resembles Sam Nujoma and is shown leading a group of marching male and female compatriots.

The semicircular bronze mural can be compared to a relief that surrounds a Pyongyang monument to the founding of the Korean Workers’ Party, lead by General Secretary Kim Jong Il (supreme leader, 1994–2011). Here, a stone belt encircles a larger monument, and its scenes represent “the historical root of the Korean Workers’ Party, the might of the single-minded unity of the leader, party and masses, and the fighting feature of the Korean people to carry out the human cause of independence.”⁴⁶ The narrative segments display strong, defiant figures of both sexes, whose determined expressions match the forceful poses of their bodies. As with the mural at the Namibian Heroes’ Acre, the Pyongyang memorial emphasizes the achievements of a united citizenry guided by great leadership.

Noticeably absent from the stylized account of the liberation struggle at the Heroes’ Acre is any reference to the roles of civilians and diplomats in ending outside rule. As Melber and Saunders note, though the armed liberation led by SWAPO did have a major impact on the course of decolonization, they were not the sole factor in the achievement of independence.⁴⁷ Importantly, as Bauer notes, independence came only after years of diplomatic efforts at the United Nations. Moreover, the final transfer of power occurred after a year-long transition overseen by the United Nations and mandated through United Nations Security Council Resolution 435.⁴⁸ Reinhart



FIGURE 28.3 Mansudae Overseas Project. Bronze relief, detail of Heroes' Acre Memorial, 2002. Outside Windhoek, Namibia. Photograph by Meghan L. E. Kirkwood, 2010.

Kössler argues that a narrative centered so disjointedly on liberation efforts waged mainly by people in exile discounts an assortment of civil dimensions of the liberation struggle. Specifically, he points to efforts by groups such as the workers' and trade union movement and student activists, as well as Namibians from regions of the country that had little direct experience with the armed struggle.⁴⁹

In sum, the visual panoply of references to the militarized members of the independence movement at the Heroes' Acre, exemplified through the narrative relief that foregrounds the role of military leaders in achieving independence, and the unknown soldier who looks out towards the prosperous urban capital from the monument's apex, assert the primacy of SWAPO in achieving Namibian freedom. A North Korean visual rhetoric was used to articulate this assertion of power by the SWAPO elite, and to link the current regime to the achievements of the SWAPO revolutionary figures, and instill awareness of a shared history for those visiting the site.

Nationalist Iconography and the New Namibian State House

“[The] new State House prides itself on being a Namibian capital project that truly represents the diverse cultural and artistic features on the country,’ the Swapo Party Congress said.”

New Era, March 20, 2008

The new State House was the second work designed and built by the Mansudae Overseas Project in Namibia. The North Korean firm was, once again, awarded a

no-bid contract, a decision some attribute to former president Nujoma, as well as a need to retain the North Korean experts who oversaw the construction of Heroes' Acre.⁵⁰ Commissioned in 2002, construction of the new State House on the 23 hectare site took five and a half years and was completed in March of 2008. The project was realized at a cost of over 500 million Namibian dollars to the Namibian people, up from original estimates of 242 million.⁵¹ As with the Heroes' Acre, there are several parallels between the State House and sites in Pyongyang that work against meaningful cultural references relevant to the Namibian context. Construction of the new State House was not without controversies, foremost being the high cost of the commission and the outsourcing of lucrative contracts to North Korean architects and laborers. These and other oppositions to the project demonstrate that the government's selection of the Mansudae Overseas Project for the job was likely less a choice of convenience or economics than an expression of the postindependence government's fondness for the modern, opulent, and authoritative nature of Mansudae-designed works.

By opting for a design representative of a North Korean aesthetic, the postindependence Namibian government challenges assumptions that Europe and the West constitute the sole source of modernity. Indeed, it may be useful to understand the hiring of the Mansudae Overseas Project as an expression of what Comaroff terms "alternative African modernities," which consists of signs, practices and dispositions that originate in African encounters with "elsewheres." Because these modernities are negotiable and constantly in the making, they are as much a product of local agency as they are a reaction to external forces.⁵² Comaroff's approach helps us to see that, distasteful or as inappropriate as Mansudae-designed works may seem, they do represent strategic expressions of local agency.

Public Reception of the New State House

The new State House provoked considerable controversy, much of which surfaced in Windhoek daily newspapers such as *The Namibian*, although only some of the opposition related to the commissioning of a North Korean design firm for the project. By any measure the new State House is grandiose, with amenities such as a musical fountain, a massive underground parking area, and collections of life-sized animal sculptures dispersed throughout the grounds. The cost to the Namibian citizens quickly exceeded initial estimates, fueling anger that the government was acting irresponsibly when nearly a third of the population lived in poverty.⁵³ This sentiment is captured in quotation from one Namibian woman included in a *New Era* article:

If 60 percent of our people are unemployed or underemployed, where did we get the money to raise money for this State House? We can have the most beautiful buildings and other structures, but with unemployment, our peace and stability is in the balance.⁵⁴

That North Korean workers made up the majority of the labor force for the building project provoked further criticisms: when the project began in 2003, only 44 of the 176 workers onsite were Namibian citizens.⁵⁵ Further controversy arose in the summer of 2003 when the government declared its intention to expropriate around 50 neighboring properties to create a secure area around the State House.⁵⁶ Many citi-

zens also voiced opposition to the secrecy that surrounded the planning and building; even documents such as feasibility studies were unavailable to the public.⁵⁷

Official responses to complaints from the public and opposition parties within the Namibian parliament indicate a rift between how the public and the ruling Swapo party viewed the State House project. To the public and representatives from opposition parties, the rising costs and outsourced labor indicated governmental irresponsibility. Statements by Swapo representatives confirm that the lavish new State House was seen as an investment, one meant to inspire nationalistic sentiment and loyalty to the new regime. For example, minister of presidential affairs Albert Kwana told the National Assembly: “The new State House is . . . a symbol of Namibia’s Sovereignty, of our history and our struggle . . . People will appreciate our freedom when they see the new State House.”⁵⁸ In this statement the minister justified the project’s cost and reminded the audience of the government’s role in the struggle as a means of affirming its legitimacy. Also of note is that within the state budget the allocation for the new State House project is listed under the heading of “protecting and defending the Constitution,” a section that designates provisions for the maintenance of peace, stability, and good governance.⁵⁹

Lawrence Vale argues the importance of straightforward, legible architectural statements for new regimes. He writes: “for rulers of fledgling countries, in which questions are too many and answers are at a premium, the prospect of a building that fails to contribute unambiguously to the consolidation of rule may be unsettling.”⁶⁰ In other words, demure architectural works may convey weakness on the part of the ruling regime, and invite unwanted dissent towards the government. Vale’s emphasis on the importance of buildings that clearly pronounce a national identity favorable to a new regime might explain the appeal of Mansudae designs to postindependence leaders, such as in Namibia, who wish to solidify and legitimate their positions.

The New State House Interior and Its Sources

Visual parallels are numerous and apparent between the Namibian State House and Mansudae projects in Pyongyang. Indeed, the Namibian State House interior recalls elements found in the Grand People’s Study House, the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, and the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital, and their integration into the State House design makes clear reference to the opulent nature of Mansudae interiors. For example, the walls and floors are laid out with a different color of granite for each level, a detail that recalls the polished stone walls and floors that typify Mansudae interiors in Pyongyang. Also common to the Namibian State House and the grand buildings of Pyongyang are the inlaid botanical patterns that radiate out from the center of mosaic stone floors, such as in the Grand People’s Study House and Pyongyang Maternity Hospital. Similar circular designs are found on floors in the Credential Area Room and the State House Media Briefing room in the Namibian State House. Another feature of the Namibian State House rooted in the visual culture of North Korea is the use of grand, emblematic landscape paintings. In North Korea such large-scale paintings often serve as backdrops for official photographs of visiting dignitaries. Grand, romanticized landscapes are also paired with statues of North Korean leaders, such as at the Grand People’s Study House. There, a painting of Mount Paektu, the holy mountain of revolution and mythical birthplace of Korean civilization, rests behind a statue of Kim Il Sung and visually links him to this important heritage site.

Mansudae artists were commissioned to travel throughout the country and paint large-scale canvases representative of Namibia's landscape such as Ruacana Falls, Fish River Canyon, Epupa Falls, and the Spitzkoppe rock formation, and their works figure prominently within the State House interior. The decision to commission North Korean artists – instead of Namibian artists – to paint scenes of the Namibian landscape for State House decoration is surprising. Namibia has a vibrant arts community, evidenced by the number of artists working and exhibiting in the capital. In Windhoek, there are two prominent art schools, the John Muafangejo Art Centre in the Katutura area and the Visual Arts department at the University of Namibia, whose students are trained to work in a variety of two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, as well as a National Gallery with a large and diverse permanent collection. These institutions could have supplied decoration for the State House if it had been made a priority to include artworks by Namibian artists or if the commission had been open to anyone besides the North Koreans.

The lobby of the State House features a mural-sized painting of the first Namibian Cabinet. The group portrait extends the length of the wall and makes clear that SWAPO-elite were the key players in founding the independent government. Large-scale portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are among the immediate precedents for this work. Such North Korean icons typically display the two leaders together in idealized natural landscapes, which are often filled with emblematic plant species such as the magnolia. In a similar vein, the Namibian portrait represents members of the postindependence government against a desert landscape with laces of welwitschia leaves in the foreground. All persons pictured were also important figures within SWAPO prior to independence, and many, such as Hage Geingob, continue to hold officer positions within the party. That this portrait is so prominently featured within the new State House effectively equates members of the SWAPO elite with the realization of the new, postindependence government and naturalizes them within the house of government.

