

Decolonising art in Africa: some preliminary thoughts on the relevance of the discourse on decolonisation for contemporary African art, with particular reference to post-apartheid South Africa

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1. The construction and imposition of “authenticities”

“Indigenous” creativity in Africa was denigrated under colonialism. Africa was denied a history and culture in order to justify its exploitation. African spiritual practices were denounced as idolatry and provided a rationale for the intervention of missionaries, who sanctified exploitation in the name of saving souls. The creative production of Africa was pillaged as trophies and souvenirs for ‘adventurers’, at best a curiosity for anthropologists and ethnographers. The “discovery’ of African art by the European avant-garde in the early 20th century failed to altar the status of African art as a material and spiritual expression of civilised peoples. Whereas art in the European tradition that had its origins in ritual was relocated comfortably to the new sacred spaces of the art gallery and art museum, sacred African art removed from its site seldom made it beyond the ethnographic museum.

What Picasso discovered in the Trocadero revolutionised Western Art. However this ‘breakthrough’ in western art also had far reaching negative consequences for the development of art in Africa and serves to illustrate the double standards of European civilisation. From that time on African artists were expected to produce a ‘traditional’ art, free of “outside’ influence (read the West) regardless of the fact that Africa since time immemorial has been the site of migration, trade and war, and that the ‘traditional’ Africa ‘captured’ and frozen in time by Anthropology no longer existed in the lives of most Africans. African artists were thus condemned to a no-mans land, not allowed to enter into creative dialogue with Picasso, and unable to produce a ‘canonical’ art where the structures of patronage were no longer those of the pre-colonial era.

While the notion of traditional culture remains the best known example of an imposed ‘authenticity’, it is in fact only one of a series of authenticities constructed for Africans. A second incarnation of authenticity took root in the non-directive

educational pedagogies of expatriate founded art schools in Africa in the 20th century, finding its apex in major exhibitions in Europe and the USA in the 1980s and early 1990s. The context for these exhibitions was a gradual, if reluctant acceptance that Africans could make modern art, provided that it was unspoilt, i.e. untutored (in the academic sense). Just as the 'traditional art of Africa was interesting only in so far as it shed light on the development of western modernism, so too African 'neo-primitivism' was interesting because it implied affinities with western primitivism.

Yet the contexts were very different. The emerging European avant-garde (and the Romantics that preceded them) reacted against the militaristic and dehumanising consequences of industrialisation, turning their backs on "European civilisation" and seeking refuge in 'unspoilt' exotic cultures. Picasso's generation rejected the sophisticated verisimilitude that had developed in western art since the Renaissance, preferring to develop more spontaneous 'primitive' aesthetics that, they believed were more authentic forms of expression than the academically inclined pedagogies of the art institutions of the day. These modernists and primitivists had very little in common with African artists who post 1920 were increasingly introduced to the notions of the autonomous art object by expatriates such as Kenneth Murray, Laurent Moonens, Margaret Trowell, Romain-Desfosses, Pierre Lods, Ulli Beier, Frank McEwen as well as African born pioneers such as Cecil Skotnes. These artist/educators were mostly themselves very much part of the European modernist tradition, and tended to be ambivalent as to how much 'foreign' influence they should introduce for fear of corrupting their students. Some early pioneers such as Margaret Trowell were keen to introduce art historical examples to their students but deliberately steered away from anything that demonstrated technical skills such as foreshortening and perspective. The political dimensions of colonialism were also marked: the dissident sons and daughters of western imperialism operated within a fundamentally different frame to colonised subjects grappling with an unprecedented pace of change, and for whom making art was part of the process of making sense and developing new voices for their new worlds. The essential point being that once again, understanding African art in its own context was of no real consequence when one was really interested in furthering a western discourse.

These two authenticities, the traditional and the primitivist, have been widely criticised by a host of writers, curators, artists etc. Where the situation becomes more complex is when African born curators, based in the West, responded to the notions of a traditional, primitive Africa. 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, African iconoclasm became the norm for constructing a new 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. Another consequence of this iconoclastic repositioning of African art that has escaped comment is its implicit conservatism vis a vis 'fine arts'. By vociferously rejecting the inclusion of e.g. sign painters in major exhibitions, the curators of this generation demonstrated a reluctance to acknowledge that art made outside the gallery context, for a 'non-art' audience may have as much relevance as gallery oriented art within an emerging contemporary African frame. They also tended to polarise so-called 'trained' artists with 'untrained'

artists, whereas training happened in many forms and is not necessarily synonymous with the nature of the 'institution' providing it.

