

SUB SAHARAN AFRICAN CULTURE – 20th Century

Frederic Will, PhD

Overview By the 20th century Colonialism is in force throughout Africa, and the real struggle is on, to achieve harmony among races and economies which have little in common, and on the whole little understanding of one another. While the western powers exploit, and missionize, Sub Saharan Africans profit, when they can, from the contact with more proficient technical and administrative practices. Though to our day Africa still lags in many society making skills, the benign influence of the intrusive other can be found all over the arts and cultures of 20th century Africa: in architecture, painting and sculpture; in writing and theater; in music and philosophy. We can sample the Sub Saharan versions of those achievements in the following.

Visual Arts

Architecture A Nigerian friend (in Iowa) fastens to his fridge door a poster with urban profiles of all the major African capitals: skylines, we might say, that might as well be Chicago, London, Buenos Aires or Nanjing: brilliantly lit, topped with fearless towers, all that is glitzy in capital's richest hangouts; yes Africa is an architecturally modern continent and has been scoped out as such for some time. By mid twentieth, the colonial power was on many fronts busy building or remodeling University buildings for the major cities of the African continent; urban-conscious architects like Le Corbusier had been busy, in the twenties and thirties, with sketches for new living complexes in North Africa; cities like Abidjan, in Cote d'Ivoire, were plugged directly into French capital investment; and generated fresh and well planned urban lifescapes; the Italian Futurist movement had laid plans for the remaking of the Libyan city of Tripoli. And so on. And so on, of course, into the question whether these innovations link to African tradition, and into the answer that *yes*, the African is always the dominant flavor because it is strong, but that the portals are open for Africa's own architectural visions which will match the sculptural brilliance Ben Enwonwu devoted to the doors of the Chapels of the Apostolic Legation in Lagos, in 1965.

Painting Sub Saharan African painting flourishes today, as the work of sophisticated mainstream Africans who have been trained in the west, or in non-African traditions, but who have continued to work along African thematic lines. One of the outstanding examples of this contribution is Bruce Onobrakbeya, an Urhobo painter who has slashed daring colors and strict designs across canvas and silk screen prints, and has proven himself a leader of the new African sense of color and design. Concurrently there is a vigorous African movement to promote the work of young African visual artists, including painters. In the 1970's Frank McEwen, Director of the National Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe, initiated this kind of movement 'by supplying painting materials to the art gallery attendants.' From this seat of the pants populist offering grew an upswell of young artists' work throughout Zimbabwe. Painting, among the other arts, has similarly prospered elsewhere in contemporary Africa, in the arts communities around Suzanne Wenger, in Ife and Ibadan, as well as around the National Art Gallery in Lagos, Nigeria, where young painters from regional polytechnics work through their own home grown powers of 'being African with your eyes.'

Sculpture So far from it being true, that Sub Saharan African sculpture at its strongest belongs to an earlier period, pre colonial and subsistence based, there are reasons to question this easy perspective. Within the sculpture of the past century one sees evidence of new sculptural powers. The present surfing entry-maker reflects on a few examples: a mask carved in the early years of the 20th century, depicting a three toothed shamaness, medicine and sacrifices in her 'dishevelled' headdress, ancient power storming in her; the head of a wooden spoon, carved by the great Yoruba sculptor, Tompieme, and replicating his daughter to a tee; powerful carved wooden doors for the chapel of the Apostolic Delegation in Lagos, installed in 1965 as the work of Ben Enwonwu, the first western trained African artist to achieve international fame. All of this work is from the unslaked energies of the African haptic, deep in the blood, and flowing.

Performing Arts

Theater **The transitions to high drama (1950--)** It seems a jump from the still 'popular' character, of the West African traveling theater, to the emergence of international level art-theater in many parts of Africa. When we come to the mid-twentieth century, an explosion of distinguished drama comes to mind: in Ghana, Eflia Sutherland's

Edufa (1962), and Anna Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965); in Kenya, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Trial of Dedon Kimathi* (1976); in Nigeria, J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1964), and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963); in Cameroon, Bole Butake's *Lake God* (1986). This random mention, of a few of the territory-opening works of newly independent Africa, will excite the obvious question: where did this breakthrough come from? Independence? Internationalism? (Many of the writers involved had had significant exposure to western writers, and University learning environments in the United States and Britain.) Simple cultural maturing, as African cities grew and elites formed?

A thread of continuity? When one puts together some of the fragmentary evidence for continuity in African theater, threads of continuity emerge. The Bantu migrations helped to consolidate a Sub Saharan African family-tribe-clan structure which translates into the 'family drama' later portrayed in theater. The masquerade and dance-theater elements, noted from the 15th to 18th centuries, promoted multi-media cultural blends--dance, music, theatrical narrative--which built onto the earlier acquired sense of performance as total social engagement, audience as part of the creation. The popular theater of the Colonial era not only melded dance, music, and narrative performance, with frequent applications of vaudeville and slapstick, but sharpened the socially critical edge of the resultant drama, which bit the 'colonial masters.' The sophisticated dramatic upgrade, of work created in Sub-Saharan Africa since the sixties, has moved its cutting critical edge to regions of more nearly universal meaning, than it had reamed in its developmental stages.

