

## DAK'ART 2012: A CRITIQUE OF ARTISTIC TRAJECTORIES AND POLITICS OF POWER

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper I undertake a review of Dak'Art 2012. An engagement of this kind is considered pertinent when we realize that the Dak'Art Biennale has come to be a globally rated event. It is proper to articulate how Dak'Art has fared in its objective.*

### **Introduction**

Biennales are avenues to showcase the 'novel' in art practice. It is also a space used to evaluate the progress of art in various continents. The Dak'Art biennale has two separate platforms being the *Main International Exhibition* and the *Off* platform comprising of numerous individual exhibitions organized by artists and curator. I have witnessed the Biennale of African Contemporary Art popularly referred to as DAK'ART for three consecutive times since 2008 when I participated as an artist under the aegis of the Nigerian National Gallery of Art's *off* platform. In 2010 I made the list for the main international platform and only recently participated in an adventurous outing by the Pan African Circle of Artists in the 'off platform' of the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the biennale. Considering the above, I am equipped simultaneously both as an artist and an observer of the Dak'Art Biennale.

Dakar as a city in Senegal has a unique historical significance of being a nexus between Arab, European merchants and local Wolof traders. The city has, through the colonial and post colonial period, been a centre for intellectual activities in the former French colonies. It maintains this position of a rendezvous of cultural and intellectual activities, despite hosting one of the most horrendous sites of the infamous slave trade in Goree Island, off the coastal city. Dakar "stands out as a shaper of history, it shapes not just the history of capitalist and late capitalist networks in the sub-region, it also represents a collective voice struggling to emerge as a veritable alternative to the imperial centers of power." (Nwafor 2012:5).

### **Historical Perspective**

In the 1940s, Leopold Senghor synergized with Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas to enunciate the concept of Negritude as a deserving response to the yearning and needs of Negroes within the continent and the Diaspora. The thrust of this intellectual movement among other aims was to assert and valorize what is believed to be distinctive African characteristics, values, and aesthetics. Negritude was simply reacting against a prevalent current in the West that Africans lacked rational reasoning capable of instigating its development. Negritude as an ideology, however, favours dialogue and exchanges among different cultures. The emergence of the activist –poet, Senghor, as the president helped set a solid foundation of cultural and intellectual direction for the new country in 1960. The above history foregrounds Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, the main host city of Dak'Art biennale, as a city of culture. This is the ideological

frame in which the biennale can be located. Presently it is believed to be one of the most authentic art spaces with its focus on the African Artist within Africa and its Diaspora.

Dak'Art is a project geared toward maintaining space for recognition, enhancement, sharing and dissemination of the visual art of Africa and its Diaspora. It is a platform for the verbalization of the African aspiration in a burgeoning global milieu. It has brought together the best from Africa and its Diaspora to form a passage of acceptance into other international art events elsewhere. From 1989 to the present time the biennale has served as an important platform for emerging and established voices from the African continent. It is a very vital platform for power negotiations in this contemporary time. "*Dak'Art* takes into account the Senegalese government's desire to promote culture as crucial to its national development agenda, and the importance of creating a sustainable postcolonial pan-African cultural institution with a global frame of reference in Africa" (Nzewi 2012).

### **Controversial Status**

Africa presents interesting and pitiable readings when viewed through the prism of its long suffering via centuries of slavery, colonization, neo-colonization and domestic colonization. These continue to manifest themselves through a new reconfiguration called globalization. Recent manifestations engendered by visionless and autocratic rulers who are patronized by so called advanced economies of the world have deepened the misfortune of most countries in the African continent. Whereas the intellectuals and artists in pre-Independence Africa and the Caribbean reacted against Western Narcissists and their schizophrenic arrogance, today's African artists through their work tend to point their creative arrows back at their own leaders who through greed and ineptitude have pushed the continent into more dangerous malaise of domestic colonization. The images of the Biennale point to the above direction.

The Biennale has played host to over 500 activists within the dynamic culture machine comprising of: artists, scholars, curators and other cultural actors since it was inaugurated. However, the issues of autonomy and authenticity of the African still loom around its laudable trails. Could it be said through its 10<sup>th</sup> edition that the biennale has been able to present an objective mirror to Africa and others which show the continent according to a clear interpretive ability? Concerning the Biennale's scope, Kasse notes that:

African production should open up further by asserting a certain specificity which will become its identity and move towards that dimension of art considered as universal communication medium and which is at the heart of Kantian aesthetics: the beautiful is not for all but is a beauty shared together. It is a medium and a meeting place (2008:26).

