

# AFRICAN ARTS

## TAKE THE HIGHROAD

### AWAY FROM WESTERN ART

By Magdi Wahba

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Vignettes by Louella Ritz. Reproduced from *The Classic*, Vol. 3 No. 3 1970

Three general features appear to be common to all the independent African countries: their shared experience of European colonization, the social mobility of their new élites and the absorption of their cultures into the wider context of politics, religion or social institutions. If necessity be the mother of invention she is also the stepmother of a monolithic philosophy of social organization.

The poor, the weak, the hungry can ill afford variety of experience and expression, nor can they indulge in the luxuries of disputation. Their lives are haunted by the spectres of starvation, poverty, despair and the gruel kitchen. Nothing else really matters, and it is against such a background that culture must struggle to obtain a precarious foothold.

Ministries and Departments of Culture have sprung up in most African countries whose aim is to embody the national ideals and culture in activities, academies and museums, but the most widespread means of diffusion is still the radio and, to a lesser extent, television. The purveyors of culture find very soon that their best chance of success is in reducing their message to an oral one, fitting into the broadcasting system.

The cosy, ubiquitous transistor has the virtue of cheapness coupled with the freedom of privacy. Besides it fits into the general spirit of oral tradition which has been the main transmitter of most of African culture since time immemorial. The radio is also the most important means of dissemination in the Islamo-Arab countries of Africa, where the spoken word and the traditions of chant, recitation and song are truly historical and dominant.

Yet the question may be asked, can culture be limited to the broadcasting of words, images or music? Is not the true repository of culture the printed word? Roger Caillois, French philosopher and writer, in a thoughtful introduction to a Unesco meeting of cultural policy experts in Dakar in 1969, raised this question with regard to African culture.

In substance, his words were a cry of alarm with regard to developing countries. There was, he felt, a terrible temptation to skip the stages of development and to go directly to television and the tape-recorder, without passing by reading and writing. And yet, he maintained, there is no true substitute for reading and writing as stimuli for critical thought. He was convinced that cultural development was closely linked with schools and universities, with reading and writing. Is culture, in its broadest, universal sense not primarily the culture of the book?

If such is the case, then there is little choice, especially against a background of almost universal poverty, but to link cultural dissemination and the preservation of cultural values with the educational systems of Africa. Here also may be posed the problem of the visual arts.

In the European context, after the age of the great cathedrals, art certainly became an expression of individual, identifiable talent. The artist bore a name and his name was transmitted down to posterity by means of a culture based on accumulated book-learning. In most of Africa, art has always been functional, deeply involved in the material, social and religious needs of the community. But it is also anonymous.

In North Africa, of the ancient arts of mosaic, copper beating, marquetry and calligraphy, it is the latter only which has some claim to individualization. In Africa south of the Sahara the traditional arts are becoming more and more part of a museum of folk-arts preserved with some effort for the benefit of the tourist trade and the research of the ethnologist.

Oral tradition, also anonymous, nevertheless survives with much more vigour, becoming adapted to the various modern literary forms with remarkable ease and thus entering as it were, the limelight of an individuated author.

Again, in North Africa, the romances of the *Arabian Nights* and the epic chronicles of the Hilaliya and the tales of Antarah have obtained literary passports to modern respectability in a variety of literary and dramatic adaptations, which have lifted them from the trough of anonymity, but also cut them off from their social origins.

How many graduates from the educational systems in Africa wish to explore their community and find ways and means by which they can be active in enhancing the quality of the society to which they belong? How many schools or universities for that matter would happily abandon didactic for non-didactic methods of instruction in order to produce a new generation with a intellectual curiosity whetted instead of stifled?

One of the causes of the mediocrity perpetuated in many African educational systems is the almost blind insistence on the transmission of certitude to wavering consciences. How can culture, local or universal, flourish in such a wilderness of certitudes?

Further questions we might ask are: What culture? Whose culture?

In the Islamo Arab North there is a common language which for historical and religious reasons subtends a common world outlook. There is a classical heritage in that language, which can supply the people with common literary memories.

If a certain amount of generalization may be allowed, this is a condition not to be found easily in other African languages, with the possible exception of Swahili in the east and Wolof in the west. English and French will remain, for a long time to come, the main organs of cultural and instructional transmission in many parts of Africa.

There is something dramatic about the way in which a civilization of "orality", based on the perpetuations of memory, is having to come to terms with the written word, in English or French or in the transcription of the various national languages.



Inevitably, the epic chants and rhythmic encomia of the "griots" lose their immediacy when written down or broadcast on the radio. Anthologies with introductions by learned anthropologists are *saving* oral tradition, but they are also *freezing* it in time. Never has it been more true than now that "an old man dying is a library going up in flames", to quote a Malian sociologist and historian, Amadou Hampâte Bâ. The problem of music and the visual arts is no less dramatic.

