

# The African Aesthetic Experience: Current Situation and Philosophical View

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The concept of aesthetic experience is an extremely broad one. It includes a rich range of aspects with great variation across time and space. For Africa, as for the rest of the world, aesthetic experience encompasses everything that has to do with the five senses: touch, smell, hearing, taste and sight. In Africa, art forms have flourished in relation to all these five senses (Lalèyê, 2006a). Art has even exploited the numerous unpredictable spaces where sense-perceptions intersect, stimulating creativity in the fields of poetry, in the form of poems and songs, and religion with hymns and prayers, in the very important domain of culinary art through the subtle refinement of flavours extending far beyond what the non-habitué would think of as just the ‘smells’ of the dish, and even in the domain of artisanship (Lalèyê, 2006b) where objects of purely utilitarian intent have been made with such loving care that they have been deemed worthy of finding a place in the world’s finest museums.

Even the areas of traditional magic and so-called fetishism in Africa are infused with a concern for artistry; creative African practitioners have attained a high degree of mastery in manipulating the *rhythm of matter* in order to celebrate its *spirit* (Lalèyê, 1978). Much might thus be said on this subject of African aesthetic experience (Lalèyê, 1977). But I will limit myself here to raising three questions which will offer a triple pathway for assessing the current situation and looking at it from a philosophical perspective.

I will begin by considering the nature of aesthetic experience in Africa today before taking stock of the place that philosophy occupies, or could occupy, within it. Finally I shall attempt to determine to what extent viewing this experience in its philosophical dimension might draw profit from a context of dialogue associating philosophers and thinkers from Africa, America and the black Diaspora throughout the world.

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While putting off an attempt to circumscribe within suitably precise boundaries what an *experience* might consist of, whether it be individual and/or collective, we can affirm that three things characterize the African aesthetic experience of the present time. The first of these is an intense

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effervescence. The second is great freedom of choice, even though this latter remains conditioned by a level of purchasing power which varies considerably from one society or social class to another. The third – which arises directly out of a proper analysis of the first two – is an accelerating process of acculturation.

I call *effervescence* the tumultuous and spirited level of creativity that confronts the observer who takes even a superficial glance at what is going on in our languages, our music, our literatures, our cinema, our philosophies, our religions, our moral structures, our politics and even in our crafts, which are the expressions of a learning which we struggle to get on top of in our schools.

It is widely known that there are a large number, even a very large number, of African languages. Nevertheless, some languages predominate, allowing a still approximate delimitation of language zones, within which one might speak of the existence of dialects. Peulh, hausa, yoruba, fon and songhay characterize the West African language zone. Swahili dominates the East African zone while the bantu languages, for which Kagamé (1976) left valuable maps, form the language zone for Central and Southern Africa, from which the present-day dominant languages such as lingala, kiluba, kikongo and khoisan emerge. However, despite this for the moment overwhelming wealth of languages, it is apparent that the Africa of today is making huge efforts to speak English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and, certainly in the near future, Chinese. This frothing effervescence of language use mirrors the multiform efforts brought by Africans to complement their already and still known native languages with the adoption of all these dominant languages, especially those of European origin which may assist in determining the success of a career.

Present-day African music provides a marvellous reflection of this fervent outpouring of ideas (Cowen, 2002), images and, in particular, sounds and rhythms. Our traditional instruments such as the tom-tom, the balafon, the guitar, the kora, the flute and the calabash or simple the canary set – or not set – atop a pitcher of water, have become combined with, and not just supplemented by, the piano, the European guitar, the saxophone, the violin, the European drum, to mention just a few. As a consequence, instead of stifling the creativity of our indigenous composers, these introduced instruments seem to have injected a salutary burst of vigour to this creativity, leading to the emergence of novel melodies accompanied by often startling rhythms.

In the field of literature, it is known that laudable attempts to produce work in African languages have been undertaken in a variety of places. On the other hand, our poetry, our novels, our theatre, our political conferences, our addresses on religion are not hampered by being presented in external languages so as to bring to the attention of the wider world a creative genius of which Léopold Sédar Senghor and Wole Soyinka are eminent representatives, while in his own fashion Aimé Césaire has proven how such genius can traverse oceans and still flourish.

Similarly, one will not be astonished to observe that this effervescent aesthetic experience has extended even into the realm of religion (Lalèyê, 1993). For while the presence of the traditional religions is certainly still marked in all their dimensions of ineffable and ungraspable mystery (as is appropriate for any religion that encompasses the sacred, the numinous and even the transcendent), Africans, whether they wear a cassock, a Western suit, a burnous or a boubou, also read the Bible and the Qur'an in the text. The religious spirit manifested by the peoples of Africa glows vibrantly in thousands of aesthetic expressions, be it through song, dance or costume (Lalèyê, 2000).

In the field of ethics and morality as well, Africa is full of fervent activity, for the rules governing individual and collective behaviours are no longer drawn purely from custom and tradition; they now take inspiration both directly and indirectly from the principles of human rights, leading to questions of how Africans today approach guiding their conscience and judging their personal actions.

