

Decolonisation of art in Africa: a post-apartheid South African perspective

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This is not a tightly argued paper, but more of a loose mapping of ideas that have preoccupied me for several years, ideas triggered by the implications of the concept of decolonisation, specifically as it has relevance for the visual arts, within but not limited to the contemporary South African context. [1]

My thinking on the relevance of decolonisation as a concept for interpreting contemporary African art was prompted by the reference to decolonisation and independence movements in the sub title to *The Short Century*, curated by Okwui Enwezor (2001). [2]

It seemed to me that Enwezor was offering an alternative framework for interpreting and validating contemporary African art, rather than, as was common, measuring it against the dominant western model. The tendency to accept the western canon as a neutral 'standard' and then to dismiss modern African art as a poor imitation lacking in authenticity was all too common.

Up until the advent of *The Short Century*, the discourse on contemporary African art had, it seemed to me, failed to proactively go beyond critiques of western constructions of Africa, as well as the exclusion of Africa (and indeed most of the world) from dominant art historical narratives. Here, it seemed to me, was a concrete alternative. Surely, if the struggle for decolonisation represented one of the key concerns for Africa for much of the twentieth century it could provide an overarching contextual framework for the interpretation of much of its art?

However, a close reading of *The Short Century* did not provide me with a blueprint for such an analysis.

In particular, I found myself uncomfortable with an approach to decolonisation which appeared to represent it almost exclusively as a political process, culminating in political independence. Economic colonisation as well as cultural colonisation, both surely necessary dimensions in addressing legacies of colonialism, appeared to have little importance in Enwezor's model of decolonisation.

Furthermore, if as Enwezor implied, decolonisation began in earnest after the second world war, then surely decolonisation could not be presented as a framework to interpret modern African art preceding this date.

Indeed, what also began to become apparent to me was that while it is possible to date militant responses to colonialism and to chart the ascendancy of political resistance, it was a lot more difficult to differentiate between complicity and resistance in the cultural sphere.

My own fairly recent research on the Mozambican artist Malangatana, an artist whose career spans nearly 50 years, has highlighted that decolonisation was indeed a critical theme in his work. However, this was not, as may have been expected, primarily at the level of representing the political struggle against the Portuguese. Instead decolonisation manifested as a theme in his work through apparent evidence of Malangatana's assimilation of colonial values, in whole or in part, such as western notions of feminine beauty, Catholicism's association of sexuality with guilt, and an association of traditional healing with violence and primitiveness. [3] This assimilation of colonial values was seldom a comfortable one, introducing an ambivalence and sense of personal struggle that gave many of his works, particularly from the period of colonial rule, their particular power. [4]

While my work on Malangatana has affirmed for me the value of decolonisation as a framework for interpretation, and while there is documented evidence of artists positioning their work as part of the struggles for independence in Africa, the application of the concept of decolonisation to the South African context does present some particular challenges. [5]

Principally these challenges can be summarised as: i) the distinct nature of colonisation experienced by South Africa; and ii) the fact that the demise of settler rule in South Africa occurred decades after most other African countries attained independence. [6]

These factors have no doubt contributed towards the absence of a mainstream discourse on decolonisation in South Africa post 1994. Other contributing factors include the official policies of reconciliation and nation building. [7] Notwithstanding the absence of such a discourse many of the traditional hallmarks of decolonisation are amongst us, although some have been more rigorously implemented than others. These include the adoption of a new constitution, a new flag, a new national anthem, changing of place names, land distribution, promotion of indigenous languages, and regulation of customary laws.

This may suggest the irrelevance of evoking the term decolonisation at this time. It may be argued that the term has too much historical baggage and fails to offer an adequate framework to address contemporary realities. While I would concede that there is some validity in these points of view, I would also argue that a critical reengagement with the notion of decolonisation could be of benefit to South Africans as a whole, and to our visual arts in particular.

Postcolonial critiques of decolonisation highlight the contradictory impulses that emerge from anti-colonial struggles. On one hand these include rejections of the nation state. This ranges from an emphasis on ethnicity or regionalism to internationalism or transnational communities of common interest. On the other hand, decolonisation can lead to an embrace of the (imposed) nation-state through an inclusive nationalism or alternately an exclusive nativism. [8] Of course there are

also combinations of the above responses, as when the political elite pursues strategic international alliances, whilst the populace adopts a narrow nationalism where 'foreigner' comes to mean fellow Africans...