In modern Arabic music, before the revival of the classical heritage, it has been possible to trace influences as varied as the rhumbas and tangos of the 1930s together with the odd bar here and there from Tchaikovsky or Beethoven or even Bach. These have been added, together with such exotic instruments as the accordion and the electric guitar to the classical rhythms and melodies of traditional Arabic music without any sense of incompatibility or strangeness.

And yet Arabic music is not a folk music in the accepted sense of the term, nor is it strictly "pop" music. Its classical repertoire is held as much in reverence by one hundred million Arabs as, say, Beethoven's later quartets are by music-lovers the world over.

As for the music of Black Africa its close association of the human voice with percussion instruments places it well within that civilization of "orality" mentioned above. The roots of this music are in ritual and in folk memory, and their various attempts to come to terms with Afro-Cuban, Afro-American or even plainly Western European rhythms and instruments have created what may be regarded as a very confused mixture of modern dance music and ritual rhythms.

The integration of the artist into society cannot be the result of any special sort of legislation. Artists are not artificially induced phenomena. They are often "made", but generally they are "born", they are *there*, and something has to be done about them.

Neither prophet nor legislator, acknowledged or unacknowledged, the artist is often tempted to withdraw from the traffic of an acquisitive or an ideology-ridden society. He lays himself open to the charge of isolation and sterility, and his work may be regarded as no more than a creation of private fancy. This is not a pleasant situation for the artist, since one of his main motives is to communicate and to be appreciated.

The educational systems have to ascertain, first of all, the ultimate destination of the artist in African society before they can be expected to plan the manner of his training. Almost inevitably, the artist is to become a public servant, a teacher or a state supported artist.

Perhaps that is why most of the African educational systems concentrate on the technical training of schoolchildren in the rudiments of draughtsmanship, mechanical drawing and those crayon or water-colour sketches of themes which inculcate national pride at an early age and which grace the walls of so many exhibitions of schoolchildren's art over the world.

Naturally this remark may be regarded as unfairly sarcastic, but the fact remains nevertheless that these various practices do not properly constitute an initiation into the world of art. They are more in the nature of tedious exercises akin to the drawing of maps by young children.

In Egypt, the late Ramses Wissa Wassef had to face this problem when he started the weaving centre at Harrania outside Cairo, where he encouraged young peasant children to develop their own artistic gifts. His first inspiration came from reflection on the question of the artist and the craftsman.

“By defining one as a creator, and the other as a manual worker”, he has written, “our civilization, with its conventional classifications, routines and ill-considered generalizations, has sundered art and craftsmanship, and is threatening to strangle both of them”.

The great interest of Ramses Wissa Wassef’s educational experiment is that it is applicable with slight modifications anywhere in Africa. Highly successful and, one might add, extremely lucrative for the young weavers’ co-operative, it is also an important contribution to modern philosophies of artistic education. Easily integrated into the environment, whether rural or urban, this experiment provides the key for combining the virtues of teaching and play without any artificiality or concession to outside influences.

This integration of the arts into what can loosely be called “life”, is very much part of the general philosophy of the arts which has flourished in Egypt over the last thirty years or so. Hassen Fathy’s world-famous experiment is building the village of Gournia in Upper Egypt is another illustration of the desire to return to the roots of a culture without sinking into the pitfalls of folklore.

Here the problem is not strictly the teaching of an art of self-expression, but rather the teaching of a craft which is essential for the welfare of a rural community—the craft of building. Let me be allowed to describe the problem in the author’s own words:

“If a village is to be built by its own future inhabitants, then we must give them the necessary skills. However much enthusiasm the co-operative system may engender, it will do little good if the people don’t know how to lay bricks . . . We need a method of teaching the peasant the elements of practical building so that he can contribute usefully to the building of his village, but we don’t want to turn him from a productive farmer into a skilled but unemployable mason . . .

“By training the villagers on the public buildings, which will be erected first as the core of the village, we can make use of the architects and master-craftsmen engaged by the building authority, and they can pass on their skills to the people. Then, even if the authority cannot afford to build many private houses, the skills will have been implanted, the village centre will be there, and the inhabitants will be able to go on for themselves . . . The maturing of skill is an experience of considerable spiritual value to the craftsman, and a man who acquires the solid mastery of any skill grows in self-respect and moral stature. In fact the transformation brought about in the personalities of the peasants when they build their own village is of greater value than the transformation in their material condition”.

