Meeting Carl Einstein

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Classical African art and modernism have been intertwined in a more confusing way than perhaps any other entities in art history.¹ In the 20th century, since the days of pioneers like Aina Onobolu, Oku Ampofu and Kofi Antubam, it has created, and continues to create, problems for African artists in their search for identity as well as in the reception of their work in the West. This has raised many questions. What hides behind the notions of ‘primitivism’ and ‘primitive’? What exactly took place in Europe in the years around and after 1907, when some Western artists, as we are told, ‘discovered’ African sculptures and used them as justifications and models for their own experiments? To such an extent that as early as 1914 the art of the ‘African savage’ was claimed to be ‘the root of modern art’?²

Carl Einstein, the German author and critic, is a legendary name from that time. His booklet, Negerplastik, first published in 1915,³ is generally referred to as the first, the epoch-making and most important book about African sculpture. But after such polite phrases, he seems to have been widely ignored or forgotten, and his book — never translated into English — seems to have been read by few and understood by even fewer, as he himself noted.⁴ It has, however, recently been reissued in Germany,⁵ and an English translation commenced.⁶

I found the book in some ways extremely typical of its time and European context, but in other ways revolutionary and astute, so much so that one is compelled to ask whether these past 75 years of obfuscation were really necessary. The following is an attempt to deal with my meeting with Einstein’s book from the perspective of my own experience as an African and an artist.

I first became aware of the existence of classical African art only when I came to Europe in 1973. In Tanzania I had seen the mass-produced Makonde figures carved in ebony, and other folk art produced for the tourist market, but which I had never connected to the notion of ‘art’ or ‘African heritage’. The few old
good pieces in the National Museum in Dar es Salaam told me little, and in school there was scant education in African history and no discussion of African heritage. We played Shakespeare... So it was a revelation in Europe to read about the importance of classical African sculpture, its centrality to the image of my continent, and the legendary role it had played as the inspiration of European modernism. I went to see the sculptures in the museums of Paris and London. Even now, I cannot explain my feelings in front of them; they represented an unknown Africa; perhaps they did not speak to me because I came from a region without a sculptural tradition.

Although the European discussion remained foreign to me, I noticed something in their way of talking about African art: it was interwoven with notions of savagery, primitiveness, paganism, voodoo-voodoo, etc — and, despite the alienness to me of these half-digested concepts of theirs they insisted on connecting me to them. At the same time they praised African sculptures — mostly referring to Picasso as if he had created them himself — they implied in their arguments that I, as an African, was an inferior human being. In this way, my confrontation with African sculpture became mixed up with, and a part of, my painful confrontation with white racism — an awareness of a certain structure existing in European thought in its perception and reception of everything created by a black human being of African origin, past or present.

I had abandoned my studies in social anthropology with a clear insight into its role as a science (?) of oppressors, and, in 1980, back in Africa, I started painting. What preoccupied me at that time was a counter-discourse to the scientific approach, but it was natural to me to use the pictorial language of the 20th century. I think, in the back of my mind, I had the vague idea of being implicated in it as an African, and in that sense the sculptures began to haunt me. What had given them their power over the imagination of the Cubists? However, when I returned to Europe as a modern African artist, things got stiff. Before, I had been someone with whom they could discuss Africa and African art; now, I was met with scepticism, often open hostility, and regarded as some kind of thief trying to sneak into a place forbidden to me. I had often been told, "You Africans have no history!" At first I thought that it meant we had an oral rather than a written tradition; then I came to understand that it meant something more categorical: in Africa there exists no development, no movement, no change... We Africans were thought to be unable to proceed on our own, unable to produce history. Some even hinted at a 'different construction' of our brain which made us remain eternally 'the primordial origin', unable to perceive things as the 'developed' white man. All these notions derived from anthropological theories long since held as obsolete, yet they seemed to live like fishes in the depths, surfacing in never critically elucidated attitudes.

Western modernism is inscribed with this kind of thinking, and accounts for any claim from an African to be a modern artist in its eyes to be unthinkable and impudent. In the Western art world, what they imagine to be 'Africanity' is traditional forms, airport art, bright colours and decorative patterns, masks and fetishes, drums and dances — all that could arouse their expectations of the exotic. For the Western mind, the notion of 'modern' is seldom applied to African artists, and the alternative, 'contemporary', implies simply synchronism not the idea of progression.