The above is not removed from the Senghorian notion of Negritude as an integrationist tool for navigating within a common global/cultural space. Maybe this accommodationist inclination of its founding father provides the ambivalences that trail Dak'Art till this day.

However, Seck in another development wonders if the mirror in which Africa is seeing itself is "shattered." He exposes the lopsidedness of globalization of economies when he asserts that:

this new configuration of the world, due to the effects of unfair trade and unequal trade and unequal power relationships, inevitably contribute to creating porous borders, jeopardizing local production, blowing up social structures, debasing local values and trivializing the specific and special assets of diverse cultures (2008;216).

The Dak'Art Biennale according to Nwafor is: "complicit with colonial indexing insofar as it uses colonial tropes, techniques and lexicon for African purposes of artistic articulation" (Nwafor 2012: 5). There is no gain saying that this art event has survived two decades of its life through sponsors from Europe and most especially France. Total autonomy, if one must be sincere, is lacking as the piper must play according to the payer's tune. To this extent the Biennale has been majorly criticized.

There have been murmurs from some African countries that are grossly under represented. They question the parameter for inviting more artists from some African countries like South Africa while some get none. The probable answer is that a country whose government participates in the league of sponsors gets more slot than one that does not contribute. Notwithstanding, whatever side one argues for, African countries should rise up to the challenge by seeing the festival as a Pan African project while adopting a stance of "*cognitive differentiation* (I know why I am not the other) and *affective opposition* (my difference allows me to project myself into the other, recognized and accepted as my other)" (Kasse 2008:26).

From the foregoing, is the Biennale truly a mirror then? Could it be said to be refracted mirror, a shattered mirror or just a plain mirror? Is Africa speaking its own voice or re-echoing a rehearsed script? And is there a need to groom our voice to sing our own song? These and many other issues come to view as we consider the western assumptions that Africans cannot sustain any program towards its development. Curators of the 2012 Dak'Art biennale might have had the above issues in mind. In most of the works presented for the exhibition, curators engaged inter-zonality and used separate dynamics to engage a visual pluralogue of the African voice irrespective of racial, religious or cultural coloration. The Dak'art Biennale has managed, albeit with challenges, to maintain a biennale that is consistent in its timing and position.

### **Trajectories**

An attempt at sorting and rearranging the artists' trajectories does not suggest sameness of experience, but it locates similarities in seemingly dissimilar social grid. To what extent has the African artist, using important platform like the Dak'Art Biennale, represented his/her culture, or declared his/her view of him/herself? Has the African artist communicated effectively without being a subaltern voice on issues concerning him/her? It is then pertinent to take a closer look at the works and the curatorial direction for proper understanding of these trajectories.

Dak'Art 2012 has shown a curatorial direction that tries to cover a wide gamut of what could be defined as contemporary art. This goes from traditional mimetic paintings to conceptual and installation art work, sculptures, performance, photography, video arts, mixed media and even light and sound installations. The lead curator Christine Eyene, opened up that they decided not to make a Western-style selection. Concluding her Curator's note, she asserts that: "if circumstances do not make it possible for me to showcase this wide range of creation at Dakar 2012, the fact remains that the Biennale is an ideal platform to welcome new African artistic practices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Eyene 2012: 15). With difficulties encountered in determining what defines a contemporary African art resolved or unresolved the consequence is that a selection of artists that represents Africa in its specificity of experiences was showcased from the Biennale's lists of 42 artists from 22 countries in Africa and the Diaspora. It appears that we can extrapolate this list of artists presented at Dak'Art Biennale as an aggregate of what the African artist is telling the world about their condition.