The theme of the new Namibian State House was said to be the welwitschia plant (*Welwitschia mirabilis* Hook. f.), a peculiar species native to a narrow strip of the Namib Desert that extends from northwestern Namibia into southern Angola. Despite the plant's apparent lack of particular significance to any indigenous culture within Namibia, the welwitschia is associated with the Namibian nation⁶¹ – and yet its presentation within the State House design once again functions, first and foremost, as a North Korean interpretation. That an emblematic plant was chosen to thematically unite the State House has important precedence in Pyongyang, where specific plant species form the basis of many Mansudae designs. As noted earlier, plant species are frequently incorporated into Mansudae monuments, paintings and buildings to emphasize a connection between the communist leadership and the Korean landscape. The omnipresence of the welwitschia is most clearly observed in the building's perimeter, where large, stylized golden welwitschia emblems adorn each fence section, as well as in the banquet hall, where three colossal likenesses of the plant fill a painted blue wall.

Lawrence Vale, in his discussion of postcolonial capital designs in Asia and the Middle East, acknowledges that foreign architects, in adapting their designs “to the challenges of cultural pluralism” must often make “visible assumptions about the social and cultural preferences of their clients.”⁶² By including decontextualized representations of welwitschia plants throughout the State House the Mansudae design

foregrounds aesthetic tropes common to North Korean visual culture. Frederico Freschi describes the integration of “regional elements as coding devices” as an “attempt to engage a sense of place,” yet acknowledges that all too often this results in clichéd portrayals of a generically African aesthetic instead of indigenous references.⁶³ This practice is exemplified through the indiscriminate, widespread inclusion of welwitschia plants in the State House, and also through the life-sized animal sculptures theatrically dispersed among the arid grounds that encircle the building. African game mammals such as zebras and antelopes do bear significance to indigenous cultures within Namibia, but their caricatured presentation within the State House obscures their cultural references and ultimately draws attention to the touristic artifice of the symbolic program that characterizes the North Korean design.

Taken together, the numerous ways that the Heroes’ Acre Monument and the new Namibian State House recast the visual culture of Pyongyang to suit the Namibian context are striking. Both Namibian projects are of particular national significance: the State House emblematic of the new nation and its independent government, and the Heroes’ Acre monument a tribute to Namibia’s struggle for self-rule. The aesthetic outsourcing of their designs ultimately represents a desire to replicate the clarity and forcefulness of North Korean visual culture for the purposes of imprinting the authority and modernity of the postindependence government within the public sphere, and by extension the public consciousness.

The Independence Memorial Museum as Nationalist Symbol

Both the Heroes’ Acre and the new Namibian State House pronounce the authority and global modernity of the postindependence Namibian government through the use of aesthetic programs borrowed from monuments and buildings in Pyongyang, but this intention is most overt in the Independence Memorial Museum, which is first and foremost an aggressive symbol of the Namibian government’s triumph over colonialism.

There was great opposition to nearly all aspects of this project, which further underscores the aggressive manner with which the government implemented its plans for the museum. The site chosen for the museum – at the highest elevation in downtown Windhoek, adjacent to an emblematic German colonial-era church, Christuskirche (1910) – reveals the government’s desire not only to establish new visual identities for independent Namibia, but also to metaphorically confront and supersede icons associated with the colonial past.⁶⁴ To build the museum at this site required the relocation of a prominent equestrian statue, the Reiterdenkmal. The sculpture, overlooking the city of Windhoek, was inaugurated in January of 1912 to commemorate soldiers of the German Schutztruppe who died during the particularly brutal German conquest of the Herero and Nama peoples of northern Namibia.⁶⁵ Although dismantling and relocating this statue was for many a misguided act against a monument that was part of Namibian history, for many others it represented a welcome phase of the decolonization process.⁶⁶ Ultimately, the monument was moved, but only 100 yards to the north. Nonetheless, the symbolic value of its displacement, in concert with the dwarfing of the emblematic Christuskirche by the Independence Memorial Museum, was a bold repudiation of the past in favor of the ideologically loaded present.

The Namibian Institute of Architects (NIA) was one of the many voices in opposition to the move of the Reiterdenkmal and the chosen location for the Independence Memorial Museum. The architects' association believed that the selection of a site in the Windhoek business district was inappropriate for a museum dedicated to commemorating the nation's independence. Speaking on behalf of the institute, president of the NIA, Paul Munting, urged the government to consider an alternative location:

Taking the museum to Katutura, Mondesa or Kuisebmond⁶⁷ would mean it would form part of the daily lives of those who were in the struggle. At present . . . few incentives . . . draw tourists to Katutura and as a consequence the tourist expenditure in Windhoek is concentrated in the central business district and surrounds.⁶⁸

The architect's feelings were echoed by others within the public media. One letter to the editor in *The Namibian* states: "[the museum] is right in the middle of the government and administrative area, away from the very people whose freedom it is supposed to represent."⁶⁹ The architects also voiced concern over the process through which the museum's design was chosen. As was the case with the State House, the NIA members and others objected to the absence of an open architectural competition for the design of the Independence Memorial Museum, and the failure to solicit designs from qualified Namibian architects. Moreover, the secrecy surrounding the plans for the museum's design was, for many, an affront to the spirit of the proposed project.

The architects also took umbrage with the design of the new Independence Memorial Museum, which they viewed as yet another foreign insertion into the capital landscape. Prominent local architect Jaco Wasserfall voiced this opinion in an interview with *The Namibian* when he observed: "Like the State House, this new building makes architectural references that are completely foreign to Namibia, its people, culture and history."⁷⁰ He continued, noting: "we have missed out on a crucial opportunity to have created appropriate public buildings in our country in which is [sic] reflected the soul of the new Namibian nation, its beliefs, cultures and values."⁷¹

A number of Namibian architects point to the newly erected Constitutional Court in neighboring South Africa as an example of how the Namibian government might have handled the commission for the Independence Memorial Museum.⁷² In South Africa the design was chosen in an open competition from a pool of international and domestic proposals. Once the finalists had been picked, the designs were submitted to the public for comment, and its input was given considerable weight in the eventual awarding of the commission to the South African architects Andrew Makin, Janina Masojada, and Paul Wygers.⁷³ The design of the South African Constitutional Court incorporates portions of a notorious apartheid-era prison, which represents an effort to acknowledge past injustices even as it looks to the future. To this point Bronwyn Law-Viljoen notes:

It is the realization of the dream of many to have a building in the new South Africa that would celebrate the ideals of a progressive Constitution, commemorate the suffering and struggles of the country's past without slavishly doing obeisance to history and give visible form to the belief that all are equal before the law.⁷⁴

For the Namibian architects, the Independence Memorial Museum lacks such a balance between recognition of the past, and commemoration of the hopeful present,

and, most tragically, denies Namibian citizens the chance to participate in the generation of a monument representative of their independence and postcolonial unity. Architect Jaco Wasserfall spoke for many Namibians when he suggested: “architecturally, we are being colonized by the East.⁷⁵ We live in what is called the colonial era of the Chinese and that is very sad.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

In March of 2008 Kim Yong Nam, president of the presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly (1998–) paid an official state visit to Windhoek on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of Namibia’s independence and attended the invitation-only inauguration of the new State House as the guest of honor. In his address Kim Yong Nam praised the continued positive relations between North Korea and Namibia and described the new State House as a symbol of friendship between the two countries.⁷⁷ He declared that the State House had sprung from the good relations first begun between Kim Il Sung and Sam Nujoma during the years of the liberation struggle, when North Korea supported resistance fighters with material aid. Reflecting these sentiments, current Namibian president Hifikepunye Pohamba (2005–) praised the able North Korean technicians and declared that the State House would act as a symbol of the sovereignty and dignity of the Namibian people.

A joint communiqué from the two nations details the remainder of the North Korean representative’s goodwill visit. It notes that Kim Yong Nam and his delegation visited the Heroes Monument and laid a ceremonial wreath at the foot of the statue of the unknown soldier and traveled to other sites in Windhoek.⁷⁸ In addition, the report relays Kim Yong Nam’s conviction that the visit marks an important milestone in deepening the feelings of the two peoples and giving a “fresh impetus to the bilateral relations.”⁷⁹

This account of relations between Namibia and North Korea on the occasion of the State House inauguration represents a commitment on the part of both governments to strengthen the ties that began during Namibia’s years of struggle for independence. The sense of obligation felt on the part of the Namibian leaders towards North Korea supports the argument that the commission of the Mansudae Overseas Project for the building of the Heroes’ Acre Monument, State House, and Independence Memorial Museum represents an act of calculated diplomacy. At the same time, the remarkable fidelity between the Namibian works and extant Mansudae works in Pyongyang suggests that motivations for commissioning the North Korean firm extended beyond fostering favorable relations, and more clearly demonstrated the Namibian government’s desire to adopt a modern visual vocabulary, free of colonial associations, suited to the reverential expression of a national identity favorable to the independent government.