Going through the two volumes of the catalogue to MOMA's exhibition 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art, I was amazed to see the extent of the African presence throughout this century. If those artists had been free to pick at leisure ideas, inspiration and models from classical African art — even obvious plagiarism
— why should not we, modern African artists, have the same freedom to connect
to concepts and knowledge from all over the world without being accused of being
‘un-African parrots’?

Two things seem especially striking in William Rubin’s catalogue introduction.
Firstly, African art, as well as Oceanic, Amerindian, Eskimo art, etc, seemed for
him to have no role of their own; they were conceived as walk-on parts in a
Western play. ‘I want to understand the Primitive sculptures,’’ he wrote, ‘‘in
terms of the Western context in which modern artists ‘discovered’ them.’’ More
drastically — and this has been put forward quite seriously — European artists
are considered to have created or ‘made’ African sculpture into art in more or
less the same way that Duchamp ‘appointed’ his bottle-rack a work of art. How
naive I must have been when — apropos the total lack of interest in modern
African art — I wrote to a European curator asking, ‘‘Could really the genius of
African visual creativity, which has changed the modern world’s sensitivity,
suddenly just have disappeared?’’ I should have understood that, here, we are
brought face to face with nothing less than a genetic miracle: the creative power
of the black man taken out and inoculated into the white man. I guess that is
what ‘primitivism’ means to them.

Secondly, it was amazing how the controversial aspects of the words ‘primitive’
and ‘primitivism’, so pregnant with meaning, were conjured away. Rubin
admitted that they could be criticised as ethnocentric; but he insisted that “the
notion that primitivism is pejorative can only result from a misunderstanding,”
forgetting that what is not meant as depreciatory by the proud thief can be
perceived as pejorative by the one who was robbed. He quotes Robert Goldwater
as saying that the word ‘primitive’ coupled with ‘art’ can “only be understood
as a term of praise”.

In this way, the obvious dimensions of colonial power relations and
appropriation inherent in their whole thinking was obscured. The essence of my
criticism of MOMA’s exhibition was summed up by Rasheed Araeen:

You can no longer define, Sir, classify or categorise me. I’m no longer your bloody
objects in the British Museum. I’m here right in front of you, in the flesh and blood
of a modern artist. If you want to talk about me, let us talk. BUT NO MORE OF
YOUR PRIMITIVIST RUBBISH.”

Carl Einstein (1885-1940), became a target of the growing anti-semitism of the
Weimar Republic, manifested in its reactionary court procedures. He moved to
Paris in 1928, a refugee from the Nazis, and, like Walter Benjamin, he took his
life in the Pyrenees in 1940. Seventy-five years ago, he opened his book
Negerplastik with European ethnocentrism and the very peculiar racism enacted
against black Africans. “The African is from the beginning regarded as the inferior
part which is there to be treated ruthlessly, and all that he achieves will be judged
a priori as a fiasco.” And with pungent irony, he continued: “Whenever the
European judges the Africans, he implies a specific presumption, that of his own
unquestionable, even fantastic, superiority.”

Thoughtlessly, he projected entirely loose evolutionary hypotheses onto the African;
to some he had to surrender as an example of a misconception of primitivity, while
others covered the defenceless victim with phrases, so obviously false, as peoples
of an eternal primeval time, and so on. One hoped, through the African, to grasp
a beginning, a state which never was assumed to come out of the origin.

Einstein avoids words like ‘primitive’. In a book published six years later on the
subject, *Afrikanische Plastik*, he clearly states that the African images should not be interpreted by the *poor concept of primitive art*. And he adds: *‘A considerable amount of African sculpture is all but primitive.’* I must note here that the word *Neger* that he used in his book from 1915 to denote the black African was not until much later commonly conceived as pejorative and offensive. On the contrary, *‘negre’, ‘negro’ and ‘Neger’ were en vogue* in Paris and throughout Europe in the Twenties. But Einstein’s sensitivity to a respectful approach lead him already in 1921 to reject the race connotation and to change throughout his text the word *‘Neger’* for *‘africanisch’*.15

Einstein’s book is above all an aesthetic analysis. Although accused of a one-eyed formalist approach, in fact, he dedicates an entire chapter to the predetermination by religion of African art and shows how the sculptures were made in adoration of the gods present in them. He is never lost in the history of religion or in anthropological details about *‘primitive beliefs’*. He talks about religion in a comprehensive and functional way, noting that there is a correspondence — even an identity — between the religious condition of the sculptures and the *seeing* manifested in them. It makes them closed entities, existing in themselves: the divine is in the form, is the form.

