African aesthetics and the problem of rhythm: mediocrity or excellence?
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African philosophy readily admits that aesthetics is one of the fundamental areas in philosophy. The question of African aesthetics is hence one that weighs on the minds of philosophical scholars and writers. African philosophers do not see aesthetics on the same angle, they see it differently. We are going to focus on Senghor’s negritude conception of art and its limitations. Prior to our approaching Senghor’s aesthetic idea it is important to briefly review other African idea of aesthetics. First, African aesthetics toils to draw its inspiration directly from the particularities of African life, thought, and expression. The aesthetics of music, that arouses much interest, attempts to understand the nature of musical creativity and the basis of reception, taking account of every colonial and postcolonial musical ethnography. The study of the structure of African music must however dwell on ritual music, court and funeral music, which have preserved the essential structure of African music. It is this approach which allows for lighting the way for the two most fundamental questions: “What is music and what is musical work?” African musical aesthetics will be dependent on the functional or utilitarian (and not contemplative) nature of African music. It responds to specific a social function which sometimes determines its denomination, as illustrated by the multiplicity of names for music.

Second, for Onyewuenyi, he contrasts Western aesthetics with African aesthetics. When Western aesthetics takes the standards of unicity and individuality, African works of art be they visual, musical, kinetic, or poetic are created as an answer to a problem and serve some practical end.

The aesthetic canons depend on the idea that every society makes of life. Aesthetics is based on ontology; this is why African aesthetics results from African ontology which places force at the center of its idea and representation of life. Works of art hence express life: works of art, as expressions of ritual and religion, as clues to the temperament of the tribe and society, as language in a culture without writing, must do all these in service to the community whose ritual and religion they express, whose temperament they reveal, the being of whose ancestors they participate in. This is what determines the characteristics of African art: functional, community-oriented, depersonalized, contextualized and embedded. The functionality and the communal character relegate to the second level the beauty of forms. The beauty of appearance being secondary. Beauty is functionality in the sense that the object of art reaches its practical objective. Thus it is the sculpture that promotes union with divinity. The beautiful is moreover synonymous with the good. And when African art is qualified as depersonalized, we want to say that concern of the artist is not to depict his own caprices and individual whims and feelings.

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2 Ibid. p.412
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
The idea of beauty itself, which is at the center of aesthetics, is rather complex. In the Ibo of Nigeria, the concept of beauty (mma) includes a physical aspect and a social and moral aspect. Is said to be beautiful, for example, a young pubescent girl, well cared for, the object of dress and drawings. These acts of beautification, writes Nzegwu⁶ translate as ‘co mma’, explicitly naming a subset of acts whose goal is to create mma (beauty). This concept of mma applies only if it embodies positive behavioral traits and transcends the potentially distracting elements that may impede social utility and function.⁷ Therefore, it is concluded that the idea of ‘beauty is intricately intertwined with morality, since societal well-being and progress set the standard for good life’.⁸ Be that as it may, the idea of mma is defined as the impulse of admiration, an emotive impulse as Senghor called it.

It is understood aesthetics remains interwoven with ethics⁹. Moreover, in many African languages, the beautiful and the good are not only inseparable, but yet one serves to express the other.

No one as Senghor labored to define what is convenient to be termed Negro-African aesthetics. In contrast to its Greco-Latin counterpart, which sees beauty in imitation, the Negro-African aesthetics seeks beauty in symbol and rhythm, one is naturalistic, and the other is entirely symbolic.

Greco-Latin aesthetics finds beauty in imitation, naturalism, contemplation, visual pleasure."It is the art of visual-reason", Senghor writes⁹. In contrast, the Negro-African aesthetics institutes within its center the symbol, rhythm and recourse to diverse processes: parallelism and asymmetry, accentuation and atonality, highlights and low time. It is an essentialist art, which of embrace-reason. Senghor’s aesthetics has been criticized more on sociological or ideological than on philosophical grounds. Bidima¹² emphasizes its romantic aspect leading to the impasse in the past of tradition and its identity fixing which constitutes a second impasse. But Diagne¹³ underlines the weakness of this critique, for, on the one hand, there has never existed in Senghor especially, a pure essentialism; on the other hand, there is in the thought of the theoretician of Negritude a certain hybridity incompatible with an absolute essentialism. Diagne further defends Senghor by pointing out that Negritude is explicitly defined by Senghor as a humanism. Thus his thought cannot be reduced to isolationism.