As Lawrence Vale describes, edifices and monuments that are touted as being representative of a nation’s identity are typically a means of fulfilling three other needs. First, Vale suggests, “the need to re-assert the sub-nationality of the sponsoring regime by equating its own specific ethnic heritage with ‘the national,’” a need exemplified in the depiction of the unknown soldier, which bore a likeness to Nujoma and someone of Owambo origin. Vale then posits “the need to extend international identity through staking some new claim to noteworthy modernity; and the need to

develop a personal identity of the client, who views any single building project as a highly individualized imprint of self.”⁸⁰ Hiring the Mansudae Overseas Project might be seen as an attempt to meet the last two “needs” described by Vale. The foregrounding of SWAPO’s role in the liberation struggle within the Heroes’ Acre as well as the mural-sized portrait of SWAPO elite against a caricatured Namibian landscape in the State House speak to the desire for a subnational entity to equate itself with the “national.” The erection of a new State House replete with invented icons intended to convey a sense of Namibian identity speaks to the need for a common means of forging identity and legitimacy within the domestic as well as international spheres. Similarly, the Independence Memorial Museum, whose design and location make it first and foremost a metaphorical affront to colonial structures, serves as a declarative, modern voice for the power and might of the new regime in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 The Mansudae Overseas Project is the international division of the Mansudae Art Studio. In this chapter I will use “Mansudae” to refer to the firm itself unless it becomes important to distinguish between the two.
- 2 Of the four monuments commissioned by the Mansudae Overseas Project in Namibia, the least is known about this work. Built in 2004 at an estimated cost of 25–30 million Namibian dollars, the museum remains closed to the public. See Grobler (2008a).
- 3 Important work on public monuments commissioned by postcolonial governments in Africa has been done by scholars such as Mary Jo Arnoldi (2003, 2007), and Ferdinand de Jong and Vincent Foucher (2010), but this research has not uncovered specific information about North Korean patronage or production of these structures. With the exception of Maritz (2007), to my knowledge no one has addressed the parallels between African monuments designed by North Koreans and extant works in North Korea, or speculated on a national government’s motivations for working with the Mansudae Overseas Project. See Fontein (2009); Krieger (1991); Maritz (2007); Parsons (2006); and Phala (2004).
- 4 Dr. Marsha Haufler, Professor of Art History at the University of Kansas, generously shared her photographs and expertise in contemporary North Korean art. I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Marsha Haufler and Dr. Gitti Salami, my MA thesis advisors, for their support, edits, and advice regarding this project. I am indebted to the Namibian architects who spoke with me and to the National Arts Gallery of Namibia staff for their assistance. I am grateful to Devan McGranahan for his helpful edits and to the Morris Family for a University of Kansas scholarship that made this study possible.
- 5 North Korean officials have not disclosed the exact number of commissions completed by the Mansudae Overseas Project on the African continent, though there is broad mention of works completed in specific countries in Korean Central News Agency briefings. Nonetheless, estimates are made in scattered publications by the North Korean Economy Watch, the *DailyNK* and international news organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and the *Wall Street Journal*. See Passariello (2010); Hun, (2010); and Baecker (2011).

- 6 For a discussion of a similar Heroes' Acre in Zimbabwe see Fontein (2009); Krieger (1991); and Maritz (2007).
- 7 For a brief discussion of the Botswana monuments see Parsons (2006) and Phala (2004).
- 8 For a discussion of the Senegalese monument see De Jong and Foucher (2010).
- 9 The term "socialist realist" remains problematic as a descriptor of the North Korean scopic regime for Jane Portal, who observes that art in North Korea represents a "curious mixture of influences from Western monuments, transferred through Socialist Realist Soviet and Chinese works to a hybrid North Korean monumentalism" (2005, 13). This mixture distinguishes North Korean Socialist Realism from its predecessors in China and the Soviet Union.
- 10 The Namibian Institute of Architects (NIA), established in 1952, is a professional organization of 86 registered professional architects. The organization is a member of the African Union of Architects, the Commonwealth Association of Architects, and the Union of Architects. See Namibian Institute of Architects (n.d.).
- 11 Works designed by the Mansudae Overseas Project, as evidenced by the high costs of both the Heroes' Acre and new Namibian State House, are not actually low cost. See Dentlinger (2006); Menges (2005); and Weidlich (2006).
- 12 Geertz (1973, 238–240).
- 13 See Förster, chapter 27 this volume.
- 14 Though North Korea is not located in what may be broadly termed the "Global South," sources indicate that President Nujoma viewed the nation within this context (BBC Monitoring Africa – Political 2002).
- 15 Portal (2005, 127).
- 16 Cecioni and Cecioni (2007).
- 17 Atkins (1996, 199).
- 18 Kim (2007, 24).
- 19 Myers (2010, 75).
- 20 Nujoma is a prominent figure in modern Namibian history; he helped found the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in 1960, and led the armed insurgency against the ruling South African government. For a profile of the former president and his role in the resistance movement see Nujoma (2001) and Katjaviv (1988). Former president Nujoma has remained a public and influential figure since his retirement from office in 2005. See Thomas (2010).
- 21 Following the 2000 trip, other diplomatic visits to Pyongyang were made in 2007 and 2008, and reports document visits to the Arch of Triumph, the *Three Revolution* exhibition, and the Mangyongdae and Pyongyang 326 Electric Wire Factory. Though these visits will not be included in my discussion of the Heroes' Acre and new Namibian State House, they nonetheless enter into the sphere of influence for the Independence Memorial Museum and further demonstrate that the Namibian government was aware of how North Korean works function within their environment. See KCNA (2008a).
- 22 The SWAPO party originally formed out of concern for migrant Owambo laborers, who wished to end South African rule in the country. It was modeled after the South African African National Congress (ANC) and strove to move beyond tribal affinities in favor of a collective Namibian agenda (Cliffe 1994, 18–19).
- 23 SWAPO changed its name to the "Swapo" party after independence. Therefore, I use Swapo when discussing the party in the postindependence period.
- 24 Portal (2005, 145).

- 25 KCNA (2000a).
- 26 Photographs of the monument, taken by Gary Bembridge, are available at Bembridge (2003).
- 27 KCNA (2010).
- 28 KCNA (2000b).
- 29 Young (1996, 237).
- 30 Young (1994, 6).
- 31 Officially designated “Heroes’ Day,” August 26 is a postindependence national holiday that commemorates SWAPO’s first military encounter with South African forces in 1966. Ceremonies are held each year at the Heroes’ Acre on August 26.
- 32 Menges (2005).
- 33 Nine of the 170 heroes’ graves are designated as symbolic memorials of revolutionaries buried elsewhere (Ministry of Information 2009).
- 34 Young (1996, 237).
- 35 Connerton (1989, 102).
- 36 Bravenboer (2004, 347).
- 37 Chinkoti and Kamati-Chinkoti (2009).
- 38 Though visiting heads of state may visit industries such as Meatco or aid organizations, a trip to the Heroes’ Acre and the laying of wreaths there is requisite. See Sibeene (2006); Weidlich (2007); and Maletsky (2002).
- 39 To date only a few heroes, primarily Swapo politicians, have been buried at Heroes’ Acre (Becker 2011). The topic of who should be recognized as a hero, a designation determined by a government committee, has remained controversial since the monument’s inauguration. See Maletsky (2003) and Gaomas (2007).
- 40 Becker (2011, 529).
- 41 The Owambo are the largest group in Namibia, comprising about one half of the country’s total population (Ejikeme 2011, 2). Though by no means an exclusively Owambo organization, SWAPO has been called an “Owambo party” because of its regional origins. See Cliffe (1994).
- 42 Becker (2011, 530).
- 43 Maletsky (2002).
- 44 Becker (2011, 527).
- 45 Becker (2011, 529).
- 46 KCNA (2008b).
- 47 Melber and Saunders (2007, 76).
- 48 Bauer (2001, 35).
- 49 Kössler (2007, 327).
- 50 Amupadhi (2003b).
- 51 Sasman (2008) and Weidlich (2008a).
- 52 Comaroff (2002, 130).
- 53 Johnson (2003).
- 54 Sasman (2008).
- 55 Amupadhi (2003a).
- 56 Menges (2003). The government ultimately scaled back its initial proposal and expropriated only 15 properties (Menges 2006).
- 57 Amupadhi (2003b).
- 58 Weidlich (2008b).
- 59 Dentlinger (2005).

- 60 Vale (2008, 328).
- 61 A schematic rendering of a welwitschia plant appears on the Namibian coat of arms.
- 62 Vale (2008, 322).
- 63 Freschi (2007, 35).
- 64 Namibian architect Jaco Wasserfall was part of a planning committee for the Independence Memorial Museum. He suggested that the government adapt an existing structure near the museum's current location. Nujoma told Wasserfall that the museum was to be taller than any colonial structure, and, as such, another location or existing structure would be inadequate for the commission (Jaco Wasserfall, personal communication, August 13, 2010).
- 65 Maletsky (2008a).
- 66 Kaapama (2008).
- 67 Mondesa and Kuisebmond are townships (informal settlement areas) within Swakopmund and Walvis Bay, respectively.
- 68 Maletsky (2008b).
- 69 Letter to editor of *The Namibian* ("Concerned Citizen" 2008).
- 70 Kisting (2010).
- 71 Kisting (2010).
- 72 Nina Maritz, personal communication, August 11, 2010.
- 73 Law-Viljoen (2006, 7).
- 74 Law-Viljoen (2006, 7).
- 75 Here, reference to "the East" connotes both the increased economic presence of North Korean and Chinese entrepreneurs in Namibia. Chinese firms have also been awarded architectural tenders without competition and many suspect that Chinese companies have secured contracts and permits by bribing government officials (LaFraniere 2009). Chinese architectural companies have also been criticized for failing to comply with Namibian labor laws and safety regulations, which some argue has given the Chinese unfair economic advantage against Namibian companies (Menges 2007; Grobler 2008b; Bloom and Poplak 2011). A "special relationship" between Namibia and China established during the independence struggle is also cited as a basis for their economic partnerships (Inambao 2010).
- 76 Kisting (2010).
- 77 Kangueehi (2008).
- 78 KCNA (2008c).
- 79 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2008).
- 80 Vale (1999, 396).

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Concrete Aspirations

Modern Art at the Roundabout in Ugep

Gitti Salami

Introduction

On August 16, 2011, at 5 a.m., half an hour after the bells of the Presbyterian Church rang in a new day, two town criers in ritual attire moved from ward to ward in the Cross River town of Ugep. The sky was still pitch black. The men used talking drums in imitation of their tonal language to summon the citizens. People were to assemble at the roundabout in front of Umor Otutu Palace in order to attend a *kipali* (pl. *yipali*) or town congress.