Understanding the choices arising from an anti-colonial struggle enables one to ask: where am I in this historical process; and do I have any choice in determining my identity?

I am mindful of the generalised nature of these comments on decolonisation, as well as the fact that this represents a line of enquiry that I am still grappling with. Moreover I am mindful of the nature of this gathering and the need to link my thoughts on decolonisation to the visual arts.

I will therefore focus the rest of this presentation on concrete examples where the notion of decolonisation has been of benefit to me, as well as briefly share some examples how I have tried to engage with it.

At the outset I think it is imperative to recognise that whereas there is such a thing as a discourse in contemporary African art, it has been shaped and reflects the interests of individuals and institutions who are principally based within or oriented towards the developed centres of the Western art world. I am frequently criticised for adopting this position, on the basis that I am purportedly perpetuating binaries: Africa and the west; and us and them. However I maintain my position that the international art world is not an inclusive one, and that there is the need to place an emphasis on the situation prevailing on the African continent itself.

To return to my point that the discourse on African art has been driven by western interests I believe that one can identify three key phases in this process.

Firstly the 'discovery' of African art by the European avant-garde in the early 20th century contributed towards a gradual acceptance within the western art world that such a thing as African art could or did exist. However their construction of such an art as 'primitive' and/or 'traditional' excluded any acknowledgment that it could be modern (Kasfir 1995). [9] Secondly, from the period of political independence in the late 1950s and 1960s a 'neo-primitivist' construction of the unspoilt African began to make its presence felt within the fringes of the western art world, thanks to the efforts of people such as Ulli Beier. With the advent of post-modernism, and landmark exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 this vision found fruition in what Sylvester Ogbechie has subsequently dubbed the "Pigozzi paradigm" named after the collector who was inspired by *Magiciens* to seek out Africa's unspoilt geniuses. Taken together, these constructions of traditional African art as well as the primitive and neo-primitivist models have been subjected to intense critique for having defined notions of authenticity for artists of African origins.

The third phase in the development of a discourse of modern and/or contemporary art coincides with the advent of the African born curator, residing in the USA and Europe. This generation of curators, which has asserted its presence increasingly since the mid 1990s has, understandably, endeavoured to reject European constructions of African authenticity as both racist and paternalistic. However their solution was in part a reactive one, choosing to counter the negative image of an

undeveloped Africa they chose technology as an indicator of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan Africa. Anti-essentialism and African iconoclasm became the norm for constructing what effectively amounts to a new vision of authenticity. If the dominant image of the African artist was of a polygamous male carver from West Africa then by the turn of the century exhibitions such as Fault-Lines would create an alternative Africa where the only male Nigerian artist was a homosexual photographer who lived and died in the UK. [10]

The consequences of this shift in power away from western curators to Africans in the diaspora has been profoundly significant. To be included in international exhibitions, it now appeared that one needed to conform to this new 'radical' construct. Consequently Africans in the diaspora, being Africans most familiar with conceptual art as narrowly understood in the West, and being most likely to have access to the digital apparatus required for this work, along with privileged sectors on the continent, such as some South Africans, began to dominate exhibitions of African art. Furthermore the 'primitive' carvers, painters and digital free artists on the continent were tarnished by the 'primitivist' debate that they may have been unwittingly caught up in, but which did often not accurately represent their own understandings of what they were doing.

The point of this brief overview of key phases in the development of the discourse in contemporary African art is intended to highlight particular consequences.

Firstly that the international vision of contemporary African art is at odds with much, perhaps most artistic practice on the continent.

Secondly curators residing in Africa have been profoundly influenced by the diasporan elite, and this impacts significantly on which African based artists are selected and promoted by them.

Thirdly, success at 'home' is largely determined by reception in the dominant galleries and museums in the USA and western Europe.

Fourthly, even attempts to construct African platforms, such as Dak'Art are vulnerable to accusations of neo-colonialism. One goes to Dakar, it seems, in order to get to Paris, not to build relationships with artists and curators across the continent.

All of these points highlight the need for contemporary art in Africa to overcome its psychological inferiority to the West, and the concomitant need to develop discourses rooted in its own particular challenges and priorities; as well as the critical need to develop sustainable infrastructure that caters to the long term needs of artists residing on the continent.

