

THE ARTS IN AFRICAN SOCIETY AND THEIR PARALLEL IN THE ARTS OF THE BLACK
COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN

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Mr Chairman, when I was asked to make a contribution to your conference proceedings, it was primarily because it was hoped that I would offer some insight into the nature of the arts in African society. A prospect which certainly found feasible because I have recently undertaken similar exercise for an Arts Council project. Quite naturally, an opportunity to propagate one's views is always welcome.

Mr Chairman, I shall however, beg your indulgence if I do not limit myself to doing just that. For when I received the invitation, what struck me most of all was the opportunity to meet you all and to explore with you through dialogue, the problems which face the ethnic minority arts in Britain. I therefore took the liberty to draw some close parallels between the place of the arts in African society and their place in the Black Community in Britain. By so doing I hope that rather than leave us all more knowledgeable about African society we can better understand the fundamental nature of the arts in the Black Community and specifically the problems which urgently need to be addressed by us all collectively.

I must therefore at the outset thank you Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen members of C.O.R.A.A. for having decided at your last conference to offer us this rare opportunity for an exchange of views and a sharing of experiences with you. I shall do my best to rapidly whisk you through the plateaux and jungles of Africa which are now familiarly both concrete and forest and briefly stopover in the Caribbean back to Liverpool via Nottingham Gate. No doubt my brothers and sisters from the Ethnic Minority groups will be on hand should it be necessary to make a crash landing.

As I examine the place of the arts in African society, my fascination is with the way in which the arts evolve as a totally integral part of social life. This enables me to answer such mundane questions such as what is the role of the artist? who is art produced for? how are the arts supported? one might prefer to ask who funds the arts in African society? These as you can tell are everyday troublesome questions and they have certainly troubled western society for over a thousand years.

Being an African myself, I cannot help thinking that in a world of ever narrowing options no harm would be done if I attempted to offer our way of treating the arts as a viable alternative to the western way. I shall seek to propose that the arts of the Black community represent that alternative and need your support if they are to successfully offer this alternative. In other words we have a really exciting prospect before us for changes that will bring greater meaning to the arts for the majority of the people in this our plural society.

The arts in African society are a direct product of the collective experience of the community, which is a kinship group. The group shares common values and combines its labour force to produce for its material and spiritual needs. The material and supiritual needs are indivisible. For it is fundamental to African belief that the former cannot be availed without the latter. The community, therefore, will farm together, defend its territory, but to ensure that the rains will come in time for the crops and in order to keep the enemies, natural and supernatural away, the community prays and propriates the gods together. Some interpreters have tended to present such societies as momolithic and highly deterministic. But in fact there is great diversity which brings out the significance of the individual contribution. The skilled warrior will defend the community while the farmer produces the food, the medicine man heals the infirm and the artist, alongside everyone else, creates the song, dance, poetry, folklore and plastic art objects. None is considered more important than the others for finally their individual contributions are only a segment of the totality of the life of the community. Art is therefore not a marginal activity which the individual pursues for self-gratification or one which the society can afford to neglect. It is as important a productive activity as farming and hunting in the fulfillment of the material needs of the community.

It will be understandable if we hasten to conclude that this is only possible in pre-industrial societies.

Anthropologists have succeeded in creating the myth that certain ways of caring for each other are only possible before the machine takes over and has not started to control man. That view is rejected in Africa. It is now challenged in industrial societies. To prove my point, Mr Chairman, I want us to look at contemporary African society which in the case of the arts is deliberately resisting the slippery slope towards the detached socially alienated art of art's sake. For African society today as ever before, cherishes the view that art is a vital part of the survival of the community.

In African society today the kinship group which collectively seeks a sense of unity, identity, material and spiritual well-being varies from the traditional village structure, the urban ethnic group, to wider national dimensions. The web which brings order in the relationships of individuals is the kinship system African sociologists are now agreed that as a social ideology, kinship has remained the main pillar of society through numerous historical changes which have distorted and fractured many aspects of the economic life of the people. I have found it most rewarding to seek the origins of art in the kinship ideology of the community rather than in the metaphysics of the individual artist.

Kinsip can both refer to a system or to an ideology. As a system it describes a genealogical family tree. As ideology both in traditional society as in modern society, it can be transposed to new contents to describe emergent patterns of inter-group relations. What is significant is not a distinction between, 'fictive' and 'real' kinship - categories which are by no means always clearly distinguishable, but rather the idiom of consanguineal kinship as it applies within the ethnic community to express solidarity and brotherhood and to justify the assumption of certain kinds of obligations that are associated with kinship. The general notion of common orogin is vital to the maintenance of the kinship group. With time this notion becomes so mythical to the extent that few kingroup members can give the real name of their common ancestor. But the most important factor is the label of

identity which kinship offers. For it provides the link for a man with his near kinsmen, his fellow citizens and with his newly emergent society of the nation state. Wherever he travels he finds someone with whom he shared the same sense of kinship identity.

