

Artistic Aggression and Globalisation: What will remain of Africa?

The observer of contemporary Africa may well have the impression either that there is a curse on the continent or that its children are paying a high price for the mistakes of their fathers in days gone by. Misery, poverty, civil war and corruption among most of its political leaders seem to be the only images Africa has to offer the rest of the world.

But looking back into history, we discover that Africa was once the fertile ground from which the West derived the black ore for the sugar plantations of the Americas. That was the age of slavery. It was followed by the troika of the missionaries, the merchants and the military who pillaged the continent and dismantled its cultural values. That was the age of colonialism. At the end of the 19th century, the colonial powers partitioned the continent with a compass and a T-square in Berlin, drawing artificial frontiers with no regard for considerations of a cultural or economic nature.

This appraisal of the situation is neither pessimistic nor exaggeratedly gloomy. It merely questions the foundation of many discourses on Africa which merely churn out the old familiar clichés of the destiny of a continent allegedly forgotten by history and excluded from the management of the modern world, i.e. globalisation. These interpretations are forged by an ideology which justified the division of humanity into superior and inferior races and used the school system to spread the inferiority complex, fear and degradation.

Today, all the signs would seem to suggest that the relations between Africa and her former masters are still guided by the same principles of the exploitation and annihilation of local values, albeit in different forms, the softest but not least dangerous of which lies in the production and diffusion of works of art.

This question is discussed in the following from two angles: firstly in the form of an account of how globalisation is experienced and perceived from the African point of view, followed by a discussion of the influence of artistic production on the African being—which naturally implies questioning the very future of Africa. Can we still talk of the African continent, of African art, of the African economy if the current modes of management of intercultural relations continue? What attitudes are now required in Africa and how must Africa be perceived if we wish to make a different choice?

Globalisation or Axiological Negation

Whereas the ages of slavery and colonisation were based on ideologies and policies of axiological negation, as the “negro” was regarded as a sub-human, there was hope that following the disappointments of the era of African independence, the so-called age of globalisation would provide consolation and hope for the future of the dark continent. However the facts would appear to point in a completely different direction. If there was ever a concept with so many possible forms of interpretation that it is not clear whether it is actually the same thing that one is talking about, that concept must surely be globalisation. For some, globalisation represents the world's stage of development: the advent of new information and communication tech-

nologies (ICTs) has heralded a universal upbeat, fast-tempo era, breaking down borders and barriers to trade, and placing the economy in the hands of those in a position to exploit scientific and industrial progress.

According to this school of thought, competition extends beyond the level of individual enterprises to geo-economic blocs, and work is rewarded by success. Everything is geared towards expansionism. Liberalisation, stock market speculation, outsourcing, relocation, privatisation and flexible working time have become the pillars of a global economy which claims to act on behalf of the liberty of humankind and the creation of universal employment.

However alongside this discourse, another school of thought believes that the characteristics of the current age were already analysed some 150 years ago by Marxist theory which saw the world economy as a whole, offering the conditions for a massive export of capital and the expansion of capitalist ratios of production throughout the globe. In Marxist theory, the concept of globalisation has therefore existed for over 150 years.

This visionary perspective of Marxism was based on the realities of an age characterised by capitalist expansionism. The objective of every capitalist, industrialised nation was to annex more and more territory with no concern for the real flesh and blood of the people with both physical and spiritual needs who might happen to live there. The concept most frequently used to describe the political, economic, military and religious expression of this process of the accumulation of capital was imperialism. So here we have two visions of one and the same reality. It must be conceded that whereas Marxist theories have not been given much credence in Africa since the fall of the Berlin wall, the discourse of the IMF seems to fit like a glove, putting Africans into a kind of fatalistic mind-set when things go wrong.