Yipali such as this are the fora used by His Royal Highness Ubi Ujong Inah, Obol Lopon of Ugep¹ and paramount ruler of Yakurr Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria to address Yakurr. The 81-year-old ruler, a former commissioner of police and a member of the Rosicrucian Order AMORC,² holds his office by virtue of his custodianship of the town's most important fertility shrine, the Odjokobi *yose*.³ On this particular occasion, just days before the climax of the annual new yam festival (Leboku), and a subsequent staged affair for tourists (Yakurrboku), the town leader needed to remind this Yakurr community of the potential hazards associated with the exuberance that typically accompanies these celebrations. The Obol Lopon's foremost concern was to safeguard the community. The expected arrival of out-of-town visitors within days and the associated international scrutiny of Yakurr practices must have been on his mind.

Steeped in ritual prescription, the *kipali* seems an unlikely setting for a discussion of modern art in Africa; nevertheless, the most charged topic of this town meeting would be a modern concrete sculpture. The Obol Lopon was anxious about the safety of a new statue associated with the Odjokobi shrine. This work replaced a 2005 concrete sculpture by Ben Arikpo, entitled *Mma Esekpa, the Great Mother of Ugep Eburutu*, willfully destroyed by fervent Christians during the previous Leboku. In addition, the *kipali* was staged around the base of a modern civic monument by Ubi Obongha Ikpi

(aka Ubi Artist), a life-size figurative representation of Obol Etim Ubi (aka Obol Obu), town leader from 1939 until his death in 1951. Modern art thus constituted an important topic of the congress while also serving as its backdrop.

Further, the *kipali*'s juxtaposition of seemingly irreconcilable opposites – an egalitarian-minded, technologically savvy, primarily Christian population responding to the drummed summons of a fertility priest, traditional ruler, and king – is emblematic of the “antinomies of art and culture” that now characterize the condition of contemporaneity everywhere.⁴ Designed to air out problems that stir the community, this *kipali* naturally shed significant light on Yakurr’s engagement with modern art in 2011. It thus serves as a case study that casts doubt on the universality of European paradigms of modernity and modernism, and questions their centrality to Yakurr’s discourse on aesthetics.⁵

The *kipali* focused on local sculptor Egele Enang’s undertaking to replace the artwork effaced in 2010 with a new concrete sculpture in time for the climax of the 2011 festival. This chapter thus investigates the narratives that surrounded his commission. To ground Enang’s work in local practice, I touch briefly on the repertoire and sources of inspiration of Ubi Artist, to whom Enang is indebted. Artworks from Ubi Artist’s workshop have graced town squares in the villages of the Middle Cross River region for more than half a century. Although these specific works have not received previous scholarly attention apart from two tributes to the artists I wrote for Nigerian publications,⁶ similar concrete sculptures found throughout West Africa have typically been framed as “popular” art,⁷ a Eurocentric and ideologically charged category that distinguishes them from “traditional” and “high/elite” art.⁸ Similar classifications, such as “new functional,” “transitional,” or “contemporary traditional” are more sensitive to artworks’ considerable debt to indigenous epistemologies, but still subtly ascribe them lower status than works grounded in either precolonial practices or Eurocentric academic training.⁹

This chapter rejects such differentiation. The commitment to criticality that leads Yakurr to reinvent their society and to go beyond established norms does not, in essence, differ from that that has driven the European avant-garde during modernism and postmodernism.¹⁰ In fact, Talal Asad uses terminology ordinarily associated with the avant-garde – Habermas understands it as “*invading unknown territory*”¹¹ – in his discussion of the tension between tradition’s construction of limits and “the forces that push the tradition *onto new terrain*” (emphases mine).¹² Yakurr lack the historical avant-garde’s culture-specific penchant for rupture, shock, and divisiveness;¹³ the mechanisms this society employs to embrace newness are closer in spirit to the neo-avant-garde’s preference for “subtle displacements and/or strategic collaborations.”¹⁴ It is thus not surprising that Yakurr, too, invariably tie their assertions about modernity to discussions about “tradition.” Asked to define modernity, Chief Sugar, former Chairman of the Obol Lopon Advisory Council (OLAC),¹⁵ responded,

If I were predisposed to it, I would want to know, what is the difference between tradition and culture? Tradition is something people have come to be used to; culture broadens your horizon. By the time you look at both, you will now know what of tradition to drop and what of culture to adopt. How you modify tradition ... is a question of what you will see as contribution to the people’s wellbeing.¹⁶

In as much as “traditions” (African, European, and otherwise) function as a means to synthesize the contradictions inherent in a (post)colonial and (post)imperial world,

they are all constitutive of modernity.¹⁷ It follows that provincial manifestations of modernity, such as the concrete sculptures in Ugep, owe their modernity to their very groundedness in indigenous epistemology.

According to Okwui Enwezor's notion of "Aftermodernity," whereby Africans are in the process of disaggregating "the architecture of colonial modernity" from African social contexts – with "a possible *tabula rasa* for a future composition" of modernity being a result – Africa's modernity is yet to come.¹⁸ The future orientation of this outlook generally resonates with Yakurr aspirations. However, I would argue that it is not modernity Yakurr are waiting for. Rather, it is acknowledgment of their contribution to modernity that remains outstanding.

A Note on Leboku and Yakurrboku

The first of the two festivals introduced above is the two-month-long first fruits celebration of Leboku. Deeply rooted in the cultural memory of the transatlantic slave trade, it is a community-wide practice that enacts the victorious defense of a town under siege and frames concerns with fertility and renewal in terms of the need to replenish life after war. Over 30 discrete ritual acts unfold at sacred sites and along historically significant routes.¹⁹ The second, Yakurrboku, which takes place in a sports arena and lasts only one day, is a 2005 invention of former state governor Donald Duke. It piggybacks on preexisting efforts by Ugep's priest-chiefs to proffer their culture and their views to an international audience.²⁰ It is part of an aggressive state agenda to develop the region and attract foreign capital. In addition to state sponsorship, Yakurrboku is underwritten by MTN (Mobile Telecommunications Network, a South Africa-based company); NTA (Nigerian Television Authority); CRBC (Cross River Broadcasting Corporation); and, since 2010, by Yakurr in the Diaspora.²¹ While I would argue that the two events are quickly becoming one and the same, many Yakurr feel strongly about distinguishing between the two.

The Kipal's Setting

On ordinary days, traffic encircling the roundabout at Obol Etim Ubi Square is modest; heavy commercial traffic bypasses the town center. On extraordinary days, the town square is either deserted, as during curfews or chiefly processions, or it is overwhelmed by thousands of celebrants, as during masquerades or when Ugep's priest-chiefs (the *yabol*) sit in state in front of the palace.²²

Overseeing this performance arena is the life-size polychrome concrete statue of former town leader Obol Obu (whose formal name has been given to the square itself). It is one of over a dozen civic monuments from Ubi Artist's workshop that define the region's modern townscapes.²³ These works, set on high pedestals or stepped pyramids, signify towns' hubs of ritual activity and/or the vicinity of local rulers' residences. As can be discerned from a sculpture located in Akpet Central (Figure 29.1), Ubi Artist's creations visually resemble but predate the oeuvre of renowned Ibibio artist Sunday Jack Akpan.²⁴ In fact, Ubi Artist initially acquired his skills in the town of Uyo in Akwa Ibom State, where Akpan works. There he briefly trained with A. P. Umana, who, in the mid-1930s, along with Ben Enwonwu, was an art student of colonial educator Kenneth C. Murray.²⁵



FIGURE 29.1 Ubi Obongha Ikpi (aka Ubi Artist). *Chief Aho Omini*, unveiled March 27, 1990. Concrete, paint, Akpet Central, Biase Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria. Photograph by Gitti Salami, 2002.

Concrete sculpture in southeastern Nigeria has too long and complex a history to permit a thorough review here. Briefly, Ibibio and Ejagham artists embellished graves with commemorative concrete sculptures inspired by missionary tombstones as early as 1911.²⁶ Early converts to Christianity, who provided the impetus for such innovation, also drew on regional practices such as Ibibio *nwomo* funeral displays,²⁷ Igbo *mbari*,²⁸ and Ejagham *mgbogadem* mud sculpture in these expressions of colonial modernity.²⁹ In Ugep, where such funerary monuments are absent, concrete figures were initially (literally) modeled on or over wooden carvings. A prominent shrine sculpture at Bibobiko town hall titled *Oja Onen* (*The Gossip*) retained a preexisting 1930s wooden sculpture by local carver Eteng Nsut as its armature.³⁰ In other cases, concrete sculptures replaced monumental carved wooden pillars associated with various wards' meeting grounds. Ubi Artist replaced one such pillar in Ugep with a new wooden carving.³¹ In Assiga Old Town (a community of the neighboring Agbo people), Ubi Artist translated a similar pillar into a tall concrete column with relief

designs; unlike the original monument, it gives rise to a towering life-size representation of the Oval Ndembem Igbele, a historically important figure in that community. Concrete as a modern medium is regarded as advantageous because it falls victim neither to termites nor fire.³²

Paying tribute to noteworthy people through monuments is not novel in Yakurr society; it has several precedents. After their death, economically powerful men (members of Osu, an association of accomplished philanthropists) are still honored with *kesuti*, abstracted portrait heads made of stuffed red stocking caps mounted on tall bamboo poles that are protected by inverted enamel basins or umbrellas.³³ As late as 1992, Ugepians also still honored warriors by displaying their seated corpses covered in gunpowder on 4-meter-tall bamboo structures called *ngboluk*.³⁴ The wooden pillars described above also celebrated heroes. As Ikpi Ubi Ofem related, Yakurr's "ornamental trees ... indicated the exploits of war and that [they] were great men ... They used wooden carvings to create pictures then, not cameras."³⁵

Obol Obu's statue in the Ugep square stands upright atop a 200 cm plinth at the center of a roundabout platform. It is surrounded by three concrete benches and a balustrade. Obol Obu is depicted in the same attire the priest-chiefs wear on a daily basis. The features of the ruler, whether they had to be recalled from memory³⁶ or because frequent repainting obliterated subtleties over time, are fairly indistinct. Refinement of sculpted form was less important than legibility of iconographic elements, including an *nsibidi*-emblazoned *ukara* cloth draped around the ruler's hips. *Ukara* is a resist-stitched indigo-dyed textile exclusive to Cross River region's famed Ekpe society, and *nsibidi* is the region's ideographic script.³⁷ The formal elements of the artwork may initially appear to be unremarkable, and the statue may thus seem to offer little in terms of aesthetic interest.³⁸ However, such a (mis)reading assumes that its aesthetic charge is meant to reside in its form, not in the context of its use, as is actually the case. Further consideration will show the Obol Obu's statue to be a significant work of art.