A further point I would like to make is that the debate on institutional transformation could benefit from an examination of South Africa's colonial legacy. South Africa's colonial past, as briefly acknowledged above, is a hybrid one. But what is apparent, if one looks at the historical relationships between South Africa's arts institutions and those within the international community is that very few relationships exist with African institutions on the continent, as well as with other institutions in the so-called

Third World. However, whenever debates around transformation occur, these inevitably focus entirely on race. While race is an indispensable element within transformation, it alone will not guarantee a shift away from an almost exclusive orientation towards relationships centred within the western art world.

In effect South African art world needs a new kind of affirmative action, one which allocates resources towards cultural exchange and the development of infrastructure within Africa, as well as the so-called developing south. Lobbying for such a programme represents one thing that arts organisations can do.

However, it is critical to stress that the development of such programmes and infrastructure needs to be supported by the generation of a relevant discourse. Such a discourse requires participation by artists themselves, and therefore should not be contained within the traditional sphere of academia. Popular media, including the internet represents one option to enhance participation. Theme based exhibitions also provide an opportunity for artists to contribute towards the development of discourse. This requires a departure from the traditional method of curators selecting existing content to match their own formulations. It requires partnerships and dialogue with artists that creates the space for them to articulate their own contributions towards such a discourse.

In developing such a discourse one has to be mindful of generating simplistic binaries. We would do well to follow the lead of pioneers such as Uche Okeke, whose articulation of the notion of Natural Synthesis 60 years ago provided a vision of a postcolonial art, grounded in local interests whilst simultaneously committed towards engaging the best the world has to offer.

Pieterse and Parekh (1995: 3) articulate a complementary position to that of Okeke, when they say of decolonisation that:

“Colonialism evolved a new consciousness out of a subtle mixture of the old and new; decolonisation has to follow the same route. It requires not the restoration of a historically continuous and allegedly pure precolonial heritage, but an imaginative creation of a new form of consciousness and way of life.” [11]

In conclusion, in our haste to embrace the new, such as our willingness to be post-everything there is cause to pause and to reflect on the value of what we discard, particularly if we have not engaged adequately with it. There is, I feel, much that South Africans, not least its art world, can gain from a critical engagement with the discourses of decolonisation. The past is very much evident in the present.

Notes.

[1] I have presented a paper, still unpublished, on this topic at UCT in 2006 and 2007. This version is substantially different.

[2] Enwezor, Okwui (2001). *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-94*. Prestel, Munich.

[3] Pissarra, Mario (2008) "Re-reading Malangatana". <https://www.asai.co.za>

[4] Originally written for Farafina, subsequently published with extensive footnotes on www.asai.co.za/forum

[5] This is not to suggest that the nature of colonisation across African continent manifested homogenously. In general terms one can distinguish between the strategies of the colonising powers, but as Pakenham (1991) ably demonstrates issues of domestic politics, pragmatism, and not least personalities all intervened in numerous ways that undermined any sense of a 'master plan.' See Pakenham, Thomas (1991). *The Scramble for Africa*. Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg.

[6] Perhaps the most evident of these is that South Africa's colonisation was, as theorised by the Congress movement during the liberation struggle, of a "special type". In essence this meant that South Africa experienced two forms of colonisation: The first was fairly conventional in that it consisted of foreign nations occupying and taking control, a process in which the British were dominant. The second form of colonisation was when an emerging indigenous entity, the Afrikaners, took control whilst oppressing the established indigenous groups within the country to an unprecedented degree. Apart from the fact that the original settlers came from more than source, there was also an active process of recruiting settlers, particularly from Europe, and a homogenising for political purposes of these disparate ethnicities as 'white' in order to counter the numerical superiority of the indigenous groups. One can also add that, at the cultural level, the USA also impacted profoundly in South African identity, black and white. Hence the nature of the colonising power was not as explicit as say Zimbabwe, Mozambique or Senegal.

[7] Arguably these policies were essential in order to address polarisation, although recent developments in South Africa and neighbouring Zimbabwe highlight the longer term consequences of failing to address the legacies of colonialism.

[8] Of course some countries manifest contradictory elements: South Africa has a president [Mbeki] who espouses the cause of an African Renaissance; as well as a populace who regards fellow Africans as foreigners.

[9] Kasfir, Sydney Littlefield (1992). "African Art and Authenticity: a text with a shadow". *African Arts* 25(2): 40-53,96-97.

[10] Tawadros, Gilane and Sarah Campbell (eds.) (2003). *Faultlines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*. InIVA, London.

[11] Pieterse, Jan Nederveen and Bhikhu Parekh (1995). *The Decolonisation of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. Zed Books, London.