However it is obvious that the current phase of ongoing globalisation leaves no place for Africa—other than the rather ignominious role as the object of everyone's appetite. This is illustrated by Samuel Huntington who believes that humanity has become more selective than ever and permanent strife is stoked by conflicts of interest. In one of his works on the evolution of civilisation, he describes globalisation as a battle between civilisations with no opportunity for arbitration. Huntington identifies eight great tribes of civilisation in this battle: the western, the Latin-American, the Muslim, the Chinese, the Hindu, the Slavo-Orthodox, the Buddhist and the Japanese blocs. Note that there is absolutely no sign of African civilisation in Huntington's equation! It is as if African values and African behaviour in Africa were inexistent, and do not even match up to a confrontation. In other words: globalisation is not a myth which has fallen from the heavens to offer everyone exactly they want and it even denies the dark continent its very right of identity.

In many countries, different levels of sovereignty are falling prey to an all-embracing form of neo-liberalism: water, electricity, telecommunications, construction—privatisation is the rule of the day. All this is allegedly designed to make African products more competitive and to ensure them a place in the world market. But what is actually happening is that Togo, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea have forfeited sovereignty in key sectors of national life. Before the very eyes of African governments, privatisation is generating a repatriation of profit, swelling the already inflated balance of payment deficits even further, and financially asphyxiating the countries in question.

The top priority is financial profitability. Its corollary is poverty and unemployment

in the states pushing through privatisation programmes and accepting “aid”—which merely gets them caught up in spiralling debt, the annual repayment of which exceeds 500% of the original borrowings for the continent as a whole.

The gap between the poorest and the richest nations is continually widening. Despite the continent’s diamond, gold and oil resources, 32 of the 45 countries classified by the United Nations as the least developed nations lie in Africa. And the inhabitants of these 32 states, accounting for 46% of the total population of the dark continent, live from hand to mouth off less than USD 2 a day, forced to watch their children die because of a lack of drugs or vaccines.

Another aspect of the globalisation process as it is perceived in Africa is the appeal of the international community to make “Education for All” the overriding priority up to the year 2015, with an annual spend of USD 5–7 billion, i.e. USD 20 per child, up to the target year of 2015. Every country, and every shareholder (pupils, teachers, students) are supposed to participate in financing this project.

But no one has cared to ask how Africa can possibly afford this sum when its children desperately need a kilo of rice, a few grams of milk powder, a handful of salt or a pound of millet to even survive. How can Africans be expected to afford exercise and text books when they do not even know where their next meal is to come from? Do people realise that for almost ten years now more than 60% of African families have only had one square meal a day?

The international agencies’ empty talk on poverty makes money for the specialised agencies to combat poverty rather than actually alleviating the plight of the poor. It transpires that the USD 5–7 billion necessary to achieve the goal of Education for All is the equivalent of no more than 0.6% of the fortune of the world’s 225 wealthiest citizens. Moreover, worldwide military expenditure of USD 780 billion is one hundred times the entire funding required for Education for All. At the same time, whereas the USA squanders USD 8 billion every year on cosmetics, USD 13 billion per annum would suffice to eradicate misery on our planet, an amount which exactly corresponds to the annual north American consumption of ice cream!

New universal anthropologies are fabricated and the death of individual identities is proclaimed in the name of globalisation. And those who cling so desperately to the idea of an African identity, swept away so long ago by the world market, are scoffed at as backward-looking nostalgics. Should we laugh at such visions or cry at the reality of this age which crushes economies, tramples on policies and ideologies, yet in spite of itself resurrects or resuscitates the reflexes and behaviour based on those denied identities and geared towards self-defence and survival? As far as Africa is concerned, the reality of globalisation is aggression against local populations in the form of a profit-thirsty policies in the guise of assistance and aid. So it is hardly surprising that more and more Africans are now asking themselves when globalisation is going to come to an end. Because no matter where they turn, they witness and experience an axiological negation, i.e. the rejection of their very being.

What Being for the Africans in the Context of Artistic Production?