For politics it is well established that two determinant concepts drive its current function: democracy and development (Lalèyê, 1999). Influenced by these two concepts, Africans have displayed a very broad and perceptive range of inventive solutions since they realized that the one

requires the other. This in turn has led to plethora of productive outcomes, including in the artistic domain, where the African aesthetic experience is also bubbling away vigorously.

Finally, in the field of technology, the daily life of Africans today includes so many new items that our ancestors of only two or three generations back would feel completely dislocated should they return among us. From the cellphone to television, not to mention the refrigerator and the automobile, the contemporary African makes everyday use of objects aesthetically so foreign that one might wonder what place still remains in his or her imagination for the raffia mat, the clay pot, the tom-tom that passed messages or the donkey, the horse, the zebu and the canoe as modes of transport and communication.

When speaking of this present effervescence of the African aesthetic experience, it is thus to these different realities across diverse domains that one must direct one's thought. It is the repercussions on the artistic or aesthetic level of these phenomena that require attention.

Before such an abundance of materials and opportunities, it is easy to see how freedom of choice may be constrained only by obstacles outside of the individual. By that I mean that no head of state, no church leader, no head of any human association can impose a strict way of thinking on its members or require them to live, or even hope, in a particular manner. Or put another way, alongside the ways of living, thinking and hoping put forward by those who assert themselves as chiefs and leaders, Africans are now persuaded they have the power to live, think and hope differently. But this great freedom of choice thus rendered possible is far from being effectively available to everybody. Some end up dying in trying to obtain it, others are forced into merely dreaming of attaining a few elements of it. But both these groups have nevertheless observed how the space of what is possible has been restructured, and their imaginary world has found itself stimulated by this realization.

For my part, I have observed a real acceleration of the dual process of both *deculturation* and *re-acculturation* of Africa that our aesthetic experience offers us a view of while we await the means to see its implications more clearly. The African cultures of yesterday are not yet dead, far from it in fact, but those of tomorrow are not yet born, and indeed there is still some way to go until they are. Between these two, today's Africans, just as other peoples, live and survive by combining elements from multiple sources and whose trace is marked by the African aesthetic experience.

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It is important not to confuse *philosophy* with *philosophers* (Lalèyê, 1982). When referring to African philosophers, I mean African intellectuals of philosophical training who live and work in Africa. They are notably devoted to their jobs as teachers who try to apply officially prescribed programmes which will allow their students to pass the different examinations leading to degrees which give access to a variety of professions.

It is equally important not to confuse a total absence of philosophy with what might be considered a somnolence of philosophy. What may be observed is the absence here and there – and a somnolence here and there – of any philosophical concern to address the cultural effervescence phenomenon in order to observe and describe it and provide explanations for certain questions that it raises for those who live in its midst in order to forge concepts and theories capable of deriving philosophically acceptable solutions.

A philosophical concern with the African aesthetic experience should not be limited only to exploring and re-exploring our artistic heritage in all its musical, literary, sculptural and technical forms. It should also address what it means to live that artistic experience in the Africa of the present day so as to assist as far as possible in bringing to awareness the real challenges that face this experience and hence to be able to sketch some solutions.

In the context of a dialogue between philosophers from Africa and those of African heritage, art represents a privileged field for comparative studies, hence for exchanges that allow light to

be cast on what we had in common, less at the beginning than at a *certain* beginning; and, at the same time, what remains common to us in the multi-faceted struggle to confront modernity without closing ourselves off from it, and in opening ourselves up with lucidity and discernment to what it has to offer us.

Religion, as I observed earlier, is a field in which artistic creation has free rein, whether for illustrating myths, for acting them out, or expressing them through song or dance. And religions remain precisely the forms which have enabled a cultural heritage to survive transplantation across oceans and resist the brutalities of slavery. To be sure, those traditional religions had to adapt to the new conditions of life that were imposed on the transplanted children of Africa. That is why, by adequately observing diverse present-day forms taken by the African religious heritage outside of Africa, it is possible in return to understand certain of its continuing forms within Africa itself.

A dialogue intelligently conducted could allow those of the black Diaspora who are enquiring with varying degrees of pain into their roots to enter into exchange with Africans who remained in their home continent and who, in order to decide what they themselves should do, could find great value in listening to those of the Diaspora and their descendants.

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It is of great fortune that the first decade of the third millennium has been marked by a *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, very quickly followed by a *Cultural Diversity Convention* (UNESCO, 2002, 2005). During this time, the African states which adopted a *Cultural Charter for Africa*<sup>1</sup> in 1976 judged it timely, some thirty years later, to adopt a *Charter for African Cultural Renaissance*.<sup>2</sup> This means that if the people of Africa require a framework and juridical instruments to facilitate their work around their cultural specificity (Lalèyè, 2010b) within the well-understood respect for the cultural specificities of other peoples, this framework and these instruments are henceforth at their disposal.

It remains only for those of us Africans who have benefited from a philosophical training (Lalèyè, 1982) to consider in what way philosophy might contribute to making the different discourses already engaged around our cultural life more coherent with our origins, in any case more coherent with our current knowledge and to conform more to our aspirations, but still within the strict respect of the aspirations of other peoples.

## Notes

1. Adopted in Port-Louis, Mauritius, 5 July 1976.
2. Adopted in Khartoum, Sudan, 24 January 2006.

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