Although in a modern skyscraper jungle of the urban conurbations this all appears tenuous, the needs of the society or the community and of individuals for a sense of belonging, identity, material and spiritual support remains as pressing as ever. If anything, I have just come back from Africa and I observed how the precarious balance which the industrial African is forced to maintain between the uncertainties of material life and mental sanity, is forcing people to seek support from their kinship community. For this is the only structure which is dependable, it has the image of continuity and permanence, and most importantly it caters for all. It offers the precondition for the continued existence of the individual. It is within this framework that the artist of yesterday, today and tomorrow continues to exist.

For the artist, his life inextricably ties him to that community within which he fulfills his obligations to the rest and equally realises his expectations of the society. It is a relationship which remains conterminous with evolutionary changes as they take place. His art represents the labour which he contributes as a member of the community. In other words he fulfills a need for which society in return supports him. This is not by any means to suggest rigid social determinism, rather, the artist exercises his choice by evaluating his own continually changing priorities. These range from those things which he must do to satisfy his personal needs and others which enhance his membership in the society. The latter has a wide gradation of accomplishment and perfection. In this respect certain standards are deemed to be minimum or sufficient to meet the basic expectations of the society, while at the same time a genius is free to go on pushing the limits of achievement through extraordinary effort. In this respect the artist as innovator emerges to embellish his creation far beyond the minimum requirement of the mere object of worship, the dance routine, the praise song or the costume, or body adornment - the aesthetic quality. For the artist it is not the mere act of producing the work which is important. His moment of triumph comes with the acceptance by his community - his audience, of that work as vital and potent instruments or symbols with which members can affirm their belongingness to the group; their collective unity against both internal and external threats, and most of all their life line for the spiritual protection of the supernatural, the ancestral spirit, God and translated in simpler language - the protection rendered by the common values of the community.

The artist has the duty to create new symbols with the power to meet the challenges of complex changes; he must create new rituals, new dances, new songs, new drama and new statuary. But as in the past when the new rituals failed to please the Gods they were discarded (not too dissimilar from the wrath of critics today). Museums in Europe are full of discarded symbols which in some cases were virtually given to anyone who could take them to far away lands where their bad influence would be confined. The work of the artist today can be rejected if it does not fully transmit the potency and vitality of the Gods, to bring about the communal ecstasy of the trance. The inspiration which we all look for in the work of art.

In African society, the artist is not a passive self-distancing craftsman who creates objects whose acceptability he does not care about. He is an active participant in the entire process which is part religious, part enjoyment and part political. The community as a whole is also involved in the creative process, for members must be concerned that the artist does not create profane or weak symbols. Acceptance is sometimes political if the artist is to convince his community of the efficacy of his "way out" creation.

Art like an Egungun dancer is therefore constantly in motion with such vigour that no-one can ignore it, the equilibrium which it strikes is never static but constantly re-achieved, transforming the lessons of tradition into a dynamic and immensely exhilarating experience for the present. To succeed in making this offering for the unity, material and spiritual protection of the community, the artist must constantly exceed himself.

In contemporary society, the artist whose kinship community now includes 50 million as opposed to his previous village's one hundred and fifty, adopts new media, he uses the popular arts, film, the literary word, the gramophone plate etc. in seeking to make his dutiful contribution to the unity, material and spiritual well-being of his kinsmen, his society, his nation, and that of humanity.

You will forgive me, Mr Chairman, for this rather functionalist analysis. There is of course a great deal of conflict arising out of the competition for dominance among sub-cultural groups. But that same conflict propels the search for symbols that enhance greater acceptability you might say greater dominance. Here the issues of integration vs. separation, are incidental, what is important is acceptance of the group for what it can offer. The art which arises from this complexification of society reveals foremost the ideology of kinship at work, for in order not to be crushed by the anonymity of the "no mans land", the kinship group must vigorously project itself but in the process it makes an even greater contribution to the larger whole.

There is also a great deal of conflict which manifests itself in the form of the "tourist art". This is the art which is created basically outside the kinship group, for the overseas market. Its origin is alien and confusion is created when, because of its self-conscious naivety, it is thought of as the 'authentic', unadulterated - and that other famous adjective - 'primitive' African art, which if read backwards suggests that African art is primitive and statically unadulterated. An obvious misrepresentation Mr Chairman, you will kindly allow me to fulfil my earlier promise to bring you back to Liverpool.

In looking at the nature of the arts of the Black community in Britain, which no doubt shares several characteristics in common with other ethnic minority groups. I cannot help drawing very close parallels with the arts in African society.