He treats Classical African art as an epoch among others in the history of art, and he simply notes that *‘the images are worshipped just as they are among other antique people’*.16 The sculptures reproduced in his books show him that *‘the African is no undeveloped human being; an important African culture foundered [through colonialism, as he notes elsewhere]; the black African of today corresponds to the imaginary ‘antique’ maybe as the fellah to the ancient Egyptian.’*17

To me this is one of his most liberating observations. It sweeps away the last remnants of a conception of African art as perpetually static. I do not care if his clear-sighted perspective was made easier by the lack of a more detailed knowledge in his time. He was aware that *‘neither the historical nor the geographical facts allow even the most modest determination’*.18 His comprehensive view stands, at least as a metaphor of classical African art as a historical entity. Neither do I care that traditional work continues to be produced since such temporal overlapping is common and marginal to all cultures.19 What is important to me as an African artist is that Einstein did away with ambiguity and placed classical African sculpture in a historical perspective.

And what about the poisoned question of *‘primitivism’*? Einstein was a close eye-witness to its first two phases in the 20th century: Cubism in Paris and German Expressionism. During his studies of 1904-06 in art history and philosophy,20 he had discovered classical African art in the Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin, long before the artists in Germany (with the exception of Paul Klee) had shown an interest in it. The German Expressionists were to follow Gauguin’s exoticism, some even *‘going native’* like him. They may perhaps be called primitivists in a more tangible sense. Einstein doesn’t mention these artists by name, but from hints one can guess that he felt mostly contempt for their romantic flirtation with, to them, exotic cultural patterns. *‘The metaphysis in the work of artists today...is mixed up in representation as figuration and formal component, whereby the unconditional relationship between religion and form, its sharply marked off correlation, becomes blurred into a destructive confusion.’*21

On the other hand, the Cubist painters’ predominantly formal involvement in classical African art provided him with an important point of reference. As a friend of their dealer Henry Kahnweiler, the 23 year old German art critic was
introduced to and frequented the studio of Picasso, Braque and Gris in the decisive years from 1907. With his experience of African art and his advanced analytical apparatus — he was a student of Wölfflin and he refers in his text to Hildebrand — he is very likely to have been actively involved in the discussions then.

Some years ago, we experienced in France the crucial crisis. Through an enormous mobilisation of consciousness, one recognised the dubious irrelevance of the procedure [of European art]. Some painters had enough power to dissociate themselves from a craft mechanically pursued; disregarding conventional means, they examined the elements of spatial vision... At the same time, one was bound to discover African sculptures, and to recognise that they in splendid isolation had created purely plastic forms.22

He did not write that "they", the artists, 'discovered' African sculpture. He specified that "some problems of recent art brought about a less thoughtless penetration into the art of African peoples."23 He characterised it as a need to rewrite history by including African art in order to correspond to the new development in art. It always functions that way, he said. And when we study his text closely, it appears that to Einstein it wasn’t so much the artist who ‘lifted up’ African sculptures and made them into art. Artists were preoccupied with their own problems and used whatever they found. Besides, we know about the ambivalence manifested by many of them when it came to recognising the important role of African art. Picasso, for instance, stated demonstratively, in an enquiry published in 1920, ‘Negro art? Don’t know!’; and Brancusi denied against all the evidence of any African influence.

Part of the scene was an early passion that grew amongst collectors. A market developed more or less parallel to the ‘technical’ involvement of the Cubist painters. In the years around 1910, Einstein, along with a group of European art dealers and collectors, frequented the Café Dôme, which was the nucleus of interest in African art. One of the group, Ernst Brummer, a Hungarian sculptor turned dealer, was even, some years later, to promote Negerplastik.24 This appreciation expressed by art collecting was, to Einstein, the true appointment of African sculptures as works of art. He saw the same market mechanisms at work for them as for all art, so there was nothing mystical about it. ‘The well-founded activity’ of the collectors, he wrote, ‘created out of the old material a reinterpreted object’;25 art.

It should be added that Einstein himself and his book played a decisive role in promoting and confirming this process. The analysis he makes of the vision and formal language of African sculpture is purely European and typically German. And he openly admits that he does not know if it would correspond with an African outlook.

But he operates his equation with a clear aim: ‘If a formal analysis proves to be possible, related to and encircling specific entities of spatial creation and seeing, then it is implicitly proved that the given images are art.’26 Without trying to intrude into a spiritual world that he was aware he knew little about, and without pretending to understand and explain it from a Western scientist’s position, he used his instruments as a modern art historian to do away with the white racist prejudice that weighed heavily on African art.