The consequences of this shift in power away from starry eyed western curators to hard nosed careerist Africans 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 question then arises whether marginalisation and exploitation by ones own is sweeter than that of others. And whether by choosing to break with dominant (western) expectations of Africa, a new 'authenticity' was not inadvertently being created.

Is decolonisation a historical event or a process?

One may ask what this has to do with the question of decolonising art in Africa? Certainly it has very little to do with a very restrictive understanding of decolonisation that limits the use of the term to the struggles for political independence. I believe that this is the model used by Okwui Enwezor with *The Short Century*. How else can one explain the footnote status given to Ngugi wa Thiong'o by Enwezor? It is Ngugi who perhaps best represents a more radical critique of decolonisation that goes beyond the rituals of political change. East Africa generated much of the discourse on Neo-Colonialism, a discourse largely centred on questions of economic power. But from an artistic point of view Ngugi remains the standard bearer of the decolonisation debate. By focusing his attention on the question of language, and by arguing for the promotion of indigenous languages in the face of the seemingly overwhelming tide of so-called international languages such as English, Ngugi brings into focus the issues of the authenticity of the voice, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the medium through which we communicate as artists. Most importantly his term 'decolonising the mind' contests narrow understandings of decolonisation, centering the debate in the mindset of individuals and communities. It is the kind of thinking that would later find expression in Bob Marley's "None but ourselves shall free our minds". Without freeing the mind from what has been termed, by Marley and others, as "mental slavery", the promise of transformation is called into question.

The point I am trying to make here is that the imposition of constructed authenticities on artists in Africa amounts to a process of colonising Africa's art, since Africa is effectively prevented from developing its own voice.

Constructing African authenticities as part of the discourse of decolonisation

Now it's important to recognise that there are several examples where Africans on the continent have endeavored to construct their own authenticities through their art. Negritude, which was proclaimed official cultural policy in post-independence Senegal provides an intriguing example. Intriguing because here was an attempt to define an Africanity in artistic terms. However given its origins in the cosmopolitan Paris of the 1920s and 1930s Negritude is in fact not totally unrelated to the diaspora led 'authenticity' noted above. Where Negritude differed from 1990s African iconoclasm was that it propagated an essentialism. Where it failed was that this essentialism was uncannily similar to western stereotypes of Africa. Where it was perhaps more successful was in its pragmatic assertion that a 'new' Africa was a hybrid one: that elements of western culture could be assimilated as part of an African project.

This latter point was also a feature of debates in Nigeria around political independence, and was articulated within the concept of Natural Synthesis developed by the "Zaria Rebels". Artistic dogma, be it Negritude, Natural Synthesis or anything else, tends to be characteristically unscientific in the sense that it is often difficult to pin down an entirely rational exposition of the central concepts that are more likely to be delivered with poetic flourishes. However it can be observed that Natural Synthesis appears to have been predicated on foundations not unlike those of Negritude in that it recognised the need to research and validate indigenous forms of visual expression (ullu painting being the best known), and allowed for assimilation (synthesis) of foreign (western elements). It is a position developed with the confidence that its practitioners do not need to profess their Africanity since they are indisputedly African. Africans should have the choice to assimilate 'other' models. Demas Nwoko's statement "African art is art made by an African" captures this position precisely, although unlike Nwoko, most of the Zaria Rebels made more of an effort to identify 'African' sources. Natural Synthesis also departed from Negritude in that its practitioners drew heavily on a specific ethnically associated 'tradition' whereas Negritude was ambivalent in its focus; a national policy (for Senegal) that was simultaneously pan-African in its search for Africa as well as global in its exposition of humanity.

I touch briefly on Negritude and Natural Synthesis because they are probably the best known of the debates that took place in Africa before and after independence. However one should note that the issue of decolonising art was also debated in other countries: Ghana, Morocco, Uganda and Kenya among them. It should also be noted that decolonisation was part of the discourse of liberation in South Africa particularly within the Black Consciousness movements, and hence a critical issue for some black artists from the early 1970s. However it seems to me that post 1994 South Africa, and South African art in particular, sidestepped the decolonisation debate.