I cannot resist the temptation to repeat the words of Franz Fanon, when he prophesied that "From America, Black voices will take up the hymn of African culture with fuller unison, the 'black people' will see the light and Busia from Ghana, Birago Diop from Senegal, Hampté Ba from the Sudan and Saint-Clair Drake from Chicago will not hesitate to assert the existence of common ties and a motive power that is identical'.

The phenomenon of African culture outside Africa has often been widely misunderstood, when it is not completely rejected. This has largely been because African culture has been used as the mantle of the black power movement. If the contribution of African culture and the concomitant nature of the arts in the black communities in the Caribbean, the Americas and Britain today is to be understood for the enrichment of all, this position must be corrected.

Our brief stop-over in the Caribbean helps us to take cognisance of the fact that the specific nature of plantation slavery preserved and promoted the need for a sense of kinship identity. The role of art in such a society we have seen is central in reinforcing the essential sense of community. The Carnival as communal ritual, the Rastafarian body adornment as kinship identity are vivid parallels of the African kinship community. As we saw in African society, the primary need to belong pulls the individual towards integration within the kinship community. He needs symbols with which to affirm the unity of the group, be it music, dance, drama or literature, he must affirm the material and spiritual protection of the community through these art forms, but he must create them and constantly transform them. Art is therefore not divisible from the total way of life just as different art forms are more often than not integrated.

Readers of the St James Evening Post of the 19th March, 1726 could not help noticing an article which described the nature of the new Black community in the making. The article reported that they created a social world for themselves from the residue of African culture and the institutions which they found in England. Observers at the time had found that Blacks met, lived and entertained themselves in little Black enclaves within the city. That London abounded with an incredible number of Black men who had clubs to support those out of place. That that bond of social sympathy cut across the primary divisions of the tribalism and African or Creole lines. The houses of well-placed Blacks often became a focal point where others met and sheltered or passed their spare time. On the occasion which has promoted the article, 57 Black men and women were reported to have supped, drunk and entertained themselves with dancing and music at a public house in Fleet Street until 4 in the morning. Here was the first point in British history when an attempt at creating a cohesive self-sustaining community was clearly made in England. At that time, the need was for self-protection. Hostility to the Black population was crystallizing in a spate of publications aimed at stopping a further influx of Blacks. It was the cultural link manifesting itself as art in song and dance which then, as now, provided the basis for sharing in a sense of community.

The Black community, as much as other immigrant groups, since those early days, has been subjected to a crises of identity. For attempts to adopt new mannerisms, life styles, language, and materialism soon become feasible substitutes of their genuine culture. The second generation, contrary to the predictions of total assimilation made when their parents first arrived, are now actively rediscovering an ethnic tradition, they invariably find this constantly dislocated in the flux of a society that seems to be unsympathetic to their special needs. The uncertainties of their position of necessity leads them to seek comfort in ethnic identity. The so called mainstream culture is for the Black community a 'spiritual nowhere'.

This presents a different way of treating the arts when they are viewed as being a product of collective experience - a total experience through which the community expresses its internal essence.

Here at Liverpool we are concerned about how the ethnic minorities could enjoy an equitable share of the arts funding cake. To my mind the question more urgent is whether their particular nature, can be understood. In many respects the nature of arts funding in Britain today directly threatens the future of the arts of the Black community as a viable alternative way of treating the arts. This is possibly the greatest loss which this society stands to experience if many of the attitudes of the funding bodies do not change to take account of these fundamentally different characteristics.

There is evident distortion and fracturing arising out of the enticement of the artist to detach himself from the larger whole within which he functions by the insistence of funding bodies to favour what they consider to be the superiority of professional work as opposed to the so called amateur activity. If our friends in Fleet Street had lived today that important activity which they pursued would have been first broken up into elements of music, dance and drumming before it could be funded and might not even have taken place for several months - if at all - which is the situation facing most groups today.

In conclusion, Mr Chairman, as I said earlier, I came as a man seeking to commence dialogue with you and your colleagues. I have tried through a cursory description of the arts in African society, to show the nature of the arts on the Black Community in Britain. It represents an innovation within our society, one which might point to a viable alternative for the arts in general. I and my friends from the other ethnic minority groups wish to see our alternative ways of treating the arts given a chance to flourish alongside the more established western cultural approaches. As you may know, we at Drum and the Commonwealth Institute, are looking to the RAA for co-operation in organising a national multi-media youth arts festival in March 1980 - 'Celebrate'.

I make this request in the belief that your body is still young and therefore less resistant to change. In fact that indeed you represent - through your devolution programme - vitally needed institutional and structural changes in the funding of the arts by central and local government the country over.

I thank you Mr Chairman, for bearing with me. Most of all I wish to thank you all for listening so patiently.

Thank you.