This brings me to a wider perspective in which Einstein’s Negerplastik must be seen: the still on-going war among Western academics; between, on the one hand, ethnographers and anthropologists and, on the other, radical artists and critics. Ethnography and anthropology are historically inseparable from Western

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24 ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art, Vol 1, p 143f.
colonialism. They were the tools to snoop on, rule and exploit colonised peoples. During the 19th century, the colonisers brought home pillaged African sculptures and masks to the European metropolises and put them higgledy-piggledy together with all kinds of other objects as ethnographic items in especially created museums, functioning as displays to advertise colonialism.

Despite their wide recognition as art during the first part of this century, African sculpture has not as yet been moved out of the trophy store-houses and put into art museums. Instead, the ethnographic museums — those graveyards of the cultures of others — have been given an aesthetic face-lift. A growing popularised awareness of the artistic qualities of classical African art, spread not least through a broad exploitation of the theme of ‘l’art negre’ in the Twenties, forced museums to adapt themselves and to rearrange their shop windows to meet the expectations of their public.

Robert Goldwater, who founded and directed the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, and who was one of those who launched the ethnographic term ‘primitivism’, wrote in his book on the theme in 1938, that this turnabout of the ethnographic museums, enforced from outside, probably also reflected a corresponding change of theoretical position among the ethnologists who were responsible for arranging the objects in the museum showcases.

He was involved in a rather partial effort to reconcile the antagonistic parties, ethnography and art criticism. And in my opinion, he must have confused cause and effect, since he had to admit that it took at least thirty years (that is, until the publication of his book!) for the views of the latter to somewhat penetrate into ethnography. Indeed, it has taken much longer. The fundamental conflict is in no way settled, nor can it be.

An enquiry in Paris in 1920 among ethnographers, artists and art people took up the issue of incorporating classical African art into the Louvre. It could be considered, implicit, a test discussion about liberating African art from ethnographic museums and contexts. It manifested diametrically opposed outlooks. Leading ethnographic museum people at the time revealed unbelievably colonial and racist attitudes. Significantly when the same discussion was repeated 70 years later, it showed that the frontiers and trenches were basically the same even if arguments had been cleaned up.

Einstein put his finger on the essential point. ‘To consider art as a means to anthropological and ethnographical knowledge seems to me dubious, as artistic representation hardly explicitly expresses anything about the kind of facts to which such scientific knowledge is bound.’ Nothing in principle has altered the truth of this simple and revolutionary assertion. Art and the specificity of its communication cannot be reduced to a mere basic material for anthropological or ethnographical observations however structuralist. What has changed is that today those museums seem to have been ‘alloted’ (by whom?) the task and the resources to ‘take care’ of us — we, the African artists, who have been excluded from the Western art world, along with other artists of the ‘periphery’ who have been the victims of the art blindness and abuse of power by ethnographers, thus institutionally ‘hallmarking’ us as second-rate and exotic.

How has it been possible that for the 75 years since Einstein clarified things, African art — classical and modern — has continued to be humiliated in the name of some much questioned branches of Western science? As I have already indicated, Einstein’s Negerplastik has been widely ignored, or at least marginalised (as in MOMA’s Primitivism catalogue). Goldwater’s treatment of it in his book of 1938 is probably characteristic of the aggressiveness felt in the ethnographic
camp against Einstein and what he stood for — Goldwater must largely be counted on that side. He talks about "the champions of primitive art" and speaks ironically about how they do not just defend it, they praise it. 30 They approach primitive art directly as isolated specimens, he complains, and do not want to study its meaning in the context of its own society. These critics and collectors believe that they can grasp its qualities, the formal organisation that they admire, simply by immediate examination. "They contented themselves with isolating the individual work, but often not keeping within these limits, gave romantic and groundless interpretations." He didn't conceal the fact that he was referring to Einstein.

To me, the main reason for these misreadings is clear. Goldwater was deeply affected by Einstein's remarks about the racism inherent in white Western attitudes towards the black African and African art. He quoted bitterly: "Our contempt is nothing but the reflection of our ignorance." Alas!

