The words about us

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This article challenges the history and interpretation of the visual arts of Africa promulgated by much of the documentation on African art found in British art libraries - both that based on the colonial archaeological, ethnographic and anthropological approach, and that stemming from the influence of African arts on early twentieth century European art. Drawing parallels between the false picture of African history produced by colonial historians, and the perception of African art history by non-African art historians, the author draws attention to the need for Africans to document their own art, and to the lack of documentation on the contribution of Black artists to British cultural life.

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My colonial type schooling failed to cultivate in me a critical creative consciousness. For by design it had other aims and desired not truth-seeking criticism, nor creative alternatives. The recognition of truth remains one of the bitter-sweet experiences of my life. What school would not offer, my immediate environment and its conscientious elders could. However, school did drill into me a respect for the power of the printed word. Marshall McLuhan may be correct about the television media being the massage of contemporary consciousness, yet, I

believe, the media of influence on the visual arts is still from Gutenberg's galaxy of movable letters. So I read the literature on and about African art with scrutinous, suspicious eyes. Often reading the blank spaces between the set lines of type to find the truth. Like the blind reading braille, I feel my way through what is physically there on the page, to the 'abstract' truth in the mind.

Let me start by saying that contemporary understanding of the visual arts of Africa has been shaped not by our words but by the words about us.

The Library is regarded by most as a storehouse of information and knowledge. Yet in the case, or better said, the bookcase of African art, there is a vast amount of short-sighted presumption, misinformation, taboos and downright racist lies. There have been books on African art on British bookshelves for decades and at the times when this society was an acknowledged mono-ethnic, ethno-centric culture. Through all those decades the quantity of documentation has increased but its quality leaves much to be desired. It would be wrong to assume that the books in British libraries on African arts are there as an acknowledgement of Britain being a multi-

cultured society or that these books could constructively contribute to a solution of the ever growing problem of racialism. The hard scab of Britain's festering racial sore has not dried up and dropped off over these many years. On the contrary it is still there being cosmetically treated as if it were a pimple on her beautiful face.

The question arises, why put books on African art into British libraries? What would be truthful and under the circumstances perhaps Utopian reasons for such an act? I find three reasons. The first is that cultures should be brought together, for it is the proximity of cultures that creates a reciprocity of ideas and promotes development; cultural awareness breeds respect for and equality amongst humans. The second, is the need to illustrate the structures, the beliefs and energies that hold together the exotic surface of the African continent's expression. Finally, as information for the practising artist and student of the arts, it offers insight into other modes of expression, tracing the origins and development of these modes up to the present; and demonstrates the skill, craftsmanship and innovation of artists.

If documentation could truly offer us this we would all be richer in the experience of it. This multi-cultural society could become, simply, a

cultured society. One in which all cultures were treated, documented, debated and presented with equal respect. The reality of the documentation of our art is far removed from that.

Two major phases of European interest laid the foundations for the documentation of African art. They are science and aesthetics and both arose within the period of colonial rule. From the preface to the first edition of the British Museum's 'Handbook to the Ethnographic collection' published in 1910, I read:

> 'At no period in the world's history has any one nation exercised control over so many primitive races as our own at the present time ... '

It also explains to the museum visitor:

> 'The great amount and variety of available information on the peoples of the whole uncivilised world, their beliefs, habits and productions, have rendered concise treatment a necessity; but it is hoped that even this short abstract from an immense material will enable the visitor to grasp the scientific value of ethnographic objects, and to perceive their relation to the products of more advanced civilisations exhibited in other parts of the Museum.'

It points to the nature of Europe's relationship to Africa that those who initially documented our art came from the realm of science and

not from the humanities or the arts. We were examined, not appreciated. Our cultural body was painstakingly dissected by colonial archaeologists, ethnographers and anthropologists who studied each segment separately from the other. From then on African art was generally put into categories that were out of context. The new home for much of our art became the cold, glass cases and vaults of the so-called primitive art museums of Europe. Our art became artefact. It was submerged in a context of underdevelopment and branded with a permanent stigma of ethnography.

The preface to the second edition of the British Museum's Handbook, published fifteen years later, tells me that:

> 'Ethnography is that branch of the general science of man (anthropology), descriptive of the manners and customs of particular peoples, and of their development from savagery toward civilisation. Although the word in its strict sense embraces the manners, customs, beliefs of all peoples, including those of Europe, it is more especially concerned with those races which have no written records and are unknown to history.'

Today in this multi-cultural society one liberally refers to cultures not indigenous to Britain as Ethnic or Minority; but, then mostly in reference to the cultures of the so-called underdeveloped, third or

developing world, or any other pathetic adjective one cares to use.