ROMARIC ASSIE'S '*La table a palabre*' is an oil on canvas painting. The painting has a simple design of a circular portion (a bargaining table) painted with nuances of white colours as the major source of light. On top of the table are to be seen identity tags, documents, the Ivorian flag and a vase with flower. Five men are seated around these symbolic elements, evidently politicians. Note that the content of the painting is, at first, explicit enough much as the style is pictorial and descriptive of its content. The faces of the personages in the painting are so expressive that one can imagine vividly the subject of their discussion. A reader can also feel the pervading mistrust in the atmosphere which suggests a clandestine undertone under the veneer of diplomatic hood. The painting is an extrapolation of intricacies involving conflict resolution in Africa in particular and the world in general. The genealogy of most wars in Africa can be traced to the greed or selfishness of its pseudo leaders who come to the *round table* armed with private agenda to enrich self, remain in power longer than is necessary. The antagonists to the government come also to find ways to wrest power. Eventually the peace of the place is compromised. The above situation is reflective of the multiple problems plaguing African countries. The artist notes that: "This work addresses the difficult issue of socio-political crises in the world and Africa in particular, and the manner in which to resolve them". It writes the story of war-torn Africa, impoverished Africa, stunted or underdeveloped Africa whereby sit-tight leaders see leadership as a patrimony that should never be relinquished even at the threat of death or generational annihilation. In the above concatenation of events, Assie says that "unfortunately during roundtables to negotiate peace only the partisan interest of belligerents and facilitators prevail. Agreements that are signed are primarily for the sharing of the country's wealth and ministerial posts."

This situation calls to mind a pathetic venality of the African rulers who, though are mere puppets dancing to the pulling strings from the West, has erroneous belief of ego and self will. For Chinweizu, this *lootocrats* are not "the least insulted by the fact that the world's other men amusingly see them as powerless children, dressing up in their parent's discarded clothes and comically carrying on as if they were responsible adults" (Chinweizu 2011;48). The scenario presents a situation that is simultaneously pathetic and annoying. It tends to give credit to centuries long devastation of continental and Negroid psychology by the West. (See fig.1)

YOUNES BABA-ALI'S "*Horn Orchestra*" is an interesting intervention with sound as a metaphor of both revulsion and attraction. The medium is contemporaneous to the extent that it is new and almost inconspicuous as an art piece. The work under review is part of a series he has called "sonic attack." In an earlier discussion between the artist and this writer he claimed to have explored this theme in a workshop he attended. A viewer may walk past this piece without the slightest idea of walking past an art piece. The sound installation consists of 10 car horns hanging from a ceiling. The horns remain silent until it is triggered by moving presence. Its shadow sensor activates a blaring sound which calls attention to such presence. The art addresses political issue in an uncanny and metaphoric way of involving both victim and perpetrator. It presents a post-modern discourse of paradoxes when we consider the level of interest Islam and its adherents generated immediately after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 incident in the United States. There has been a sustained debate which I believe Baba-Ali is alluding to. In a symposium, during the 2010 Dak'Art Biennale by Sallah Hassan entitled; *Contemporary Islamic Art and Global War on Terror* the erudite scholar drew attention to this prevailing stereotyping of people and an eventual objectification of same as potential harbingers of terror. He said that his "talk is to look at the contradictory way with the paradox of the way people look at Muslim people these days, especially before 9, 11. Which is labeling Muslims as terrorists or potential terrorists, they

treat them with despise, they treat them as if they exist outside the law.” There arises a multi layering of metaphors and narratives from victims of stereotypes, xenophobia, segregation based on colour, race, status and other social stigmas.

What makes Baba-Ali’s work interesting is not only its metaphor which is based on otherness but also the fact that the piece transcends known tropes of visuality, which it extends to audio thereby opening new frontiers for the expression and appreciation of art. He writes in the Dak’art catalogue that his practice is situated:

In the development of simple and basic interventions as well as in the construction of much more sophisticated systems. By diverting every object from their original function, he makes them independent and transforms our relationship to them, emphasizing a commitment made to reveal the relationship usually based on power or possession that we have with things (Dak’art 2012, 34).

The above interconnecting issue extends not only to religion. It is an open template which accommodates human quest for superiority (See fig. 2).