Obol Obu played a pivotal role during the colonial age. Inaugurated on June 23, 1939 and deciding then to "become a harbinger of the New Ugep,"³⁹ he was the first town leader to occupy the office after the British colonial administration dismantled the system of "warrant chiefs" and reinstated hereditary rulers.⁴⁰ In Ugep, after nearly four decades of colonial rule, it was decided (but not without argument) that the council of 23 priest-chiefs had comprised the political leadership during precolonial times.⁴¹ It is noteworthy that what has been passed down as Yakurr "traditions" were practices disrupted and mediated by the British; many "traditional" institutions never existed in their current form apart from colonial modernity. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, indigenous practice and modernity in Ugep constituted each other.

Changes to the civic monument observed over time register the porous borders between indigenous and foreign imposed culture. The roundabout sculpture created by Ubi Artist in 1979 occupies what is now considered to be secular space, but constituted sacred ground prior to the population's widespread conversion to Christianity. Today the space has a political dimension; after the May 1999 election, young men articulated their optimism surrounding the end of military rule by painting the shawl draped over Obol Obu's otherwise bare chest in the colors of the Nigerian flag.⁴² Similarly, when the priest-chiefs, in response to the government's promotion of

Leboku as an international event in 2005, enclosed the palace with a wall, they also fortified the Obol Obu statue and replaced the roundabout's then flimsy wrought-iron fence with a concrete balustrade.

The Obol Obu statue conveys that concrete sculptures in the region are as responsive to indigenous culture as they are to the postcolonial landscape they occupy, and that "tradition" and Nigerian modernity are inextricably intertwined. Sometimes, in fact often, this entails jarring contradictions that have been so naturalized within the environment that they are brushed over. For example, Apostle Ibor Esu Oden, a devout Christian member of the royal family and an eligible heir to the throne when Obol Obu died, opted to go into exile to avoid the office. In 2002, he pointed to the sculpture and laughed, "[If I had taken this position] I would be dead now; that is a very hot place to be standing all day long."⁴³ The implication was that chiefs who are envied often die prematurely because they are subjected to witchcraft ("heat" signaling danger). Apostle Oden, regardless of his monotheistic beliefs, saw this supposedly secular sculpture as an extension of the sacred authority of Obol Obu and as a reference to the suffering a leader must endure. Homi Bhabha attributes the origin of such antinomy in (post)colonial societies to the British colonial administration.⁴⁴ He explains that the British, in their "civilizing mission," only partially replicated post-Enlightenment European society in the colonies. Simultaneously promoting the virtue of full citizenship and autonomy in the colony and legislatively foreclosing upon their attainment – thereby grounding colonial modernity in deceit and absurdity – they fostered masterful negotiation of paradoxical constellations and in Ugep they may well have laid the foundation for a new "after-modern" consciousness.⁴⁵

There is another layer to the Obol Obu statue. By 6 a.m. on the morning of the *kipali*, despite very heavy rain, several hundred people had formed a large circle around its base. They left about 6 meters of open space between themselves and the structure to allow ordinary men from various wards to step forward and offer a response to the Obol Lopon's speech. By 7 a.m., a single-file procession of priest-chiefs, led by the town speaker and trailed by representatives of the Obol Lopon Advisory Council, emerged from the palace grounds and assembled on the roundabout platform. The town criers stationed themselves in front of the structure and circumambulated it as they underscored the Obol Lopon's messages with single strokes of their drums. A palace guard and several policemen took up station behind the audience. This setting yields a concentric layout: a circle at the center, inscribed by the sculpture of Obol Obu, surrounded by a series of rings, the spaces occupied by the priest-chiefs, the town criers, the ward representatives, the citizens, and the police. Is it not interesting that, expressed graphically, this yields the *nsibidi* symbol for "assembly" or "meeting?"⁴⁶

Seen in this light, Obol Obu's statue can hardly be said to create its own autonomy; it does not reach "downward to absorb the pedestal into itself" or operate "in relation to ... loss of site," as Rosalind Krauss observes of European modernist sculpture.⁴⁷ In fact, the Ugep statue does quite the opposite. Grounded in Yakurr epistemology and its emphasis on the interdependence of people and ancestral spirits, the roundabout sculpture seeks out social context even as it initially solicits a visceral response.⁴⁸ It gains meaning from and legitimizes the performances that surround it.⁴⁹ From its privileged space at the center of the *nsibidi* sign for "assembly" (again, the epitome of esoteric knowledge in the Cross River region), this modern sculpture of a revered

ancestor presides over Yakurr performances and reinforces local understandings of mankind's place in the cosmos. As if this conceptual construction were not already sufficiently tight, the sculpture is situated at the crossroads, a potent symbol of the threshold to the transcendental realm in much of western and Central Africa.⁵⁰ I do not mean to suggest that the Obol Obu statue functions or is locally understood as *nsibidi*, still, the manner in which the sculpture's meaning is constructed is informed by the fact that regionally signs acquire their significance from their performance contexts.⁵¹

The life-size figure thus absorbs and synthesizes alien impulses – concrete as a medium, naturalistic representation, and the very idea of a central authority figure. While the *kipali* context reveals the mechanism by which time-honored practices in Ugep bring about such absorption, the Obol Lopon's speech underscores the specific conflicts that render this postcolonial community resistant to foreign paradigms of global modernity.⁵²

The Obol Lopon's Address

The Obol Lopon's speech was mesmerizing. It lasted about 30 minutes and despite torrential rain no one left the scene. The ruler cleared his throat, a ritually sanctioned prerogative that "indicates that you can talk on behalf of the town, clearly, without any obstruction."⁵³ Then he said:

A few days ago they made me to be happy. We heard rumors the government has taken the international festival to a different village. When we heard these rumors: Ah! It can't happen! It has never been so. I myself, in different stations in Cross River State, onto the time I retired, when I became a chief, I have never seen where they keep two headquarters in the same local government area. When I heard these rumors I was shocked.⁵⁴

With this grand opening, feigning credulity, the Obol Lopon placed himself amongst his people and struck at the heart of an intra-Yakurr conflict that has plagued the region for nearly a century. The immediate issue was Ugepians' fear that the state government would heed other towns' complaints regarding Ugep's sole control over Yakurboku, and honor requests to rotate the lucrative event among communities.⁵⁵ Although Yakurboku takes place in Ugep Peace Stadium, during Ugep's "real" festival, it is intended to showcase the culture of all villages in the local government area and bring economic development and peace to an impoverished region.⁵⁶ Needless to say, Ugep's control over Yakurboku had the opposite effect and reinforced animosities between villages.

The underlying conflict dates to the colonial age. Incompatibility of the people's autonomous, "democratic village republics"⁵⁷ with the colonial government's need for a centralized administration became problematic the moment (c.1920) the British set up a "native court" in Ugep (then called Umor), and later placed everyone in the region, despite the lack of any unified Yakurr identity, under the jurisdiction of a Yakurr Clan Appeal Court (c.1935).⁵⁸ The smaller towns fought fiercely against Ugep's subsequent claim to leadership, a position "that Umor [was] inclined to press without justification."⁵⁹

In 2011, the other communities in the area threatened to boycott the nationally televised tourist event. They were disgruntled because their chiefs had felt ill treated by the festival organizers during the previous Yakurboku and gone home empty handed.⁶⁰ Respecting clan autonomy and sharing resources equally are sacrosanct principles that local peoples adamantly defend, even in the face of modern political and economic realities. Thus, even in Ugep, where most people welcome the government's tourism scheme (largely because festival participation brings economic benefits tied to visitors while bolstering Yakurr identity), people maintain, "The government was stoutly resisted ... The terms of Ugep's patriclans and matriclans and the traditions are *non-negotiable*."⁶¹

After establishing the implausibility of the rumors regarding rotation of Yakurboku, the Obol Lopon challenged those who spread them to step forward. When no one did, he dismissed the hearsay and revealed he had written confirmation from Cross River State Governor Liyel Imoke stating that "the governor is coming with those who love to celebrate with him."

Next, the Obol Lopon spoke of Ben Arikpo's polychrome concrete sculpture of Ugep's patron deity, Mma Esekpa, which had been integrated into the Odjokobi shrine in 2005. The ruler asked, "What is there to gain? [from the deliberate destruction of this work of modern art]." During a press conference held a week earlier, he had explained, "I never knew some Church people were not happy with that effigy." The vandalism had taken place under the cover of the 2010 performance of Etangala, a popular and dramatic masquerade associated with Oblantamana, a spirit that protects crops. Etangala is accompanied by an entourage of men who control his movements with staffs and chains; he chases audience members and threatens to behead them with a sword. On the main day of Leboku in 2010, Etangala drew a crowd of well over 10,000 people to the palace grounds, and when this mass of celebrants dispersed, only the statue's feet and a low platform remained.