Why SA sidestepped a mainstream decolonisation debate

While one can recognise that there have been many debates and processes in South Africa post 1994 that could be viewed as classic elements of decolonisation: the promotion of indigenous languages, changing of place names, regulation of customary marriages and land reform among them, I think that overall these have been positioned within a discourse on transformation that is primarily centred on

redressing apartheid, rather than addressing our colonial legacy. This is not to suggest that the two are unrelated, clearly apartheid can be read as a particular expression of colonisation, but they have a different emphasis. For instance addressing racial inequality does not necessarily entail a critical reconsideration of the nature of the relationship with former colonising powers. I also do not want to suggest that there is not a discourse on decolonisation, but rather that it does not occupy a central place in the transformation discourse.

There appear to be several reasons for decolonisation not featuring prominently in the South African discourse on transformation. The most obvious is that apartheid cast everything in terms of black and white and was so visible a system that it had to be tackled head on. In contrast the nature of colonisation was complex and unique to South Africa. The notion “colonialism of a special type” was a theory that South Africa experienced two forms of colonisation: the first was the classic type when foreign nations seized control. The second was when an emerging indigenous entity, the Afrikaners, took control from British Imperialists whilst oppressing the established indigenous groups within the country to an unprecedented degree. 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 populations. Thus the nature of the colonising power was not as explicit as say Zimbabwe, Mozambique or Senegal.

But even if the nature of South Africa’s colonisation was unique in Africa this alone cannot explain why the decolonisation debate did not really take place in South Africa post 1994. One possible explanation to this may be that, as the last country in Africa to free itself of white domination, more than thirty years after most other African countries, decolonisation appeared to have been a done discourse. We went straight from apartheid to post-apartheid and post-colonialism. To talk of neo-colonialism seemed positively quaint.

Another possible reason for the absence of a mainstream debate on decolonisation may be because South Africa prioritised the path of Reconciliation. Understandably there will always be a valid fear of a crude understanding of decolonisation that pits two apparently clearly defined groups: settler and indigenous against each other. A risky proposition in a polarised, militarised culture. Blacks and whites were also polarised but it was perhaps easier to emphasise a common South African Identity than to raise questions posed by a discourse on decolonisation. Looking back we can see that we went rapidly from a liberation discourse of non-racialism and anti-racism that was pitted against the apartheid conceptualisation of separatist, discriminatory multi-racialism into a *simunye* rainbow nation discourse. This may have made sense from an urgent short term political need to set a divided country onto the road of nation building, but it did also have its down sides. Among these was the way in which it entrenched an ahistorical model of multi-culturalism (one nation many cultures) characterised by a deepening of identities that, for the most part emerged under colonialism and apartheid.

We can also note that one of the hallmarks of decolonisation, the transformation of national symbols was apparently given as a concession to the right wing to appease the perceived military threat that they posed to the new democracy. Hence we are expected to enact the neo-dadaist ritual of singing a mildly tinkered with voortrekkers

anthem with the same gusto as a liberation song; and the protea which I grew up thinking was the unofficial emblem of apartheid was added to the official lexicon of national symbols.

Why revisit the discourse of decolonisation?

To return to the first part of this paper, art in Africa has been largely at the mercy of outside forces, including African born curators operating in and arguably for a first world environment. The objective of developing art that is relevant in an African environment can best be developed in an African environment. No matter how noble the intentions of curators of large scale exhibitions of contemporary African art may or may not have been, these western based curators have inadvertently perpetuated a status quo where the notion of contemporary African art is constructed for a mostly non-African audience. They have also perpetuated a status quo where to be successful is to succeed in the West. One can only wonder if the same commitment and resources that has gone into curating these large shows had been aimed at an African audience, whether there would be more signs of the development of a viable infrastructure for the development of art in Africa.

Ngugi's notion of "Moving the Centre" was an important contribution to the decolonisation discourse. With this concept he articulated a vision of internationalism predicated on a plurality of centres. He did not, as Olu Oguibe mistakenly claims, argue for an exchange of one centre for the other. The significance of Ngugi's notion of a plurality of centres becomes evident when one considers the role of African Biennales. Are they vehicles to Venice or genuine alternatives rooted in local conditions and serving the interests of the communities where they are located?

