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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

African Aesthetics and Literature

Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 4(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1973

DOI

10.5070/F741016430

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ISSUES

[In our Vol. III, No. 2, we initiated an "ISSUES" segment aimed at encouraging our readers to express their opinion and insights in a format that allows more scope than a letter to the editor but, at the same time, is unencumbered by the paraphernalia of the scholarly paper. Ed. note.]

AFRICAN AESTHETICS AND LITERATURE

This paper is a call for the development of the discipline of African aesthetics which will be applied to the criticism of the literary arts. Such aesthetics will require much original, independent and muscular thought on the part of African intellectuals. We cannot fall back, as we are wont to do, on the usual imitation of Western thought since Western aesthetics have been relatively neglected; seen as a negligible part of philosophy, or reduced to highly specialized linguistic analyses.

The new African aesthetics should not only deal with the philosophy of beauty, it should strive to become a theoretical study of the arts, seeking information from other branches of scholarship such as art criticism, psychology, sociology, anthropology, art history, and cultural history. It should be a theoretical understanding of the arts not only in relation to each other but to culture as a whole.

This presupposes that there is an African world view, an African culture. It posits that an African views, feels and conceptualizes his world in a distinctive though not exclusive manner.

The last statement will of course raise immediate clamor as to whether there is an African culture - much more,

an African world view. There will be noise about the definition of culture and whether it is necessary or interesting to pursue such an investigation. After all, the intellectual efforts in such directions have always met with short shrift, particularly from English scholarship.

Two needs underlie this necessary theoretical approach to African cultures. One, a comprehension of the principles involved in the production, criticism and use of African arts; two, the need to attain self-definition and knowledge of African culture while Africa undergoes change and external influence. The uses of the new aesthetics should encompass self-knowledge as its end (despite the disgrace into which negritude has fallen and the antipathy of British Africanists and Anglophone African intellectuals and artists towards conceptualisation and any activity of self-definition). The uses of the aesthetics should include the codification of the old ways, the old traditions, concepts, and methods which are threatened with surcease if they remain unsystematized and unrecorded, untheoretically formulated and unpublicised as they are in the old cultish hands.

The new African arts should be enriched by this effort because artists can, in full self-awareness, bring together the old and the new; the traditional and the foreign. And significantly, the contemporary African artist can portray a truer Africanity than heretofore. An examination of major African literary arts, namely the poetry of Okigbo, *The Road* of Soyinka, his *Interpreters*, Achebe's novels, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, Oulougum's *Bound to Violence*, and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, will reveal that the ontologies behind these works are essentially Western.

Do the works noted depict the objective modern African reality or do they merely co-opt fashionable aesthetic attitudes in depicting man as basically Hobbesian, and the artist as the only saving sensibility; in positing an angst-ridden, a-historical, static and chaotic reality where action and life are meaningless and the only meaningful thing is the suffering subjectivity of the lonely artist? Is their world of despair which is not momentary or historically explicable the nature of things, the existential condition; is their world an African concept of being?

For criticism, we might be able to establish criteria which will be classical for African art: for instance

standards of epic narration can emerge from a theoretical study of the Mwindo epic or that of Sundiata. These forms must have satisfied something in the African which *Idanre* and *Ozidi* do not in the African who can read them. The intent of such a theoretical study will not be to tie the hands of our artists but to enrich their possibilities, and to provide a means for judging their effectiveness, inventiveness and their originality. The more important end, I believe, will be to discover what appeals to the African sensibility in the literary arts so that we may discover an African audience for the modern African arts; so that the Africanity of contemporary African art goes beyond the superficial and the ornamentative level of the stylistic; so that we may eventually be able to define the African novel; so that we may find out why Ogunde, Ogunmola and Lapido succeed where Clark and Soyinka fail (even with the educated African) and why Fagunwa, the Onitsha chap-book writers and Ekwensi and Achebe are the popular artists. (And the answer to the last about Achebe and Ekwensi cannot rest only with the language problem and the audience's lack of sophistication.)

We must discover and conceptualize why an African audience laughs when it does in the cinema and the theatre. These phenomena imply a cultural sensibility, chords of which are either mauled or missed by the contemporary African artist in English.

The African artist should begin to respect the African audience and its essence. The African writer does not as yet aim his effects at African sensibilities. For instance, since the ideal of the Japanese aesthetic is "aware" - the gentle sensitivity to the beautiful sadness of things and the delicate relationship of the mind to things (crystallized perhaps in haiku verse--in the fall of a flower or an unwept tear or an autumn evening) the Japanese is not likely to attain his highest degree of aesthetic experience from the cowboy film, Kafka's *Castle* or Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. This is not to say that, within their milieu, these examples are not good works of art.

And indeed, modern Japanese film artists are responding to the essence of their culture in their handling of the film as an art form. It is clear that the Japanese film uses largely Japanese modes to achieve its aesthetic effects.

In the same way the great 14th century Japanese playwright Seami applied the aesthetic theory of yugen to Noh

theatre; these Japanese artists innovate while moving forward in method and style with the best of the modern spirit. It is to this possibility that the African intellectual and artist has to be persuaded; that a cultural self exists; that it exists in history; that it is important to know or rediscover that self without rejecting a universal humanism. As we are all human, we have the same emotions; but about different things and at different times, expressed differently. And finally, he has to be persuaded that it is possible to be modern without jettisoning that essence of the historical and cultural self.

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THE ARTIST'S PLACE IN MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY

It can be said that the modern African artist labors under an identity crisis--to use the jargon of the socio-psychologists (how pervasive is their language in the everyday thinking of the West living in a society whose value system is at best fragmented); he finds it hard to maintain a credible stance in the ever shifting terrain of his time. Is he a unique voice, proclaiming his individual vision detached from ideology or the common pursuit of men? Or is he an engaged participant deploying his talents to further a cause, usually a political cause? Does he produce art for an end in itself or only as a means to a larger end? Is he a free agent or does he subordinate his freedom to the discipline of a group, a vanguard of a struggle for equality, justice, etc? Is he a black separatist or integrationist? Is he a critic of his society or its embattled defense counsel? Is he rebelliously progressive or crustily counter-revolutionary? Is he content merely to entertain or does he have to push a socially relevant message? Should his art set him apart, isolate him from the masses, or should it serve as a means of identification with them?

With so many critical options, it is a lucky African artist who not only can find his role but will have it accepted by his society.