We understand Diagne’s position, which tries to come to terms with Senghor. Like Senghor, Diagne as well as other thinkers such as Lufuluabo,¹⁴ Mabona¹⁵ emphasize the significance of rhythm in Negro-African aesthetics. The question that comes to mind is:

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
What is the real merit of this sense of rhythm in the life of African? Marcien Towa,\textsuperscript{16} in his important work questions the validity of the Senghorian: “l’émotion est nègre comme la raison est hellène” as well as the Senghorian mediocrity of the opposition of the Cartesian "je pense donc je suis" to the Negro-African "je sens, je danse l’autre, donc je suis" and his textual conclusion of the superiority of the second.\textsuperscript{17} If all of black Africa dances while working, if art in Africa is introduced in daily life, can we assert that an African is a free being? Incontrovertibly, there is spontaneity and a sense of rhythm the African that is often touted. To a greater extent the African knows how to make time and who rejects any form of rush. That is why he is said to have no idea of time. Concerning its sense of rhythm it has created in Senghor this thought that for him, Descartes’ "je pense donc je suis" becomes "je danse donc je suis". The rhythm that scans the existence of the African is one of the multitude and the proliferation of life in the tropics. It is a rhythm by participation in life. In principle, the submission to this rhythm ought to guide man in the discipline of the body and mind which determines a self-mastery. That would be indeed a degree of freedom the African would gain in that. But we know very well the rhythmic existence of the African does not provide him a more self-mastery than to the other. On the contrary he has the reputation for being impulsive, hot blooded, and nervous and is ready react extremely. The existence of art in the form rhythm and dance in the daily life of the African has not therefore hitherto contributed in making out of him a more free being than others.

Rhythm and dance appears to be natural, whereas they should be cultural. We want to say that if it is nature that manifests itself in the behavior of the African then freedom is not to be sought on that side. Since freedom is opposed to nature more than it is allied to it. Speaking about the sense of rhythm or about the aesthetic sense is to describe a nature. But the truth is that there is no free nature even when it concerns a nature described as a predisposition in the aesthetic sense. To say that nature is free is an incontrovertible contradiction. Nature can only affirm itself against nature. By nature here we mean a kind set of provisions that are given a set of a defined system and virtually immutable or unchanging. However, culture itself can take on the appearance of nature. Negritude poets, as it were, were really wrong. They easily and immediately established in nature and essence of the African a totality of dispositions certainly turned rigid and coercive but nevertheless acquired within the natural milieu and via social practices. These acquired dispositions that are transformed into nature are nothing other than a system of habits comprising in themselves a threat of alienation. If therefore the sense of rhythm in the African, his love of dance is born in this way, it can be understood we will present them as a nature contradicts as such freedom that we want to see developed in and by art. The true artist must therefore distance himself from this form of art of a natural kind. The artist we are seeking must cultivate his sense of rhythm, of the gracious, the beautiful and not rely on an aesthetic nature.

Cultivating the sense of art, cultivating freedom necessarily appeals to the whole of education including the acquisition of knowledge in a broader sense of the term. And it is also the occasion to indicate the limits of the idea. To have taste, knowing how to take one’s time, openness to the new, in short, to have an artist turn of mind is not enough to make a


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 97.
free man. Indeed, what about our artists, painters, other sculptors in the slums of African cities who like the average man of the masses is unaware that most illness suppose a pathogenic agent. Man needs a sufficient culture that will contribute to his positive liberation. Hence Marcien Towa\footnote{Towa, Marcien, Leopold Sédar Senghor:Négritude ou servitude( Yaoundé, editions Clé, 1971), p.115} sees in Aimé Césaire’s négritude an affirmation of the full humanity of black people, the power of transcendence and the regeneration of their cultures. On the contrary he sees in Senghor’s négritude as nothing but an anchor that weighs man down toward a positive liberation.

Thus at the center of this culture of positive liberation Marcien Towa places the scientific knowledge of the self and the world, the bona fide knowledge. The know thyself of Socrates remains a valuable precept in all times let alone insisting on the idea according to which the man who knows the world is he who can predict instead of letting oneself be tossed around full of surprises. And he can only predict not to be subjected by it but to act on it. Moreover, we can know ourselves to be able to anticipate our own reactions and orient them in a good direction. Man’s creativity manifests precisely in the prediction shift where free and creative action is inserted. Is there consequently any need to say once more that, the underdevelopment of Africa, precisely Sub-Saharan Africa, is not solely an economic underdevelopment but also a cultural underdevelopment? The culture we are talking about here is not one that we willingly recognize in all peoples of the world: culture understood as a complete system and specifically relation to the world: diverse institutions, customs, cosmogonies, exploitation of nature, socio-political organization, etc. Every people can indeed exhibit such a cultural totality but for being excluded from the power of talking about cultural underdevelopment. Negritude is nothing other than the expression of a culture understood in this anthropological sense. But do all facets of négritude encourage socio-economic development, for example? Must we not have to wait for development itself to overhaul négritude?

References
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