The discourse of decolonisation enables us to evaluate the liberation of art in Africa through the notion of neo-colonialism. When we go to Dak'Art is it to get closer to Paris, or to develop networks in Africa? With South Africa the question of neo-colonialism is more complex because our colonial history is more hybrid than in Senegal: we do not only have one colonial master lingering in our closet. It is also important to note that some Western powers supported liberation, the Swedes for example probably more than anyone else including our own new democratically elected government provided the most substantial support for community arts projects in this country, consequently contributing immensely in addressing the historical position of the visual arts in South Africa as a white dominated practice. While the West is not a homogenous notion it does by and large serve to distinguish geo-political interests, and it does not take a Timbuktu trained astrologer to recognise that post the cultural boycott the South African art world has prioritised engagement with Europe and the USA, and invested very little time in building relationships on the African continent.

At Sessions Ekapa several participants appeared to be grappling with the notions of what constitutes an African artist and an African Biennale. These are important questions if we are address the glaring inequalities within the dominant model of international art. We do need to set an African agenda founded on African interests, and we do need to develop strategies that build the infrastructure of art on the African continent. However what strikes me as ironic is that whereas in some ways South African art appears to be ahead of art in the rest of Africa, Sessions Ekapa

provided evidence that we have barely begun a discourse that, for many African countries began decades ago. This clearly illustrates that South Africans should suppress their arrogance and pay more attention to the experiences in African countries, where we may well find that we have a lot to learn from African art history.

I have already briefly alluded to the need to rethink the identities imposed on us by apartheid, or developed in resistance to apartheid. It is worth noting that some artists are quietly grappling with issues of African identity that have affinities with what took place in other African countries around the time of their Independence.. For example one can find affinities between the works of Nigerian artists such as Uche Okeke who drew on Ibo traditions and South Africa's Garth Erasmus. Erasmus' art, particularly since the late 1980s can in part be explained as a rejection of the imposition of a "coloured identity" and the reclamation of a Khoisan heritage. Both artists have also produced what can be termed 'abstract art'. An analysis and comparison of the works of Okeke and Erasmus would elucidate the 'authenticity' of abstraction as an African voice, whereas conventional art history has colonised abstraction in the name of a western centred modern art. Clearly both Erasmus and Okeke have not been untouched by western art, their use of physically autonomous rectangular/ish formats being one evident expression of this, but there is absolutely no grounds for dismissing either artist as a purveyor of second class modernism. I present this merely as one example of the benefits of analysing African art in its own context, rather than simply and erroneously dismissing it as a derivative and inferior form of western centred modern art.

Conclusion: a new face to the decolonisation discourse

My aim in this paper was to ask whether there are aspects of the discourse and experiences of decolonisation that are still relevant for contemporary African art, particularly for South Africa. I do not wish to suggest that the discourse of decolonisation is an entirely adequate one for the present situation. Simply that it does enable us to address some of the key questions facing artists in Africa today.

Certainly the decolonisation discourse needs to learn from its own history. For instance to some people decolonisation implies a simple binary between the indigenous and the settler, the colonised and the coloniser. The post-colonial situation is a more complex one than it was in the past: how many generations does it take to become indigenous? Is the merest hint of an alien ancestry sufficient to perpetuate a sense of not belonging for all time? How much time does an indigenous person, or person of indigenous descent have to spend on another continent before acquiring another identity? Do the values and practices of an indigenous person necessarily represent African interests? Do the interests of someone with non-African heritage necessarily represent those of their ancestors?

I think if there is one thing we can learn from the negative experiences of decolonisation, such as that opportunistically practiced by Idi Amin, it is that decolonisation should not be a debate that leads to polarisation, conflict, forced repatriation and/or ethnic cleansing, because those are the logical consequences of promoting an us and them discourse. While there will always be competing understandings of what it means to be African, I believe that it is important that we begin to identify the notion of African as an essentially political identity. It goes

beyond race, culture and the nation state. It implies a recognition that globalisation functions according to strategic alliances that are at least in part geographic, in part historic; and that the conditions on the continent require a greater degree of cohesion and unity in order to give urgent attention to development. To be African today is not only about ancestry or residence, it entails commitment to advance the interests of developing the continent. Without bringing the discourse of decolonisation into the frame we risk overlooking the centrality of an African centred agenda in transformation. As things stand the current model of transformation may well provide us with a new generation of black directors who are the first on the plane to Venice, and last on the bus to Kinshasa.