Globalisation which leaves its mark on all aspects of African life is particularly apparent in the field of art. The exhibits on view in galleries and museums of contemporary African art and at art exhibitions seem to create the impression that Africa is reduced to merely imitating the tastes of the world as dictated by flagship exhibition

venues of London, Paris, Brussels or Berlin. However it should be borne in mind that this was not always the case. Before degenerating into a mere object of curiosity for European colonialists and merchants, art was part and parcel of black African culture, e.g. at the princely courts of Nok and Ife, and later in the empires of Sonraï and Mali. The curiosity cabinets which were so popular from the 17th to the early 20th century exhibited the clumsiness and inaptitude of the “negroes” in matters of art ... Until African art was “discovered” by the great masters of the western world—Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Derain, etc.—who in their search for new horizons for western art fell under the seduction of African art. When talking about their African art collections, they candidly admitted that they saw themselves as students eager to learn from black Africa’s wealth of sculptural art.

The dark continent not only became a source of inspiration for sculptors but also an important cultural reference. The turning points in the modes of artistic expression in Europe were much more due to the influence of African art than the genius of the figureheads of Dadaism, Cubism or Surrealism.

The question therefore is: why did African art forfeit this prestigious position in the course of time? Why did African sculpture cease to inspire the creative spirit of Europe? Was this the work of a form of globalisation which destroys everything which is not part of itself? Or does the blame lie with African artists who failed to learn the lessons from the past?

It is true that the West is still inspired by the creativity of Africa: the fashion world has adopted traditional African materials or formal innovations and African designers show the leading Italian and French brands how to dress the world; and Africa still has a certain influence on western music and dance.

However the influence of the dark continent is limited to these few walks of modern life. In contrast, satellites bombard the continent with an overkill of images, transforming Africans into mere consumers of the products of foreign culture. Cultural behaviour, reflexes, attitudes and tastes are becoming standardised. Images of sex, violence, the dissolution of the family unit, the loss of parental authority, have become prized assets. Africa seems to be glad to assimilate and ape everything she is dished up with.

On top of this, the products which are the spin-offs of new technologies are wondered at by Africans with an amazement which can be objectively explained by the scientific divide between the continent and the West. It is as if everything that has to be done has already been accomplished and that Africa is relegated to the role of a mere observer of a world speeding by at an ever-accelerating pace.

The tragedy is that the continent is still incapable of assuming a different role. The statistics show how little Africa is capable of exploiting the opportunities offered by new technologies and just how serious the situation is.

A World Bank report² shows that Africa, eastern Europe and the Middle East accounted for a mere 2.6% of the ICT market in 1995, compared with 43.5% for northern America, and 28.30% for western Europe. Of the million Internet users in Africa, 700,000 live in South Africa. And connectivity costs are prohibitive throughout the continent—approx. USD 65 per month, compared to USD 20 in the countries of the North. These data reveal that Africa remains on the periphery of a globalisation which has absolutely no ambition to create equality among the peoples of our planet. Which means that those who are not prepared or not in a position to invest enormous sums in ICTs are at risk of exclusion from the modern knowledge-based society.

The bitter facts are that very few African countries are prepared to pay the price for this new form of contact with the rest of the world. Some regard ICTs as the preserve of the developed countries and feel that it is preferable to channel any money that might be invested in this field into trying to find solutions to the crucial problems of survival: universal education, drugs, health, nutrition, and healthy leisure-time activities.

Such opinions must cast doubts as to whether Africa will ever be able to develop in a different direction, in particular considering the political rivalries rampant in the one and the same country and given that pygmy states wage war for the sake of sheer hunger. There can be no doubt that the question of ICTs is not a priority for arms buyers and the famished powers that be. Which completes the vicious circle: the less that is invested in ICTs, the lower the awareness of their contribution to development, and the wider the gap with the modern world becomes. In Africa, globalisation is constructing new ways of living and being which make virtually all the artists of Senegal, Niger, Burundi or Zimbabwe into Siamese twins of their peers in Europe and America. An artistic globalisation is thus emerging in which the Africans have no say and have no idea where it leads.