KATIA KAMELI’s “*Untitled*” video video installation (2011) is to be located within feminist construct and plural identity. Kameli is an Algerian by birth. She lives in Paris where she engages art as a tool for expressing conceptual issues on plurality of identity with other related issues. The video started when she crawled out from an improvised ramshackle made from disused cartons built around a street corner. She picks up remnants of some discarded cartons and fashions a placard from it with no written inscription on it. Picking up the blank placard from the surrounding floor she stands unobtrusively on the road where other widows who have done the same joined her. Their number swells in an instant as many more women join the group with blank expression on the faces but which is in tandem with the blank placards to communicate to the viewer’s conscience what written text or articulate speech could not do. This is a case of eloquent silence. In Kameli’s work this silence is shrilling, it is deafening with the coldness of razor blade piercing our innermost sub-conscious with eternal truth through a non-verbal media. Like ellipses we have the answers ready in our mind. The video seems to agree with Aniakor that the “role of the writer, and by extension the artist, is to raise a people’s consciousness of the truths and contradictions in a society through a lofty vision and ample literary techniques shown in the spell binding language” (Aniakor 2011; 80. Emphasis mine). The women in Kameli’s art live at the fringes of their society and from that point they protest such repressive condition. As observed in the Dak’Art 2012 catalogue, “Her work is inseparable from her own experience, from her plural identity. Protean, it expresses the in-between through which the sign of belonging is rejected in favor of multiplicity.” Her work negotiates issues from a third paradigm of hybridity making possible a third position as an alternative space. The “*Untitled*” video art records a feminist voice responding to the plight of widows, the eloquence of their seemingly silence in a culture that excludes them from being seen and being heard. The art packed with is shrilling non-verbal speeches and very articulate in visual metaphor as the women declares their immanence. It can also refer to events of the Arab spring in Middle East North Africa (M.E.N.A.) by seeing women as a vital group in the negotiation of secured future within their country, the muted placards seem to say millions of words louder than uttered or written words could say (See fig.3).

MAMADY SEYDY “*Celui qui ne sait plus ou il va, doit-il retourner d’ou il vient?*” (“The one that does not know where he goes must return where he comes from?”) is an installation of multiple sculpture pieces with therianthropic figures (half human, half animal). Other images in the installation are: a fuel pump that is not spurting oil, wool and rug. According to Nzewi, in an article written for *Universe In Universe* of June 2012, Mamady’s installation is “largely inspired by a fuel shortage crises in Senegal, in 2008 which resulted in endless queues at gas stations, the installation explores humanity’s animalistic when dealing with existential struggle for survival.” Beyond Nzewi’s allusion to a certain fuel shortage in Senegal in 2008, one finds it comfortable to locate Mamady Seydi’s work within an allegorical presentation of Nigeria and its recurring fuel crises. Intertextuality as a vehicle for deconstruction can be applied here. As Aniakor argues, “the novelist has no monopoly of meanings in his novel..., you may read a book to help you understand another book” (2012:12). Reinforcing this point is the fact that the organized confusion of humans losing their humanity to adopt bestial qualities have come to be a constant picture in Nigeria occasioned by regular and unprecedented fuel crises. The structural paradigm in the installation piece interconnects many African countries including Senegal though this tends to be located more in Nigeria. The choice of white wool on top of green rug thus creating a visual design of green-white-green is reflective of the Nigerian national flag. If the situation of fuel shortage should be personified and made to assume nationality of a country, I believe, it will be a Nigerian. Furthermore with the advent of internet, satellite radio and television stations and other fast communication media, world spaces are condensing to the extent that information spread moves in a breath-taking speed. That being the case, Mamady might have assessed this constant event that happens in Nigeria (See fig.4).

HERVE’ YOUMBI’s triptych conceptual photography “*Au Nom Du Pere*” is self explanatory on the condition of sit-tight African leaders who see public office as a family heritage that must run from father to son and so forth. It is a presentation of the artist himself as the president of a country seated on the presidential chair at the state house with all paraphernalia of statehood. At first, it was him alone. This condition metamorphosed to him and his infant son (apparently taking tutelage in preparation of a possible hand over of mantle). An interesting version of this second panel, apart from the son, is an introduction of his first photo at the state house. The last of the sequence is the huge presidential throne with the son alone on the right corner of the seat which leaves a space large enough to accommodate another person. In this final stage, the image of the father looms ominously at the background. The implication of the above picture in African politics and crises is obvious. The artist states in the biennale’s catalogue: “In Africa, the act of reviewing the constitution and rigging elections has become a sport for the power hungry heads of state. When they pass away, one of their sons is settled in their place. Inspired by wind of anger and freedom of the Arab Springs, ‘In the name of father, son and holy constitutional monarchy’ the above description is a vicious jinx which many African countries have been embroiled in, typical examples are: the recent Arab Spring uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, earlier events in countries like D.R. Congo, Sierra Leone just to mention but a few. The host country of the biennale narrowly escaped a cathartic downslide of event.

