

# “Made in Africa” Biennale: Afrika Heritage and the Politics of Representation

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The baggage of post-coloniality continues to weigh-in strongly in the discourse of contemporary African art, more so when this discourse is coloured by the politics and economics of representation. In the 1990s, the contest that ensued in the global art space with regards to African art was one of representation and authorial spokespersonship that was engendered as a result of the seminal but hugely controversial *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition of 1989 curated by Frenchman Jean-Hubert Martin. The blockbuster show undoubtedly reconfigured the reception of modern African art in the West. But beyond that, it helped to facilitate the emergence and acceptance of contemporary African art on a large scale in major cultural institutions of the West. This to borrow from Olu Oguibe, set the tone for reclamation of authority and reversal of imposed anonymity on the native, perpetrated by ethnography that effectively bars claims to subjectivity and normativity.

The 1990s was a conflating era of definition and affirmation led by the diaspora intelligentsia. It was also a period of intense contestations informed by issues of identity and representivity. Interestingly as it were, ideas of labels and tags were fissures which considerably impacted on the debate of normativity and otherness, two constructs that framed the discourse of African contemporaneity at that point. While this spawned palpable interests in the diaspora, its import was only beginning to trickle into continental Africa. Exhibition venues in the West became battlegrounds, and exhibitions like *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art* (1991), *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (1995), *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (1996), etc, were forums where discursive issues were debated extensively. It is important to also iterate that these battles, chiefly championed by the influential diasporic intellectual community, were for a change of baton steeped in the political economy of representation.

As contemporary African art exhibitions proliferated in the West in the 1990s controlled by Western institutions and African-born metropolitan intelligentsia, alternative platforms were also constituted in the continent. This thus gave rise to mega events in the continent, such as the first and second Johannesburg biennales (South Africa) in the mid-1990s, *Dak'Art* (Senegal), the *Cairo Biennale* (Egypt), *East African Biennale* (Tanzania) and the *Afrika Heritage* biennale in Nigeria, mediated by the Pan-African Circle of Artists, among others. If we agree with Barthes that enunciation is a code of legislation like Oguibe suggests, “It becomes clear that its essence is to define the rules of interaction and interrelation between people, to set the limits of intervention and dominatory incursion, of encroachment upon the sites of our individuality and subjectivity, to present ourselves and establish our authority over not only our creativity, but most importantly, over ourselves too.” [1] This is what

these platforms were contrived for, but which forms the core of *Afrika Heritage's* agenda in the propagation of contemporary art in Africa.

From the first biennale in 1995, *Afrika Heritage* has illuminated the well-rehearsed African-American maxim, "For US, by US," popularised by the New York based clothing company FUBU. By inserting itself as an agency of pan-African activism, PACA, through *Afrika Heritage*, redefines the rules of engagement in/for a continent whose intelligentsia remain haunted by what Achebe describes as the psychology of the dispossessed. The point one makes is that the sensibility that is brought to most contrived biennales in the continent as Nancy Hynes notes, "is one that is internationalist and global, conceived within a privileged, cosmopolitan diaspora experience." [2] While one is quick to add that there is nothing wrong in adopting strategies that are internationalist and global, the question that arises is the efficacy of such strategies in ameliorating the occlusion of the greater percentage of artistic production – informed by reality and experience – from inside the continent? *Afrika Heritage* therefore mediates the missing gaps by engaging and interrogating themes, social and otherwise, that find much relevance in the living reality of a continent worsted by its own constructed history.

In all its exhibitions, PACA has assumed the position of advocacy in ensuring that a home-grown vibrancy is maintained in the continent in spite of the drawbacks, particularly the dehumanising socio-political and economic conditions that plague the creative terrain in Africa. In 2000 the biennale was themed around what George Agbo aptly calls "socio-political psychology of existential conflicts and contradictions." [3] Thus *Crossroads: Africa in the Twilight* confronted ideological issues of Otherness and Otherising, issues that informed post-colonial debates at the twilight of the last century. *Changing Attitudes* in 2002 was a grand narrative that engaged socio-political and economic issues affecting the continent. *Afrika Heritage 2004* comprised of five exhibitionary platforms namely, *The Grand Exhibition*, *The PACA Peace Exhibit*, *The Nude Figure Never Sleeps*, *Altars of Terror*, and *Tayo Adenaike: A Foremost African Watercolourist*. Krydz Ikwuemesi describes the exhibition as a river with many tributaries that seeks to interrogate "peace from various complimentary standpoints, the evolution of the nude in African art, the notions of leadership in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, and the engagement of wide-ranging aspects of contemporary reality in Africa." [4]

The 6th edition of *Afrika Heritage* comes at a time when there is a call for a Nigerian biennale. [5] Biennales, as Hynes points out, "are large, extravagant events... [where national governments] parade economic prosperity and enter luxury art markets." [6] Although PACA is domiciled in Nigeria and has contributed significantly to the development of an art ecology in Nigeria, it is however important to reiterate that *Afrika Heritage* never set out to be a Nigerian art biennale but rather a biennale that infuses an Africanity, a core essence lacking in most biennales contrived in the continent. At the same time, it is heartening to note that despite the attendant economic emasculation of the creative terrain in Nigeria, nay Africa, the Pan-African Circle of Artists has successfully organised its biennales with threadbare funds raised internally by members, patrons and friends. That PACA has come this far is a measure of the resilience, dedication to duty and perseverance of the human spirit; rare instances of nobility exhibited by members and patrons.

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Notes.

[1] Olu Oguibe, "Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art," In *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Market Place*, edited by Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999), 17-29.

[2] Nancy Hynes, "Art For Africa Sake", *Prospect Magazine* 29, (April 1998).

[3] George Agbo, "15 years of Harnessing Creative Energies", in *Afrika Heritage 2006: 6th Biennale of the Pan-African Circle of Artists*, 2006, [www.panafricanartists.org](http://www.panafricanartists.org).

[4] Krydz Ikwuemesi, "Introductory Notes", *Afrika Heritage 2004*, 2004, [www.panafricanartists.org](http://www.panafricanartists.org).

[5] After the Dak'Art 2006, a debate ensued in the local art scene in Nigeria on the absence/presence of a Nigerian biennale. While a section of the Nigerian art community particularly those in Lagos were of the view that there was/is no art biennale emanating from Nigeria. Members of the Pan-African Circle of Artists rose strongly in the defence of Afrika Heritage as a biennale that not only has its roots in Nigeria, but also the only biennale that has emerged in Nigeria. I have merely elaborated on PACA'S position in this essay.

In addition, PACA's International Advisory Council states emphatically that Nigeria is only a platform since the biennale has been structured to shift to other venues in the continent in the next few years. The 6th biennale was intended to kickstart the new development but due to the lack of enabling funds that prevented the event from happening in 2006, PACA reverted to the old strategy and Nigeria has hosted the biennale once again.

[6] Hynes, "Art for Africa Sake"