The next wave of interest in Africa's visual art does have its roots in the arts; an indication of improvement some would say. Europe's avant-garde poets, writers and artists of the early nineteen hundreds took it up in their work. They decorated their homes and places of work with African art. Their appreciation was of our arts' expressive energy, its brilliant use of abstraction and 'its sheer aesthetic splendour. African art became the catalyst for the most fundamental change in European artistic expression. Yet this changed very little or nothing for the people of Africa and their cultures, and, in particular for the artists. Similar to the use of our forefathers' manpower in the era of slavery, Africa's cultural achievements were used to enhance the development of non-African cultures. This new use of our art created new forms of documentation which aimed to transmit the arts' plural aesthetic harmonies. However it lacked insight into the cultural foundations on which these now uprooted works once stood. What started off as aesthetics often deteriorated into exoticism.

Our art, both traditional and contemporary is not a conglomeration of characteristics, curiosities, or things. It is the

superstructure, the dynamism and creative potential of a culture, that make art possible and nourish creative expression. Documentation which fails to recognise this fact cannot sustain a genuine appreciation for its subject.

A logical way to create new documentation was to combine the available material. Yet it did not suffice for art is not as simple as that. Art, I believe, aims to express the established cultural knowledge using the ·generative energies bestowed upon a culture by a people as they shape it. Art and culture are therefore not synonymous, Art is the complex expressive heart of a cultural body. (It should also not be confused with the repetitive mode of cultural practice called tradition). Art is always sociological, philosophical, historical, emotional, aesthetic, poetic and truthful. Combining documentary material with a bias to colonial ethnography, and, full of exotic simplification, could hardly do' justice to a subject so complex and important, I say important because the documentation of any part of the arts of any nation implies the making of its art history.

The documentation of Africa's general history provides me with a comparative example to illustrate this point. A volume of Africa's

general history published in the fifties or earlier would, I believe, read to the then contemporary African, presuming he or she was progressive in their thinking, like a fairy tale. It had very little to do with them even though its title implied that it should. It was about other non-African peoples' actions, mostly against their forefathers. Colonial history, as this documentation should rightly be called, centred around the myth that Africans had no history except that which colonialism had defined. Yet the focus of this documentation were the actions of the colonisers themselves. Colonial history was force-fed to Africans through the colonial education system. A system intolerant to criticism from those caught up in it. To the uncritical African this history was believed to be his, thus, history was transformed into a tool for colonial oppression. A tool to subjugate Black people and justify White domination. Every publisher, librarian, and school teacher who used this tool consciously or not became an accessory to the inhuman crime of colonialism.

Important for the independence struggle in Africa was the acknowledgement by the revolutionary leadership of their living under a false concept of history. It was a step toward intellectual independence, forcing a reassessment of the past and a vital new look at the future. Africans realised that they had a history and that their struggle for

independence was the making of history. Today I am able to find African history books which in essence are quite different to those of the early fifties. Their authors (mostly African), have filled them with an African presence. This new documentation removes Black people from the mythical no-mans-land of colonial history and plants them into the earth of truth on top of their ancestral roots.

Visual arts documentation bears remarkable similarities to colonial history. One can surely say that Africa is having its art history defined for it by others. Close to one hundred per cent of the people exhibiting, categorising and documenting our visual art are non-African. Colonial thinking permeates this documentation and I have found it, without surprise I must add, in very recent publications. My lack of surprise stems from the knowledge that we have had no cultural revolutions in Africa; also that Africans have little or no control over the publication of this documentation. Speeches by revolutionary leaders about the need to revitalise cultures remain rhetoric as long as no programmes for a change in cultural praxis are undertaken. African governments have yet to lift the visual arts and its documentation on to the bottom rung of the 'priority' ladder. The contemporary consciousness toward Africa's visual arts has been influenced not so much by African artists as by European

and American art historians, critics, museum curators etc., and even private collectors. In short, the documentation of our art lacks an indigenous voice. Ulli Beier notes in the conclusion to his very good book 'Contemporary art in Africa'[1] that:

> 'On the whole the artists, as is natural, have been less vocal than the writers and much less inclined to prop up their creative work with theories.'

This makes all artists appear to be lacking a theoretical basis to their work and generally accept that others should theorise and vocalise for them, Ulli Beier not excluded.

Progressive art critics are only too glad to have some documented information about an art form of which they know very little or nothing; even better if the information comes directly from the artist who creates it. They are unmoved by yet another rehash of the old ethnographic data or a photocopied curriculum vitae and price list set out at the exhibition entrance. An important part of the documentation of African art and in particular African contemporary art is the exhibition catalogue. When a catalogue embodies an African presence such as the wonderful catalogue for the 'Nigerian treasures' exhibition, shown recently at the Royal Academy, with a text by Ekpo Eyo, its contribution

toward a reappraisal of African art becomes apparent. Ekpo Eyo is an almost singular voice in a grand choir of off-key singers singing their praise of our art. There is a strong need to multiply our voice and get the choir into harmony. I will not go as far to say that only Africans should write about their art, that would be foolish and racist, but I would appeal to publishers to create more opportunities for our scholars to get a word in edgeways, and to those concerned with international cultural exchange to encourage the quiet Black voice to increase in volume and temper. Recognising that intellectual independence does not arise from sympathy but from genuine struggle by those denied to express their viewpoints, it is very much up to Africans themselves to work for, and along with, those who aspire to a truthful Black art history.