My meeting with Carl Einstein's book has meant more to me intellectually as an African artist than any other confrontation with a Western art text. Far from isolating African works of art, and far from forcing on them an alien, Western structure of thinking, the reproaches made by his enemies, he contemplated classical African art as a totality, as an epoch, or, in his own words, as a "seeing". He wrote:

One has to keep to the seeing and step by step follow its specific laws; nowhere is one allowed to impute to this seeing and to this creative activity the structure of one's own reasonings...if not, one will end up in the prejudice that spiritual processes could simply be read in reverse, so that what one thinks subsequently about an artwork should simply constitute a counterpart to its creation. 31

In 1914, whilst he was working on Negerplastik, he specified:

On the contrary, one should locate the notion of conceiving art within the creative process itself, in the sense that the particular art work implies as such a specific act of conceiving and judging. 32

This is to me an essential issue. The Western reception of modern African art has not yet reached this level. It is characterised by innumerable projections of the white man's ideas about Africa and Africanity. My own experience is that it is difficult, next to impossible, in this context for anybody to read the seeing and to perceive the discourses of art implied in my work without interference from notions about my origin. A second reading of Negerplastik makes it clear that it consists of two discourses, separate but dialectically connected. One is about classical African sculpture, and tries to analyse what the author considered to be among the most remarkable solutions in the world to certain plastic and spatial problems — the simultaneous seeing of the three-dimensional, the cubic.

The other is about how a European art tradition since the Renaissance, culminating in the Baroque and flowing out into Impressionism, had lost the sense of plastic form and, in the eyes of the Cubists, had become 'irrelevant'. With the help of this critical analysis, Einstein defined the essence of what he had found in African sculpture. This second discourse is, therefore, heavily marked by a specific moment in Western art history. In a sharp and incisive use of language he talks about a complete confusion of painting and sculpture (Baroque), of the increasing involvement of the spectator in the process (perspective, psychological interpretation), until sculpture was reduced to a matter of conversation between two individuals.

This discourse can be implicitly read as a demonstration of the revolt necessary
in art, about which Einstein was later to write in his history of the art of the 20th century:

Every revolt contains, from the beginning, destruction, criticism and demolition. One revolts again and again against the idea that art should be the repetition of some given rule.33

To me, the concept of revolt is inseparable from the journey of any artist today, and I refuse to consider it a prerogative of the Western modernist or to depreciate it as something alien to the modern artist outside the Western world. Only, the revolt within art cannot simply be copied. The Japanese scholar Shigemi Inaga has made this clear. Talking about the immense difficulties of a dialogue between cultures, and more specifically about whether the Japanese avant-garde art of today can at all be presented to and understood by a Western public (which refuses to see any revolt other than that of its own artists), he takes Africa as an example. Cubism and Fauvism were confirmed by references to black African art. But, he points out, ‘if the autochthon’ African people were to refer to the same sources as the Westerners, they would in no sense be able to claim an avant-garde position.’34 On the contrary, he observes, within its own context that would be a traditionalist, old-fashioned, or at least anti-modern choice.

Unlike Japan, Africa has had to deal with the burden of colonialism. This has added immensely to the complexity of the cultural situation, because, as Frantz Fanon has stated, ‘in the colonial situation, dynamism is replaced fairly quickly by a substantification of the attitude of the colonising power.’35 Looking back at a century of colonial domination of Africa, under which culture had become rigid and reduced, as he wrote, to its mineral strata, he foresaw the enormous difficulties of finding a way out, after independence, of these death-pangs of the national culture, due not least to the mutual and internalised dependence of the oppressed and the oppressors.

But Fanon was clear that revolt was as necessary in art as in society if African plastic artists would ever be able to ‘find the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge.’ After having taken part in the main trends of contemporary painting, he wrote thirty years ago, they cannot just turn their backs on foreign cultures and in their own time look for “a true national culture” by going back to traditions, which have, in fact, become nothing but the cast-offs of a once-living thought. They must go on.

My own revolt demands a tremendous journey of knowledge which exceeds the battle of consciousness inherited from Fanon. I can never take anything as a matter of course. I must try to reconquer my African history on different levels, local, national, continental, including the history of 20th century African art. This is extremely difficult, due to a lack of literature, museums and collections; to a lack of easily available centres of documentation, the colonial splitting up of languages; and, above all, to negligence, especially on the part of those who own the resources of the world. Moreover to be able to distinguish my position, I have to study the universal history of art, ancient and modern, and to go on making comparative studies of other cultures in addition to that of the West.

And, finally, I must keep my creation free so as not to make it a storing place of finds and matters that are of no concern to my art. My revolt is a combat on numerous fronts; and it goes on.