Globalisation is therefore creating a neo-cultural environment, a set of behavioural patterns and ways of thinking and acting, which is producing a new type of African, an African in European or north American shoes. This African dreams of snow, learns the life histories of Hollywood stars off by heart and is more familiar with the streets of Vienna, the department stores of New York and the rivers of France than the administrative regions of his/her own country.

The colonial administrations moulded this type of African by means of their school system. This phenomenon is illustrated vividly by the Senegalese writer and film director Ousmane Sermbène in his character Ndèye Touti, a former student at a training college for primary school teachers.

She felt more and more distant from those around her. It was as if she lived on the fringe; the books she read and the films she saw kept her in a world where there was no place for her own, just as she had no place in theirs. She went through her daily existence as if in a dream [...] Ndèye Touti in fact knew more about Europe than Africa, which had won her the school geography prize several times over.³

Nowadays we encounter Ndèye Toutis on every street corner. They are not even aware of their "African-ness" and only concerned with getting on with their lives, with "being." But what being for what knowledge in what world? What being for what future?

The Ndèye Toutis of Africa in the year 2002 evidently have no answer to these questions. However, can we blame them? No, of course not, because they are the playthings of circumstances, because they are objects moulded according to the whims of globalisation. And the schools of the colonial era were harmless compared to the powerful modern machinery which is now crushing African identity.

But that is only half the story: the fragments of modern knowledge reserved for Africa are dished up to African teachers in the form of ready-made titbits. The most recent example is the course content of the African Virtual University (AVU, www.avu.org) where the teaching resources for the English-speaking countries are developed in the United Kingdom, and those for the French-speaking countries come from France, Belgium or Switzerland.

The production of teaching software is concentrated in Europe and the USA. Cultural diversity is taboo and Africa is regarded as a rubbish dump for rejects and waste. And there can be no doubt that this development will end up wiping out the remaining residues of the knowledge passed down over the centuries from generation to generation in the minds of African children. It is this prospect which is the most alarming of all. Yesterday it was the gun and the sword which brought Africa to its knees and crushed its cultural values. Today, its very being is besieged, mutilated and profoundly transformed by artistic creation.

Impossible Africa

To say that a civilisation without an identity is not a civilisation, that a people which has lost its cultural specificities loses its creative spirit and its own artistic production is a truism. Is this truism applicable to Africa? Is this the conclusion which must be drawn for the dark continent in view of the ravages caused by globalisation and its stranglehold on Africa?

The answer to this question seems obvious at the level of the omnipresence of Ndèye Toutis but calls for a more complex analysis if we examine the motivations which form the basis for "African-ness" among African artists, critics, researchers and other intellectuals.

The fact is that the cultural stimuli which cause humankind to question the moment and formulate a complex of answers to guide his life are much more resistant than is often realised. The problem however is: what can we do to ensure that this spirit of culture remains permanently awake? What can we do to ensure that the essence of the centuries of African civilisation will continue to offer a solid basis of support to the artists of the continent? What can we do to ensure that the external observer of Africa will perceive a specificity which, to coin a term used by of Negritude theoreticians, is not one of withdrawal but a continent which is both open to the outside world and conscious of its roots. How can we manage to promote the development of African art in Africa, a form of art which emerges naturally from Africa and is not artificially imposed on the continent from the outside? As the cultural being of the countries of Africa fades from day to day, is an Africa of the Africans at all possible?

If Africa is to go down this road, African artists must learn to talk with Africa, otherwise African art will remain a mere manifestation of the West "made in Africa." This Africanised western art and its *pendant*—art by Africans according to western models—boils down to the one and the same reality—a form of art which has no public. It is of course not a question of encouraging artists to shut themselves off in a particularistic and folkloristic ghetto or to expect them to act as the spokesperson of their peoples or the *imbu* of some kind of divine mission. Art is not a museum and even less so a holdall into which one can simply pop anything and everything one happens to come across. Art is woven by the living human spirit with evolving modes of communication and forms of expression of the intimacy of humankind.