The greed of African leaders coupled with imperialist’s power play may have sustained the looming darkness in which many African countries find themselves. According to Chike Aniakor: “with the attainment of political independence, the post-colonial response to the emergence of African nationalism against the backcloth of colonial patrimony did leave post colonial countries in Africa in a deep trauma if not historical twilight” (Aniakor 2011:66). There

is a pejorative connotation of the power game with an implication of a bleak future for Africa in the global encounter of cultures and its further developments. (See fig5)

### Conclusion

Quite visible in the new exhibition hall are crowds of mixed race, nationalities, diverse interests, chatting convivially, asking questions, negotiating spaces, interrogating important issues, exchanging business cards and even trying to understand others. The significance of the above scenario within the specificity of cultural patrimony is huge as it attests to ongoing cultural negotiations that will surely determine the direction of future positioning. “Art is not a creation ex nihilo but a product to address, in one way or another, the needs that societies identify, continue to identify and express” (Kasse 2008:24). African condition, given its bumpy history, is unique and through a psychodynamics of environment must leave in the artist a special experience which must inform his/her expression. The African artists hence have exteriorized their experiences through Dak’art as a veritable platform, what remains is the active participation of stakeholders to sustain and rescue it from possible erosion through intrusion from dangerous interests.

Dak’Art ought to be a site for the demonstration of African creativity. It is important to debunk the position of Jules Romain that, “the black race has not yet produced, will never produce, an Einstein, Stravinsky, a Gershwin” (Njami 2008: 36). Rising from the ruins of what remained of centuries of emotional emasculation of the African through slave trade, colonialism, post-colonialism and ongoing neo-colonization, the African artists must remain vocal in reasserting the humanity of the African.

In view of the above undercurrents, Dak’art Biennale as an African platform (in spite of the polemics on its sponsorship, and allegiance), provides for readers of African socio/political situation an analytical grid for understanding the metaphors of Mamady’s *‘The One That Does Not Know Where He Goes, Must Return Where He Comes From’*, Assie’s *La Table A Palabre*, Baba-Ali’s *“Horn Orchestra”*, Kameli’s *“Untitled”* video installation, Youmbi’s *Au Nom Du Pere* and even other works shown in the Biennale that has not been mentioned in this critique such as: Chika Modum’s *‘Isi-Aka’* or Kimanja Wanja’s *‘You Have Not Changed’*. These works find resonance through their different media. Dak’Art provides a launch pad for the African artists for further interventions into global artistic landscape. Thus vilified, African artists have made bold to mount the global art space with an unbridled effrontery as can be seen through these artworks. What is of issue here, however, is not only the authenticity of his voice as contributing to an ever growing documents in post-modern art discourses but also the semiotics and semantics of the African.

It is plausible to say here that in spite of any controversy the African artists, through the Dak’Art Biennale’s platform, has spoken of the African condition in a way no other outside party can express it. Given the understanding of the African society by African artists, they (African artists) should have greater political stake in the current cultural negotiations and enterprises in the global sphere. Thus, African artists are part and parcel of their societies and hence understand its internal dynamics. It then can be deduced that the Dak’Art Biennale is very vital in the development of Africa in a global scheme of things.

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Fig 1 is "La table a palabre" by Romarie Assie. 120 x 170cm Huile sur toile. 2010 Cote d'Ivoire.



Figure 2. "Horn Orchestra" by Younes Baba-Ali 60x80x60cm. Installation. Sonore. 2009 Morocco.



Figure 3. "Untitled" by Katia Kameli.video HD. 2011. Algeria.



Figure 4. "Celui qui ne sait plus ou il va, doit-il retourner d'ou il vient?" Mamady SEYDI Installation mixte et video. 1000x 300x 75cm SENEGAL



Figure 5. "Au nom du pere" Herve Youmbi. 206x444cm. Tirage photography sur toile. 2011. Cameroun.