> The flow of Africa's history seems blurred in visual arts documentation. Frank Willett mentions this problem in '*African art* today'
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> 'When writing about traditional African art it is customary to write in the present tense without repeatedly indicating that only one point in time is being described. In consequence, the idea has arisen that African art was unchanged until the relatively recent impact of outside influences such as Islam and European traders and missionaries.'

Documentation which treats traditional and contemporary art in the same breath denies its readers enlightenment to the achievements

of our contemporary artists in the interpretation of their world. Art criticism which expects all our contemporary expression to be a depiction of Amos Tutuola's 'My life in the bush of ghosts', should realise that it is 1983. The ghosts we have today are of a different kind and perhaps more frightening than those in Tutuola's brilliant mythical tale. Things have been falling apart in Africa for a long time but in some instances new positive things have appeared. To overlook these developments and act as if they have no effect on art would be to behave like the Pre-Raphaelites or the romanticists of the Negritude movement. New perceptions and ideas have been expressed in our contemporary art, changing the overall character of the work, that is, its style and structure etc. We have to perceive these new works in the context of existing expectations and practices in art, to understand their full meaning. One cannot write today about the work of Valente Malangatana, Bruce Onebrakpeya, or Henry Tayali using a literary style which has the feel of an age Frobenius could have lived in.

When writing about other people's art one does not only expose one's knowledge of their culture but also one's appreciation of them as fellow human beings who share this earth. In many spheres of co-existence the Africans full humanity has to be recognised. This makes

the recognition of African cultural achievements a difficult task for those who seek to document them and communicate them.

'The Art of Black Africa' [2] is the title of a book published in England as recently as 1972, its opening words are:

> 'African art is rooted in religion ... For African works of art are nothing less than media designed for supernatural power.'

These are the words of Or. Elsy Leuzinger, a 'specialist' on African art and a professor of art history and pre-history, who in an earlier publication wrote:

> 'Whoever comes in contact with African plastic art perceives at once that it suggests a sublime spirituality. Half-closed eyes and forms that have nothing in common with nature, attain almost to a higher verity. A breath from the beyond wafts towards us; forces radiate, strike us, and reverberate in perpetual interaction .... One's interest is aroused and one asks oneself: Who are the people who created such works? Whence do they obtain their power?'

The answers I found in her 1979 publication under the chapter heading 'The artist':

> 'The most accomplished African artists are those who remain faithful to tribal traditions, for so long as they remain true to the ancient beliefs they bring to their work the necessary intensity and experience .... In each style art can

> develop in a personal manner; in each, one may identify the talent of a sensitive master, for the African is quite capable of appreciating a masterpiece and of paying due respect and esteem to the artist.'

I believe Dr. Leuzinger's book would benefit from a change of title; something with less radical assumption, and more truthful like - 'Traditional cult figure sculptures and masks'. Its content would be less misleading, to say the least, if somewhere in the text she stated that this was her subject. For it is Or. Leuzinger's professional opinion that there is only one relevant kind of African expression. the traditional cult figure, sculpture found mainly in Western and Central Africa; this is the Black Africa to which the book's title refers. The rest of the Continent's expression holds less interest for her, and I have to wonder which colour would to her be descriptive of Egyptian funerary art or Khoisan rock art?

I have up to now been rather negative in my assessment of the state of documentation. My views have been shaped by many frustrated years in libraries and bookshops. There are many who share this experience with me. Yet I must be fair to all those good pieces of documentation that have been of great value to me as an artist. It took a lot of sifting to find them, indicating that there is room for improvement.

A book I have yet to find on the bookshelves of this multi-cultured society is one which documents the contribution by Black artists to the cultural life of Britain. It is a document long overdue. Black artists have, particularly over the last twenty years, multiplied and diversified their national cultural expression; progressing from traditional art forms to forms more suited to this day and age. They have not lost sight of the essential social role of their traditional art and mirror this role in their art. How frustrating that the words about us have failed to grasp this reflection; failed to put into perspective the crumbling social fabric in which this art was made; failed to recognise the lack of opportunity; failed to perceive the humanity and the human beings; and finally, how upsetting that we have allowed this to happen.

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[1] Beier, Ulli. Contemporary Art in Africa. London: Pall Mall Press, 1968.
[2] Leuzinger, Elsy. The Art of Black Africa. London: Studio Vista, 1972.