

Introduction

The *Art, Culture and Society* series brings together important reflections on the arts in Kenya. It is a major step in encouraging dialogue on the relationship between creativity and the human condition. Volume I is a consideration of cultural productions and social change in Kenya. Creativity in this Volume is seen as an attempt to build bridges between individuals, communities and disciplines. Coming as it does after the launch of *Jahazi*: a culture arts, and performance journal edited by Bantu Mwaura and published by Twaweza Communications, the book is an additional effort to engage knowledge as it is generated from the ‘periphery’. In *Jahazi*, we seek to open discussion between art practitioners and academicians through a sharing of experiences. In the book, we take the discussion further and attempt to theorize the artistic creativity coming from Kenya. In a sense, there is a dialogic relationship of mutual reinforcement between the Journal and the book.

The publications are propelled by the premise that art has a critical role to play in society, because it is, itself, a social phenomenon. The artist, as a social being, and the product of his/her creation function as bridges between the artist and the larger society. Additionally, art affects those who bring it forth as well as those who consume it. It can contribute in the affirmation or negation of beliefs, attitudes and values. This essential human experience gives us the window through which we can see ourselves and the world around us. In the era of globalization, the artist sees more than his/her immediate environment. Equally, the consumption of the artist’s creative product transcends the immediate context and may consequently affect others based elsewhere.

Art is affected by social influences and it equally influences society; sometimes in fundamental ways. Although art tends and approximates a universal world, it is based on particularities. It must have a ground on which to stand. The artist’s interpretation of their world is determined by such factors as the artist’s philosophical orientation, history, and the context of production. As a creative person, the artist is able to inject their own innovativeness in the process of assembling the product. As critics of cultural

and artistic productions we are also driven by the social and historical ground on which we stand. This is not to say that art is reducible to its ideological components. Neither do we seek to imply that the value of art is equivalent to the value of its ideas. Beyond the ground on which the work of art stands, it lives on because of its essence as art. It transcends time and space and, in a sense, prefigures human destiny.

In the recent years, the world has witnessed political, economic, social realignments; migrations and displacements; and the amazing development of an across- borders communications network made possible through advances in technology. There have also been reassertions of particularities, especially through cultures, languages and the arts. We have for instance seen the emergence of global art produced by travelling artists who create and exhibit their works as they move along. These travelling artists bring with them new experiences and new interpretations of the world.

The present global situation demands a way to conceptualize and theorize an ever growing cultural interconnectedness, sometimes manifested in art; an interconnection that draws from a myriad of cultures and experiences. The art that is coming out of the interlinking of cultures and worldviews has traces of “Otherness” represented at different points. Kenyan art, for instance, shows traces of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

The interconnectedness that results from the process of globalization is not smooth and uncontested. It is celebrated as a site of resistance, protest and negotiation which attempts to valorize polysemic voices from the margins. Contemporary artistic productions from Africa are manifesting this hybridity of experience in form and content. The tourist industry informs in no small measure the type of music, crafts, and clothing that will come out of the Maasai community, for instance. Equally, the exposure of Africa to Asia and America will be of interest, no matter how minimally, to the artists located in Los Angeles and New York. This creolization of artistic productions resulting from contact and negotiation suggests that when a cultural expression, or commodity is recontextualized or localized new hybrid meanings and values are assigned to it. We are made to witness the refashioning of cultural productions and expressions from different countries, cultures and ethnicities. Through the bridges of contact and cultural exchange distant images are mediated and brought closer to us, not necessarily in their original form. The separateness and boundedness of culture is contested and dialogized.

In the contemporary world, it is difficult to talk about an autonomous and internally coherent authentic culture.

Boundaries between local and global have been immensely porous especially due to recent advances in information technology. Flows of meanings and cultural objects are exported and imported; imported culture is adapted, translated, negotiated and integrated into local meaning. New ways of communicating are emerging through the mobile phone and artists are composing music and poetry and saving it on their outboxes as they walk along. The culture of sending text messages has found its way into the poetic genres. In the *Kwani?* Literary Journal edited by Binyavanga Wainaina, a new generation of writers is composing narrative and poetic pieces in a form informed by information technology. Indeed *Kwani?* captures new and emergent forms of speech among the youth and a greater appreciation of style, that is almost globally generational. Hitherto unpublished short story writers are discovering their talent and winning international awards such as the Caine Prize.

It is also important to recognize that the process that leads to cultural interconnectedness is simultaneously a process of integration and disintegration; it is an agent of homogeneity and diversity. The localization of global themes (democracy, good governance, disease, oppression) through specific cultures and languages has the effect of highlighting the beauty of diversity. And this is manifested in art. These events are of academic interest.

In the last decade or so the East African region has seen an upsurge of creative, artistic and cultural works, a kind of reawakening arguably brought about by a more democratic atmosphere. East Africa is home to a range of film festivals such as the annual Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF), Amakula in Kampala and Cineweek in Nairobi. The performing artists and critics celebrate creativity during the Lamu and Bagamoyo festivals, and at the GoDown Arts Centre and the dancing fraternity, including Gaara Dance company, Jok a Jok, Dance into Space and so on are redefining movement, time and space. Additionally, the galleries and visual arts are vibrant. Kuona Trust, the Godown Arts Centre, Ramoma, Medeva and others are creating spaces for young artists to emerge through mentoring. Music, especially hip-hop, rappa, reggae and *mugithi* (the one man guitar) has brought new energies to urban centres. A connection with creativity in the African diaspora is wonderfully manifest. The articles in this book capture some of that consciousness in the diaspora.

In spite of these advances, it seems to me that there is a disconnect between academicians and practitioners in the arts made worse by the crackdown on Departments of literature in the late 1970s and mid 1980s and the trauma and self censorship brought about by the KANU dictatorship. On the one hand, popular modes of creativity, such as that found in *Kwani?* are looked down upon in some universities and on the other, many arts practitioners do not want to be 'guided' by the intellectuals. Binyavanga Wainaina of *Kwani?*, tells Egara Kabaji, a literary critic and lecturer—

“The self appointed gatekeepers (and there are more gatekeepers than producers in Kenya’s literary spaces) are generally useful when it comes to protecting their own intellectual production – which usually focuses on the negation of others to promote themselves. They are usually full of ‘should not’s’ and ‘don’t’s’ and pronouncements of ‘purities’ and ‘authenticities’ – they of course are always perfectly ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ – they have no place in the hurly burly world of creative production.” Sunday Standard Nov. 27, 2005).

It would seem that Binyavanga Wainaina is seeking for a place in which multiple voices can flourish. It is notable that the acrimonious distance between emerging art practitioners (writers) and scholars as is evident between *Kwani?* and academicians at the Literature Departments in Kenya, especially evident in newspaper columns in the recent past, is as a result of the fact that there has been little dialogue between the practitioners and academicians. The limited scope of newspaper reporting has by and large heightened the acrimony, as has the lack of provision for the academicians to engage new artists and artistic trends in their classrooms and research work. This has further alienated the academicians from the very source of their scholarship. One hopes that the forum being created by Twaweza Communications in *Jahazi* and the *Art, Culture & Society Series* will contribute in enhancing creativity and critical reflection in Africa.

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