Both Hassan Fathy and the late Ramses Wissa Wassef had to come to terms with the problem of integrating the arts and crafts into a society where the pressures of sheer survival might have monopolized the attention of most people.

This integration is second nature, however, in such ritualistic societies as that of the Mambila on the high plateau in the province of Sarduna in Northern Nigeria. For the Mambila



there has never been relief from a subsistence economy and yet the arts are lively because of their integration into the tribal initiations which constitute the spontaneous education of the Mambilas.

The men learn to work on iron, wood, bamboo and cotton fabrics, while the women specialize in the most elaborate basketwork from childhood. Artistic work is associated with the social expression of changes in status, such as engagement and accession to adulthood. Art becomes therefore a linguistic system of symbols which is not perfected for its own sake or for the sake of entertainment. Hairdressing, sculpture and painting become so many media for expressing highly emotional “language” ritualistically.

The techniques and materials of art are determined by the uses to which their products will be destined. There is no pottery or sculpture among the Peuls of the southern Sahara, for example, because their nomadic lives do not permit of such luxuries, but the rich ornamentation of their dress makes up for this, providing an avenue for extremely complex artistic inventiveness.

Different environments and social customs have emphasized certain purely functional or ritualistic forms of arts, such as mask-painting among the Chokwes of Angola, and tattooing in countless hunting communities all over Africa. Carving in wood or other materials is also tied up with the ritual significance of the work of art.

The initiation of the tribal artist is generally undertaken by the blacksmith of the village, whose position is regarded as something between teacher, technocrat and maker of tools which he will then use himself in carving. This is the case among the Bambara of Mali, the Baoule of the Ivory Coast and the Kongo of Zaire.

In the Musée de l’Homme in Paris there is a great statue of the god Gu, god of war and patron of all blacksmiths, which was brought over from Dahomey during the latter half of the 19th century. Made of bits of scrap iron, chain and railway girders from Europe, it is none the less an African representation of a dominant god, whose province is both destruction and the making of life-perpetuating work of arts.

It is from this foundation of absolute social integration without any pretence of exhibitionistic individualization or academic drawing, that education in the arts must begin if it is not to contribute to a pale parody of western European art.

Basically, the problem in Africa is one of coming to terms with the outside world. It is no use pretending that nationalism is enough, or that cultural resistance can find a *modus vivendi* with technological progress. Nationhood is a fact, not an angry argument, and the so-called African "personality" is nothing if it is not the aggregate of millions of individually unique personalities.

The true challenge lies, therefore, in the response to that very simple, that poignantly simple, Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." In the last analysis, is anything else either verifiable or true? □



## THE LOVE OF AFRICA

A Review of **Black Bronze Beautiful**, by Adam Small (Ad. Donker, 1975)

by Colin Gardner

In this small volume of fifty four-line poems, Adam Small has attempted—it seems to me—to bring together, in rich brief images and evocations, a number of awarenesses which would normally be thought of as separate.

The speaker of the poems is a woman, a black woman, who invites the man whom she is addressing to recognize and accept her, to explore her, to enjoy her, to learn from her and be enriched by her—to love her deeply and overwhelmingly. After the first few poems it begins to become clear that the African woman is also the continent of Africa itself, and the explorations and enrichments that are offered are variously geographical, geological, historical, psychological, religious. Interwoven with the direct lyricism of human love, then, there is an ecstatic feeling for a land and its meanings somewhat like what one finds in Whitman when he writes of America, and an emblematic suggestiveness a little reminiscent of the 'Song of Songs'.

Africa pleads, encourages, inspires; but who (besides the reader) is being addressed? At times it appears to be a black man or blacks in general; at other times, a white man, or whites in general. In the end the answer must be: everyone who belongs to Africa. One's sense that this is so is confirmed by the epigraph, which reads:

Fifty quatrains  
for the African road  
to a rhythm, new for  
Africa's people, as we are growing together,  
all or us.

The political dimension of the poems is very important. Whites are invited, implicitly, to accept, to seek fulfilment, and to be reconciled—to bury their whiteness in the creative darkness. Blacks are urged to expand and relax, both to learn what they are and to **become** what they are. A remarkable feature of the poems is their providing a bodily image for the political attitude known as black consciousness (and no doubt this partly explains the fact that they are the first poems that Adam Small has written in English, which is the language of black liberation in South Africa). Even more remarkable, perhaps, is the blending of black consciousness with an open-hearted appeal to whites. Adam Small seems to reach through, in the best pieces at any rate, to that innermost psychological or spiritual area where the desire to assert one's identity, and the desire to accept and embrace the identity of another, become one.

Clearly my account needs to be filled out by instances. (Before I quote, however, I must mention one minor irritation: the poet has used ordinary punctuation, but omitted