During the *kipali*, however, the Obol Lopon was careful to sidestep the issue of religious fanaticism in Ugep so as not to alienate his subjects. Instead, he focused attention on members of the Umor Otutu Women Progressive Union, who had paid for the sculpture out of their own pockets. "I want to tell all the women who contributed *even the government* has seen their effort" (emphasis mine). Drawing again on his earlier cosmopolitan experiences, the Obol Lopon compared the despoiled statue of Ugep's patron deity to civic sculptures of celebrated leaders which he had seen in Onitsha, Lagos, and Calabar. "The *Mma Esekpa* sculpture is kept at the palace to remember the women of old, just to keep memories."

As it happened, he did not have to verbalize the tension between a relatively small but growing faction of Christians who want to sabotage Yakurr practices, based on their conviction that these are of the devil, and those who adamantly defend the culture despite their Christian beliefs; it was palpable. In fact, the *kipali* itself was interrupted when more than 100 members of the Aladura church, an active Pentecostalist group, approached the town square in procession, entered the palace grounds, and paraded around the Odjokobi shrine.⁶² There, Egele Enang's new and still unfinished *Mma Esekpa* sculpture stood unprotected. For a moment the group's intention was anything but clear. Police and town criers rushed to the scene. Later, the marchers downplayed this disturbance; they claimed that they had merely come to bless the Odjokobi shrine and to dispel evil spirits.

Contradiction upon contradiction! The Obol Lopon, who had just attested to the sculpture's secular nature, explained that he had not pursued disciplinary action against the vandals because Mma Esekpa had appeared in a vision to communicate that she herself would punish the culprits. The ruler then assured his audience, "Before Ekoi day, they will finish that *Mma Esekpa*." To safeguard it, he decreed that this year no one except Etangala and his entourage would be allowed to enter the palace grounds during the masquerade's circumambulation of the town. "Anyone trying to come into the palace will be punished. When they catch you, they'll beat you, they throw you outside. Police will handle you."

Despite the Obol Lopon's harsh decree, the *kipali* did not end on a grim note. The ruler discussed a dispute over land set aside for a proposed institute of technology. A comment about Christians' failure to attend an inaugural thanksgiving service two weeks earlier – an addition to the Leboku calendar – constituted a preemptive strike against them. The Obol Lopon remarked, "They say the chiefs don't go to church. It is not so. The chiefs went. But those who say they go to church, they didn't go."⁶³ As a skilled orator, the Obol Lopon ended the address on a light note. Young men had taken to flinging condoms at female performers during wrestling competitions (an aspect of Leboku that in the past permitted them to prove their strength and eligibility for marriage), but people laughed heartily when the Obol Lopon chose to spell C-O-N-D-O-M, rather than to pronounce it aloud.

This sketch is indicative of the confidence most Yakurr have in their indigenous institutions and explains why they subordinate global modernity to indigenous logic. The general nastiness of witchcraft and bloody wars aside, the root causes of many Yakurr external and internal conflicts lie in a hegemonic power's imposition of "enlightened" institutions and laws so contrary to indigenous values as to appear irrational. European Enlightenment ideology's claim to universality is eroded here not only by its own historical relativism, as Mazrui argues, but also by the European cannons that litter the beaches of the Cross River and bear witness to Europeans' inability to live up to their own standards.⁶⁴

On this occasion, the Obol Lopon reinforced the soundness of local reasoning and relied on the certainty of human gossip to broadcast his decrees. Information relayed during *yipali* is quickly disseminated; it travels by word of mouth from compound to compound. That the citizens nowadays also use their cell phones to pass along the ruler's messages only underscores that Yakurr society, full of antinomies, is forward not backward looking, and that the region's concrete sculptures require consideration of Yakurr aspirations.

Egele Enang's *Mma Esekpa*

Egele Enang was only commissioned to create a new *Mma Esekpa* sculpture during the final stages of festival preparations; consequently the work itself was a rush job (Figure 29.2). The Obol Lopon received confirmation that the governor would finance the endeavor only one week before the *kipali*. Ben Arikpo had recently passed away, so the restoration fell to the only other sculptor in town, a 2008 graduate of UniUyo's (University of Uyo) department of fine and industrial art.⁶⁵

Enang had placed himself in the spotlight during the 2010 festival. Encouraged by the chairman of the OLAC committee on customs and traditions, he had staged a solo



FIGURE 29.2 Egele Enang. *Mma Esekpa*, completed August 2011. Reinforced concrete, enamel paint, and terracotta, installed as part of the Odjokobi fertility shrine located on the grounds of Umor Otutu Palace in Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria. Photograph by Gitti Salami, 2011.

exhibition in one of the stadium's three-sided vendor booths and received high accolades from the governor. This exhibition of over 40 mixed media works functioned visually as a unified installation. Individual works, 120–150 cm high, were made of wood, fiberglass, and metal. Abstracted figures in ceremonial garb – trumpet blowers, female dancers, and chiefs with staffs or swords – were mounted on variously silhouetted, polished wooden planks, some engraved with *nsibidi*. Rhythmically arranged to encircle the booth's walls, these works evoked the multisensory experience of a procession. This was the first Western gallery-styled art exhibit held in the region.

For the 2011 festival, Enang had planned another splash. The artist spent six months preparing an exquisitely sculpted, 4.5-meter-tall concrete sculpture, *Mmanfe Maiden* (Figure 29.3). This towering, sensuously depicted festival performer in a short, skirt-like wrapper, a Western-style bra and spiral brass leggings danced hunched over in front of a container filled to the brim with yams. Her undulating horsetail dance wands echoed the peacock feathers in her hairdo. Her twisted torso evoked the jiggling of colonial coins strung around her waist. This sculpture was to be placed at the stadium on the morning of Yakurboku in order to impress the governor, who, Enang hoped, would install the work in a prominent location in the state capital, Calabar. Unfortunately, the work was destroyed during transport just hours before the governor's arrival and unveiling of a replica had to wait until Yakurboku, August 24, 2012.



FIGURE 29.3 Egele Enang. *Mmanfe Maiden*, 2011. Reinforced concrete, enamel paint, Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria. Photograph by Gitti Salami, 2011.

Enang is a modern artist working in a traditional environment. Born in 1977 in Ugep, he is a member of a younger generation of Yakurr, many of whom aspire to a cosmopolitan lifestyle. They partake in beauty pageants, read popular magazines, produce Nollywood films,⁶⁶ and enjoy clubs and comedy shows. Enang frequently checks the Internet on his Blackberry and regularly updates his Facebook page. In March 2012, he posted a business name, “EGELES KONCEPT: shrine galleries and muzeum.”⁶⁷ Asked why he used the term “shrine,” he sent a text message, “The meaning is just a place people love going to view good things simple.”⁶⁸ He ultimately hopes to attend graduate school abroad, or, alternatively, to establish himself in Abuja, the nation’s capital.

For now, however, Enang has set out to bring some of Uyo’s greater cosmopolitan flair to Ugep⁶⁹ and to document Yakurr culture. Of his *Mmanfe Maiden*,⁷⁰ he said,

It dawned on me: Egele, you have to conceptualize a Leboku maiden. If the festival is no longer celebrated, let the sculpture speak volumes about the people’s culture ... When you talk about things the whole world doesn’t know, the whole world will be interested.⁷¹

The fact that, in reality, the world thus far has largely ignored Yakurr culture has irritated Ugepians for a long time. In an interview in *The X-Ray*, a local paper, Enang

asked, why should the focus “always always [be on] Benin art, Ife art, etc. as if we don’t have ours?”⁷² He is not alone in his effort to gain recognition for Yakurr culture. Long before the government caught on to the idea of Leboku as a “tourism goldmine,”⁷³ as already mentioned, the Yakurr used their communally authored performances to offer a biting critique of political events and made their desire to reach a global audience explicit. Recently, young and old alike have gained access to digital media that has intensified this effort and ignited “archive fever” in Ugep.⁷⁴ Videotaping the festival and preparing DVDs for sale to expatriates and the Nigerian Television Authority, with an eye cast on CNN and the National Geographic Channel, Yakurr entrepreneurs have created a new industry. Commercial activities related to digital technology also provided Christians who formerly felt alienated from the Leboku rites with an avenue to reclaim their culture without offending their religious sensibilities. “Showing of doing” – documenting rites or performing them for tourists – is different from engaging in ritual.⁷⁵

Enang understands himself as an avant-garde artist. With *Mma Esekpa* (Figure 29.2), he strove to bring Clement Greenberg’s formalist version of Modernism to Ugep.⁷⁶ His art historical training, he explained, included the “-isms” (i.e., impressionism through abstract expressionism), but also entailed evaluation of ancient Nok sculpture (created in central and northern Nigeria from roughly 1000 BCE to 500 CE) as modern, “because of the time of [its] discovery.”⁷⁷ “There is a marriage between the two [modern and ancient art]; the two work together.” His grounding is thus not limited to Greenberg’s vision of modern art, but informed by the “Natural Synthesis” that Ben Enwonwu and artists of Uche Okeke’s generation worked out before and after Nigerian independence. Realizing early on that “that which is modern preserves a secret tie to the classical,” as Habermas would later write,⁷⁸ they toured Nigeria to study her ancient art and melded modern European and precolonial African artistic conventions.⁷⁹ In Enang’s words, “in Africa, they began to unravel it.”⁸⁰