Cinema In the early 20th century African film was in its infancy, sketches of documentaries and even an early Lumière brothers film played off film reels. As it was, one of the world's earliest cinema centers was in Egypt. The portrayal of Africa itself, in film, was left to western film makers, for whom Africa was a land without history or culture, where pure adventure could play out. Jungle epics abounded, like Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*,; *The African Queen* (1961); or *King Solomon's Mines* based on the much read novel of the name, published in 1885 by H. Rider Haggard. In the French colonies of West Africa, prior to independence, the indigenes were prohibited from making films altogether, although special grit plus luck enabled one good African-made film to hit the market in France at the time: *Afrique sur Seine* (1995), directed by Paulin Vieyra- -a genre film about the difficulties of being a black man in France. Anti-colonial films were essentially not permitted in the colonies, although a great French film maker, Alain Resnais, got away with an outstanding pro-African film, *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*The statues die too*), 1953, about anti- French riots in the streets of Abidjan.

The father of African film No single individual deserves so much fatherhood, and yet, for true artistic drive and independence Osmane Sembene (1923-2007), born in Senegal, did more than any colonial to shape and enspirit African film. He began his own film journey in 1963, using a 16 mm. camera and old film reels left over from stock given him by European friends. In that year he made *The Wagon Driver*, the first African movie produced by a black man in Africa. (Friends and family formed the acting crew.) Until his death he went forward with his novels--*God's Bits of Wood* (1960) is an African classic--and with a series of increasingly bold films, including *Ceddo* (1977) which depicts violence of hatred between Muslim and Christian communities, and *Moodale* (2004), which deals with female genital mutilation. After a committed fifty year creative career, Sembene left behind him a fiery indigenous film legacy, for an Africa which had been little more than a European backdrop a half century earlier.

New Dimensions in African Film If Sembene was the father of African film, a chief intellectual driver of that film was a Frenchman, Jean Rouch (1917-2004) who opened the deep inner interest of Africa as material for film. Rouch was an hydrologist who was sent on mission to Niger, where he became deeply involved in the sociology and mysterious transcendent rites of Niger's backcountry. In a series of 120 films, which we might call 'cinéma vérité,' and which skated along the borders between the micro-real and the surreal, he penetrated into the totally fresh of the African world, and opened it to filmmakers everywhere. In such work as *La Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1950-52), or *Jaguar* (1954), he gave to African cinema a heady sense of the uniquely powerful material it was for film.

The publicitarian dimensions of African film While each country in Africa--Nigeria, for instance, with many separate tribes within a country, each filming in its own language--has its own film industry, and the hand held camera has become the play ground of everyone from kids to clever intellectuals, the film industry has exploded in certain countries. Egypt has been prolific in film, since the inception of the African industry, while Tunisia, for example, has and remains noteworthy for the high level of creativity among women film makers--Safi Faye was the first African female director to gain international acclaim. Nigeria, whose film industry has won the name Nollywood--a sobriquet applied to it by a *New York Times* report in the 70's--now boasts the second largest film

industry in number of films, third largest in revenue, and, often in collaboration with black actors from the Diaspora, has set entertainment (if not always art) standards which have generated a huge native film industry. Fame, fortune, and the cult of celebrity have travelled with Nollywood to the center of Nigerian (and by extension African) self-awareness. A film like *The Wedding Party* (2016) directed by Kemi Adetiba, has proved to be an all time box office success for the Nigerian film industry.

Literature Colonial With the scrambling intervention of European cultures into Africa, a movement taking speed in the eighties of the 19th century C.E., the dominance of oral culture diminishes on the continent of Africa. (The world of bureaucracy, public notices, and organized writing-based education asserts itself where orality had formerly ruled, with its older versions of the place of memory and social clock time.) At this point we note what is called the first African novel in English, Joseph Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911). In 1935 we meet what is called the first African play in English, by the South African Ernest Dhlomo, and already by 1958 we are able to watch major theater, still under Colonialism--Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit* (1958). If we nod even briefly to the French Colonial world we come on the manifestos and poetry exploding from the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre de langue française*, edited by Leopold Senghor in 1977, post independence but chock full of the powerful poetry of Black African (and pan African) fury which had been building throughout Africa during the fretful colonial years of French occupation.

Post Colonial With the withdrawal of the major European administrative structures from Africa--first from Ghana (1957) and then country by country in short order--African writers see themselves faced with the challenges fiction batters on: how to map the way ahead, in societies still largely traditional; how to deal with the competing claims of English (or other European languages) with native languages; or how to convert tribal into even the semblance of democratic institutions. Meeting such challenges inspired in the Black African novelist, often while using 'techniques' reminiscent from traditional oral literature, a flood of new and fresh fictions, and anthologies--worth of poetry which was new because it was traditional.