Apart from African dance and fashion design, the particular tones and sounds of African music have gained increasing national and international recognition and have long become a standing feature of contemporary life. This is no longer a theoretical question but undisputed reality. And it is in this context that we must raise the issue of art and a-culture: is a-cultural art possible? Does globalisation imply the negation of artistic specificity? Do the individuality and/or the universalistic aspirations of artists mean that their works never bear the mark of their cultural universe?

Iba Ndiaye Djiadji

An edifying example is offered by the Senegalese painter Iba Ndiaye who discovers that painting means recollection of and re-immersion in the cultural personality of his group. Although in contact with all the great masters of western art, Iba Ndiaye realises that the forms and shapes of his work are determined by the memory of his original culture: the hues of the rainy season, the scents and sounds of the African bush. A painter may of course be influenced by another painter, a musician or a sculptor. But this influence will not be strong enough to wipe out his aesthetic personality, the presence of cultural values and the nuances or even the differences in the manner of treating the material.

All this means that the aesthetic and cultural personality of the artist is not an abstraction. It is on the basis of this personality that we can identify the characteristic force of an artist's brush or chisel and the origins of his/her creativity. For there can be no art without integrated and assimilated cultural values—otherwise artistic action would fade away in the face of a reality detached from this dialogue of the senses which represents the eternal *raison d'être* of art.

The impossibility of an Africa under the repeated attacks of globalisation is therefore a constant appeal to let the "natural" in art unfold, a "natural" which is the fruit of sustained efforts and an ongoing learning process, a condensate of thought and creativity. Despite the subjectivism which often clouds inter-human relations, humans always have one thing in common—the need to make themselves understood, to articulate and communicate their inner motivations, i.e. to recognise in others the essential aspects of their own diffuse cultural identity, be it either manifest or concealed. And what better support for the human race in this dialogue with its peers than art?

This question unexpectedly places the contemporary situation of African art in the world of science and new information and communication technologies—a world which constantly gives new tinges to African culture without however producing profound change. In spite of everything, four centuries of colonialism and slavery did not succeed in completely obliterating the identity of African culture and African art—not the identity of the original "negroes" but that of the black population in itself, people getting on with their lives and seeking to appropriate the fruits of science.

So does this imply that the process of globalisation calls for a scientific approach to African art? Perhaps ... so that African art will neither be at the top nor at the bottom of the scale but merely another contemporary art form. However this inevitably calls for a change of historical perspective. Inevitably? Because I see no other solution, unless Africa prefers to turn itself into an adventure park or a reserve of pure identities to cater for the needs of modern society to get away from it all.

But this change of perspective will remain a gross mystification if the enormous scientific gap between Africa and the West is not tackled by a politico-economic will effectively in a position to translate the challenges of this development into concrete action.

The mere fact that there is such a possibility at all should arouse interest in itself. Moreover, since art is increasingly combined with science, have Africa and its art really any alternative? The fact that the scientific board of the Biennale for contemporary African art, Dak'Art, included a digital art forum at Dak'Art 2002 is an encouraging sign in this context.

Following in the footsteps of Dak'Art 2000, this year's Biennale shows that African artists are keeping abreast with scientific progress and are acquiring and implementing digital tools to express their moods and their dreams. Alongside the digital art forum

which offered a splendid opportunity for the presentation of the works of various artists, the international exhibition presented a series of exhibits incorporating digital techniques.

One example is the video installation entitled *Ecran* ("Screen") by Zoulikha Bouabdellah (Morocco) in which the artist presents close-ups of human figures in contrasting light; a child seems to ask a question from the image of a man on the screen, first with its eyes and then by touching the screen. This is the artist's view of the reality of the image in contemporary Africa. At the same time the screen portrays the cultural effect of the image on the psychological development of young Africans. Another Moroccan, Batoul S'Himi, presents an installation comprised of electric wiring, metallic structures, flashing lights and 50 kg of paprika scattered on the bare ground in a circle reflecting the shape of the electric wires. Even if S'Himi's art cannot be described as digital art in the true sense of the term, it nevertheless clearly goes in the direction of creative innovation which is so typical of contemporary African art. His work, entitled *Lever du jour* ("Daybreak"), symbolises the will of the African artist to break out of the night of political, economic, social, technical and scientific backwardness and is at the same time an invitation to admire the beauty of the installation's harmony. It is therefore hardly surprising that Batoul S'Himi's *Lever du jour* was awarded the Prize of the French-speaking community of Belgium by the Dak'Art 2002 international jury.