These artists refuted the notion that knowledge systems embedded in “traditional” art constitute an inadequate foundation for developing a specifically Nigerian modernity. They also rejected the framing of ceremonial aspects associated with indigenous artistic practice as antithetical to modernism, for, as one of their colleagues, renowned artist Obiora Udechukwu, recognized, “When you have an exhibition opening, it’s like a public outing of a masquerade.”⁸¹ Enang’s equation of shrine and gallery, festival and art exhibition is thus based upon the painstaking and original research of Nigerian artists who foreign scholars and curators, as Sylvester Ogbechie points out, have largely relegated to the liminal space between indigenous and “high/elite” art.⁸²

Enang’s sculptures differ from those of his local predecessors such as Ubi Artist and his apprentice, Ben Arikpo.⁸³ First, Enang’s work is technically superior. These older artists built the core of their figures around molds made from heaps of sand. They only reinforced extremities.⁸⁴ This technique is weak and restricts articulation of human movement to more or less static poses. Ben Arikpo’s *Mma Esekpa*, a flat, two-dimensionally conceived work, was particularly feeble. Enang, by contrast, used the “method of direct concrete.” He welded an armature from high-tensile rods (12 mm in diameter), bound the skeleton with wire mesh, filling it with rags and paper. An assistant, Francis Joseph (aka Razor), covered it with layers of concrete until a rough figure emerged. Enang then sculpted the final form, adding more material. Working from the ground up, he articulated muscles and facial features, added texture to cloth and hair, and finally painted the work with oil-based enamel,

an undercoat of black, and a brass-colored final coat. The monochromatic appearance was meant to accentuate the three dimensionality of the sculpture. Of Arikpo's polychrome figure, Enang remarked, "Colors make it look crafty. City-sized works, the light will give you all the shades."⁸⁵

Second, Enang's figures are anything but static. His *Mma Esekpa* is a naturalistically rendered, robust elderly woman with sagging breasts and a wrinkled forehead. She is shown "cooling the town," that is, she blesses the community as she rapidly moves from one sacred site to another and sprays consecrated water across the land. Enang, like Ubi Artist and Arikpo, uses iconographic information to identify the figure as a priestess associated with the royal family. A root in *Mma Esekpa*'s mouth pertains to her capacity to safeguard esoteric knowledge and her spiral brass armlet signifies the office of the town leader. Her slightly squatting stance unmistakably evokes the exaggerated posture male priest-chiefs assume during some ritual processions, and her gaze is fixed at about the distance ordinary citizens customarily maintain between themselves and ritually charged actors. The sculpture's foundation, painted stark white, plays with minimalist forms. The statue is diagonally mounted on a rectangular plinth that stands at the center of a square basin. Although the immediate overall impression is of a solid pyramidal form, the rotation and juxtaposition of contrasting elements, including solids and voids, underscore *Mma Esekpa*'s vitality.

Visual articulation of the figure as part of the Odjokobi shrine was not limited to Enang's agency, but involved collaboration with the priest-chiefs. Before work began, the priest-chiefs gathered around the shrine and dedicated Enang to the gods, to "let him work safely without anything happening to him." They also laid a curse on anyone contemplating sabotage. Over the next two weeks, intensely curious about Enang's progress, the priest-chiefs routinely ripped holes in the plastic enclosure that shielded the workspace in order to peek at the work in progress. Finally, literally before the artist laid down his paintbrush, the priest-chiefs uncovered the sculpture and gathered around its base to make it their own. They poured a libation and informed *Mma Esekpa* that their intervention was a necessary innovation, not an act of vandalism. Then the town speaker proclaimed, "We want the shrine and the *Mma Esekpa* to fall in one line so it will look beautiful." With that, the priest-chiefs moved the heavy boulders that constitute the Odjokobi shrine to hug a corner of the sculpture's base. To consecrate the new artwork, they sacrificed a goat, dripped the blood gushing from the animal's throat all around the site, and had a feast.

To Enang, the ritual practice was incidental, but not meaningless. While working on *Mma Esekpa*, he grabbed an ancient pot from the Odjokobi shrine, placed it on the sculpture's left hand and covered it in concrete. Asked whether he did not fear repercussions of such defacement, he laughed, "Oh, don't mind those old men." Besides, he asked, was his sculpture not becoming part of the shrine and was he not (literally) elevating the pot by integrating it into this modern work of art? He reiterated, "You cannot place the old on one side and the contemporary on another side; there is a big link."

While the priest-chiefs enjoyed their meal – they never did mention the repurposed pot – Enang rewapped the sculpture in preparation for the official unveiling by Governor Imoke. This event took place on Yakurrboku, August 24, 2011. As all were anxious to get to the stadium that morning, it involved but a brief address and ribbon cutting.

Comments about Egele Enang's *Mma Esekpa* abounded in Ugep. As time progressed, they became increasingly positive. Members of the Umor Otutu Women

Progressive Union, the sponsors of the original figure, were initially displeased. They had expected an exact replica of Arikpo's sculpture. They wanted their friends "on the outside" who had seen photographs of the original dedication to be able to recognize the sculpture when visiting Ugep. The Obol Lopon's wife felt particularly annoyed and said Enang's sculpture looked like a man. But another woman said the statue reminded her of the strength of the old women of Ekau, a now defunct society. Priest-chiefs observed that the very height of the base and statue befitted Mma Esekpa's grandeur. To them this new work was superior; they appreciated the clarity of the posture. "The first one stood very straight. But this one stands in action; she is really returning from somewhere."⁸⁶ They also liked the face: "A spiritual being that has never been seen facially; now the man brings out the face; something wonderful." Further, it was noted that "the brass color shows the royalty," and, in contrast to the Arikpo's sculpture, regarding solidity and permanence, "this one, a hundred people can't push it." Yakurr speculated that Enang would soon receive a commission to replace Ubi Artist's statue of Obol Obu so that he might raise it to the same "international standard."

"Tradition" and modern art in Ugep are intertwined to a degree that one has to wonder whether Nigeria's custodians of "tradition" have not contributed as much to Nigerian modernism and "Natural Synthesis" as the country's recognized modern artists. The priest-chiefs clearly foreground aesthetic concerns and move effortlessly between religious ritual, theatrical performance and modern civic ceremonials. One also has to ask whether an artist such as Enang – who enjoys official sponsorship at the highest level, thoroughly grounds his work in Nigerian art historical discourse, successfully utilizes all institutional frameworks for aesthetic display at his disposal, and, most importantly, fosters subtle displacements within Yakurr culture – can be thought of as anything other than avant-garde.

Concrete Aspirations

The owner of the Ambassador Hotel in Ugep, Tata Eteng Ikpi, pointed out that Yakurrboku only lasts one day and thus the economic benefits to local vendors and hoteliers are minimal. The real advantage of the tourist event resides in the increase in Leboku festival participation and in the boost given to the culture's visibility. Chief Sugar added, now that Ugep is "popularized and set for international recognition, the gains also involve *making international friends*" (emphasis mine). What does that really mean?

Another brief look at the *Mma Esekpa* sculpture will answer that question. Enwezor suggests that "to historicize modernity is not only to ground it within the conditions of social, political and economic life, it is also to recognize it as a meta-language with which cultural systems become codified and gain modern legitimization."⁸⁷ Point well taken. Yet does not modernity as a metalanguage also address what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "asymmetric ignorance," that is, does not the "Other" in attempts to communicate with a global audience resort to this metalanguage because the West lacks comprehension of African languages and epistemologies?⁸⁸

I was struck by the foregrounding of *Mma Esekpa* via sculptural representation when I briefly visited Ugep in 2006; I thought it was strange. Although I was familiar with this legendary figure, I could not recall her playing so significant a role in Yakurr culture as to warrant the attention afforded her in front of the palace. Daryll Forde, who conducted extensive field research in Ugep in the 1930s,⁸⁹ makes no mention of

this deity. Nor does her name appear in the litany of heroes and heroines that comprises standard Yakurr prayers. Mma Esekpa crept into my field notes first in 2001 and then only as a nebulously defined legendary character conflated with a culture heroine related to the settling of Ugep, further with an early town leader (a woman named Obia Obol Yanen), with a female deity associated with a shrine,⁹⁰ and finally with the Virgin Mary. By 2011, Mma Esekpa had become the “saviour” of the people who led Yakurr during their perilous migrations from Akpa (their alleged homeland) to their current territory, a passage that, like the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and their subsequent journey to the Promised Land, involved an enemy’s close pursuit and demise due to a miracle.⁹¹ Aside from rewriting cultural memory along the lines of biblical narratives to smooth over contradictory ideologies, the Yakurr now consolidate their complex traditional lore to make it accessible to foreign visitors.⁹² Mma Esekpa, recently invented as a patron deity, presents the public face of a society that desperately wishes to be acknowledged. Being egalitarian, Ugep’s priest-chiefs would like nothing better than a seat at the table of the United Nations.

According to Dadi, “cosmopolitanism indexes the fluidity of contemporary identity, in which affiliations are unmoored from fixed referents during a period of transition.”⁹³ Such cosmopolitanism is overtly expressed in the title of Ben Arikpo’s sculpture, *Mma Esekpa, The Great Mother of Ugep Eburutu*. As explained by Yakurr linguist, Alexander Iwara, professor emeritus at Nigeria’s University of Ibadan, *eburutu* is a name that indicates a fictitious relationship with powerful neighbors. Historically these were the Efik, who controlled the slave trading port of Old Calabar. Adding *eburutu* to the town’s name subverted the Efik’s derogatory term for people in the hinterland of Calabar (“*atam*, forest people”) by substituting a title that “has a connotation of civilization. [*Eburutu*] gives you an edge.”⁹⁴

Why does a society require such an edge? And who are the powerful neighbors addressed by Arikpo’s use of *eburutu* today? Professor Iwara made this explicit. During his 2011 inaugural lecture – another recent addition to the Leboku festival program – he explained that language structures people’s basic conceptions of the world and that, based on linguistics alone, diverse Yakurr communities share “an agreement.” His point was that “the festival provides a landing site that should empower the Yakurr people *to move the world in the direction of their dreams*.”⁹⁵ Yakurr see themselves as facing and swaying a global audience.