The modern African novel The African novel, like the African cinema, has made the twentieth-century its own, with inventive forward moves on all parts of the continent. One need only reflect on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to see how ready the African creator was to step into a new role, in which Colonialism was a condition to reflect on, instead of simply to put up with. Okonkwo, the main character in Achebe's novel, is a sensitive but vain man, who is driven into exile, from which he returns to find a topsy turvy world in which the Europeans have established 'colonial practices' in his Igbo hometown. Okonkwo is aghast at this change, and particularly at the compliance with which his former fellow citizens accept this change. Suicide is his astonished response. At such depth does the new African novel make space in itself for fresh visions: already in 1952 Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* had explored the hallucinatory dimensions of myth and oral awareness in the 'modern African'; Florence Nwapa, in *Efuru* (1966), had explored the deeply African issues around barrenness, which leaves a woman outside the entire continental value system, for which reproduction is the key sign of harmony with the world; in *Fragments* (1970), Ayi Kwei Amah writes the story of a privileged Ghanaian named Baako, who returns home a been-to, caught between two worlds, and is finally exposed to the deepest levels of his broken self, under the interrogations of his blind grandmother, who is directly in touch with the ancestors; while the young Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in *Americanah* (2013) knocked our socks off verbally, with an inwardly sassy tale that goes in pure language to the whole issue of being Nigerian, or, let's say, of not being American.

Music As in the other arts, Africans excelled in music, and by the present time have left their mark not only on their own continent, which (a visitor is likely to assent vigorously) is permeated by the noise, charm, vigor--you name it--which emerges pretty much night and day from bar, church, 'occasion'--the wedding or funeral or praise gathering at which the musical accompaniment is central--or for that matter from the fast foods restaurant down the road from me, which all day resonates loudly with piped in Gospel music. Music, more portable and invasive than the other arts--painting, sculpture, and architecture don't quite float on the air--comes out of the woodwork in an Africa which digital technology now enables to hear itself with a ferocious clarity. Perhaps the most provocative instance of this state of affairs *within* Africa can be illustrated by the musical power of Fela Kuti (1938-1997). Son of a prosperous Lagos family, Fela was sent in his twenties first to London then to Los Angeles, where a double contact, with the Black Panthers and with American black music, ricocheted him back to Nigeria, and a life of huge musical production--with his Afrobeat band--and political activism of a scathingly anti-leaders drive, which impacted profoundly on the social consciousness of newly independent black activists. Still today the Shrine, in

downtown Lagos, serves as a reminder of Fela's fiery performances, where he used to emit two hour long song-torrents directed at the corruption of his government.

Philosophy The Scramble for Africa (1881-1914) provoked in many thoughtful Africans the need to define and defend their own world-views. One influential expression, of this position, emerged from the collaboration of a number of francophone African and Caribbean writers, statesmen and intellectuals, the axis of whose thinking was African culture. (Aimé Césaire, 1913-2008, poet and politician, from Martinique; Léopold Senghor, 1906-2001, poet, philosopher, president of Senegal; Léon Damas, 1912-1978, French-African poet). These men, and a wide cultural support group of francophone intellectuals, gave 'philosophic/poetic/visionary' expression to the Black race's senses of identity, pride, and dignity. The dignity of Africanness became, in these people's work, their way of formulating those maxims of the ancient Egyptian Ptah-hotep--about duty, honor, self-control-- which are the hallmarks, for Negritude, of the socially complete African.

What can we know about 20th century Sub Saharan African culture? We can know that we are close to the pluralistic, communication-rich, open-horizoned social setting, which resembled a stage of our own western culture, yet in which themes and styles of the older world still persist. Huge architectural achievements--largely western inspired, musical performances with a multi-national purview, forerunning fiction that embraces the latest European style trends: such movements quickly made their way to the normal of alert sub Saharan connoisseurs of art and culture.

Reading

Gugler, Josef, *African Film: Reimagining a Continent*, Bloomington, 2003

Henley, Paul, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*, Chicago, 2016.

Irele, Abiola, and Simon Gikandi (eds), *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 2004.

Paulme, Denise, *African Sculpture*, London, 1962.

Rachewiltz, Boris de, *Introduction to African Art*, trans. Whigham, New York, 1966.

Shamim, Amna. *Gynocentric Contours of the Male Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, New Delhi, 2017

Discussion questions

What remains of oral literature in Sub Saharan Africa? Are there still practicing griots? Is it relevant, to answering this question, to note that there is over fifty percent illiteracy in Sub Saharan Africa?

Does the tradition of polemical critique in music, after the fashion of Fela Kuti, persist in Nigeria? Is there a political voice in contemporary African music?

We have noted the explosion of the African novel in the 20th and into our century. What kind of development has occurred, simultaneously, in 20th century African poetry? Whose work do you like?

Is the philosophy of *négritude* of lasting power in Africa, or was it the expression of much needed pan-African sentiments which now seem out dated?

How do you explain the extremely rapid and widespread development of the African cinema? Is it as though the African discovered a new organ with which to express himself, and is still thrilled with it?

How important are populist painting movements in the formation of new generations of artists in sub-Saharan Africa?