The question nevertheless remains: where is the "African-ness" of these works? Could they not equally be the work of an Asian, a European or an American artist and still retain the same meaning and aesthetic particularities? In other words, can these artists be reproached for not having drawn on the store of knowledge of their own countries and cultures for the forms and the content to be put into the digital mould? Moreover, who can claim that what they present is not their real being, the expression of their desire for artistic communication, with no concern for their passport?

No one, of course! We can only wish that art will finally cease to attempt to standardise thought, dreams, writing, painting or sculpture. It impoverishes inter-human relations because if the entire world were to do and say the same thing, where would this exchange of giving and taking be, as prophesied by Leopold S. Senghor? And above all, will humanity be able to progress every day towards new stages of equilibrium and harmony in art and the individual?

Of course it is not a question of inviting phoney particularisms or equally artificial homogenisations. But it is clear that if humankind increasingly becomes "one" everywhere, the difference between humankind and the machine becomes less distinct. I would therefore like to invite reflection on the ways and means of a reinforcing the personality of African art, on the singular plurality of the concept of identity, of the risks the command of the new digital tools represents for artistic creation. I believe that this is context in which African artists should appropriate digital media as they proceed into the future. Because science in general and the digital media in particular are not merely the banal consequences of the progress of humanity; they herald the dawning of an era which calls many a certitude into question.

It is my hope that African art will accept the only possible challenge there is: to move into and position itself within digital art. It is not a matter of turning all African artists into digital artists. It is a question of each and every individual artist, irrespective of the particular field of artistic creativity, "scientising" his/her creativity, to become a man or a woman and an African of his or her time.



But we must not deceive ourselves. The integration of new technologies into the African being and the involvement of the continent in global developments is a profoundly political issue. The less African states are prepared to invest in this field, the greater the digital divide will become and the longer African artists wishing to live in the spirit of the times and in full recognition of their identity will have to suffer.

Outlook

Africa has every opportunity to remain Africa—not the Africa of endemic disease, war and poverty, but an Africa which contributes its way of being, its know how and the way it can be to the rest of the world. On one condition only: that Africans themselves choose not to defer to a globalisation they have not helped to shape and over which they have no control, but to follow their ambition to be themselves. The children of the dark continent who have lost their roots will undoubtedly be swiftly engulfed by the space of dream and cultural metamorphosis offered by the extraordinary power of the cultural industry of the west. But no one can stifle the creativity of African artists with firms roots in the personality of the continent who make technological progress their own tool.

Such behavioural patterns will clearly not fall from the African heavens or emerge from a mere juxtaposition of good intentions. The decisive question will be the form of cultural and civilisatory resistance with which Africa will resist the appetites of Europe, America and Japan. And in Africa all major issues are fundamentally political. This means that without the involvement of political forces, without transferring the question of African art to the level of political expression, there will be no opportunity to find a solution to the conflicts of identity or the problem of the continent's exclusion. I am not suggesting that art should become political at any cost nor that politics should dictate to African artists what they should do. I merely maintain that the development of an art which can finally put Africa back on the world map and give the continent a say in the contemporary discourse depends on the will of the policy makers and the capacity of artists, critics and the cultural community of Africa to be able to formulate and offer solutions to their problems in depth, i.e. at political level.

Translated from the French by Stephen Conn

1 UNDP 1996 World Report

2 World Development Report, 1998/99

3 Ousmane, SEMBENE Les bouts de bois de Dieu Paris : Press-Pocket, 1974, pp. 99–101