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Notes

- 1 *Obol* (pl. *yabol*) means “chief”; *lopón* means town.
- 2 Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, an international organization introduced into Ugep in the twentieth century.
- 3 Ubi Ujong Inah, personal communication, July 19, 1998.
- 4 Smith, Enwezor, and Condee (2008).
- 5 Cf. Smith, Enwezor, and Condee (2008, 1).
- 6 Salami (2002, 2012).

- 7 The literature has focused on the cement funerary monuments of the Akan peoples in Ghana and Ivory Coast (Domowitz and Mandiola 1984) and Ibibio people in southeastern Nigeria (Butler 1963; Soulillou 1985).
- 8 Barber says of her own “traditional-popular-high/elite” art model that it is “so overburdened with qualifications and so undermined by provisos that it might as well be thrown out altogether” (1987, 19).
- 9 Thus, such sculptures “need not be crudely fashioned” (Kasfir 1999, 45), and the artists who make them can “achieve elementary competence by trial and error” (Vogel 1991, 95).
- 10 Cf. Lamourreux (2006, 207).
- 11 Habermas (1998, 3).
- 12 Asad interviewed by Scott (2006).
- 13 Lamourreux (2006) talks of the originally “militaristic connotations” of the term “avant-garde.”
- 14 Foster (1996, 25).
- 15 OLAC consists of accomplished, educated members of Yakurr society, who keep the Obol Lopon abreast of political and economic developments in the country.
- 16 Victor Eteng Sugar, personal communication, August 4, 2011.
- 17 Cf. Jameson (2001, 64); Ranger (1999).
- 18 Enwezor (2010, 615–616). While these observations are keen, I find Enwezor’s overall argument in this *South Atlantic Quarterly* publication to be flawed. Space limitations do not permit a critique here, but it has to be pointed out the term “Aftermodernity” is confusing. It simultaneously grants Africa a particular kind of modernity in the present while also denying it any modernity at all.
- 19 Forde (1964, 234–253); Salami (2008, 2009).
- 20 Salami (2008, 2009).
- 21 The impact of Yakurrboku has been a dramatic overhaul of Leboku. I will address its ramifications in a forthcoming monograph.
- 22 The *yabol*, not to be confused with OLAC (see note 15), is a council of 23 traditional rulers that includes the Obol Lopon. These priest-chiefs are either custodians of matriclan-owned fertility shrines or leaders of patriclan-owned associations.
- 23 Other sculptures can be found in Akpet Central, Adim, Idomi, Ekori, Mkanpi, Nko, Assiga Old Town, Igbo-Imabana, Obubra, Oderege, Okorokpana, Nri, and Nkarasi. The earliest work was unveiled at Obubra Government Council on the day of Nigerian independence, October 1, 1960. I consider this oeuvre and the implication of its national context in my forthcoming monograph.
- 24 An illustration of the sculpture of Obol Obu in Ugep would have been preferable, but alas, the statue sits high above the ground, is heavily backlit and difficult to photograph. The example from Akpet Central reproduced here in Figure 29.1 is representative of Ubi Artist’s style.
- 25 Ogbechie (2008, 48). Ubi Obongha Ikpi, personal communication, September 26, 2001. Also see Probst, chapter 15, and Blackmun, chapter 20 this volume.
- 26 Rosevear (1984, 44).
- 27 Butler (1963, 118).
- 28 Cole and Aniakor (1974).
- 29 Talbot (1910).
- 30 An archival photograph by Daryll Forde of the now hidden wooden figure still exists in Rhodes House, University of Oxford Bodleian Library (Forde 1935–1941).

- 31 It still stands in front of Ikpakapit town hall but is now badly deteriorated. See Forde (1964, pl. xia). Forde photographed a second of these carved pillars (see Forde 1935–1941).
- 32 Yakurr frequently commented on the devastation of a 1919 fire that destroyed most of their community. Iki Ubi Ofem, personal communication, October 16, 2001.
- 33 See Thompson (1983, 259).
- 34 Cornelius Ikpi Edet, personal communication, November 23, 2001.
- 35 Iki Ubi Ofem, personal communication, October 16, 2001.
- 36 A photograph by Forde in the Rhodes House Library may be of Obol Obu (Forde 1935–1941).
- 37 On *nsibidi* and *ukara*, see Thompson (1983); Cole and Aniakor (1984). While *nsibidi* is designed to communicate information to members of Ekpe, its larger function in the society is to inspire respect via secrecy. *Nsibidi* encapsulates esoteric knowledge.
- 38 Nicklin and Salmons (1977, 34) warn, “all such judgments concerning art, made in ignorance of the cultural context of the works in question, are related to the intellectual climate of the West.”
- 39 Obu (1939).
- 40 The warrant chief system grew out of the court of equity established in Bonny in 1854. It was first formalized around the turn of the century and arrived in the Middle Cross River region after two punitive expeditions (1895/1898) (Afigbo 1972; Obu 1939).
- 41 The Yakurr Improvement Union, an organization of Christians, argued that the priests’ duties prior to colonialism were restricted to officiating at fertility shrines. Letter by E. Omini, Report to Resident at Ogoja, in Obu (1939).
- 42 Military rule came to an end with Abdulsalam Aboubakar on May 29, 1999.
- 43 Ibor Esu Oden, personal communication, July 7, 1999 and April 6, 2002.
- 44 Bhabha (1994, 85).
- 45 My spelling of “after-modern” instead of Enwezor’s “Aftermodern” is meant to imply a consciousness that will eventually supersede modernity altogether.
- 46 Jordan A. Fenton, e-mail communication, October 17, 2011.
- 47 Krauss (1998, 40).
- 48 The sculpted cement benches that surround the statue underscore this understanding.
- 49 Thompson (1983).
- 50 Thompson (1983).
- 51 This is particularly true for *nsibidi*, which can take the form of gestures. See Carlson (2007).
- 52 Cf. Enwezor (2010, 614).
- 53 Cornelius Ikpi Edet, personal communication, December 1, 2001.
- 54 Translation of my video documentation of the address provided by Fidelis Otu Ubi.
- 55 Sharing institutions on a rotational basis is a longstanding practice among Yakurr.
- 56 It is also at times a warring region. Some conflicts involve brief violent clashes; others, such as the Ugep-Idomi war of 1996, are full-fledged bloody wars replete with formal declarations.
- 57 Afigbo (1972, 15–16).
- 58 Letter by Mr. Fellows, 13 Sept 1936, part of “Residents Covering Report” by Sgd. G. B. Williams, April 25, 1937, in Obu (1939).

- 59 “Residents Covering Report” by Sgd. G. B. Williams, April 25, 1937, in Obu (1939).
- 60 The dominant concerns were lack of reserved seating areas for chiefs of smaller towns and smaller towns’ disadvantages as regards the marketing of foodstuffs (given the difficulty and cost of transport). Outright corruption surrounding government-sponsored competitions played a part.
- 61 Tata Eteng Ikpi, personal communication, July 30, 2011.
- 62 See Jewsiewicki, chapter 17 this volume.
- 63 There had been a mix-up regarding the schedule of the event.
- 64 Mazrui (2001).
- 65 He was mentored by Professors Ben Ekanem and Anthony Okonofua.
- 66 McCall (2004).
- 67 The spelling “is just the uniqueness of my concept, i.e., my own way of being different from the crowd” (Enang, personal communication, June 28, 2012).
- 68 Enang, personal communication, March 28, 2012.
- 69 During a trip to Uyo the artist identified a gallery (housed in repurposed shipping container) and a fountain as desirable features of a cityscape. He also asserted that Uyo hoteliers, who commission artists to design appealing foyers, had greater vision than their counterparts in Ugep.
- 70 An earlier version of it stands at the entrance to UniUyo.
- 71 Enang, personal communication, July 11, 2011.
- 72 Offem (2009, 11). The same sentiment was voiced by priest-chiefs in 1998, when they first endorsed my research project. For Benin and Ife, see Blackmun, chapter 20 and Probst, chapter 15 this volume.
- 73 “Leboku Yam Festival” (2007).
- 74 See Enwezor (2008).
- 75 Schechner (1988, 108).
- 76 Greenberg (1995).
- 77 First publications became available in the middle of the twentieth century (e.g., Fagg 1956).
- 78 Habermas (1998, 2).
- 79 Okeke (2002, 96).
- 80 Enang, personal communication, July 11, 2011.
- 81 Udechukwu (2002, 176).
- 82 Ogbechie, (2002, 208–216).
- 83 Arikpo, who created several sculptures in Ugep, including one of an unknown Biafran soldier, was trained as a painter at Yaba College of Technology in Lagos. He filled commissions for sculptures reluctantly.
- 84 Nicklin and Salmons explain the process in detail (1977, 33).
- 85 Enang, personal communication, July 18, 2011.
- 86 This and the following quotations derive from a number of personal conversations with priest-chiefs in August 2011.
- 87 Enwezor (2010, 597).
- 88 Chakrabarty (2001, 179).
- 89 Forde (1964).
- 90 The Esang Del shrine, not the Odjokobi shrine.
- 91 Ikpi (n.d., 15).
- 92 Cf. Ben-Amos (1977).

- 93 Dadi (2010).
 94 Professor Iwara, personal communication, August 14, 2011.
 95 Iwara (2011).

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