

theatre; these Japanese artists innovate while moving forward in method and style with the best of the modern spirit. It is to this possibility that the African intellectual and artist has to be persuaded; that a cultural self exists; that it exists in history; that it is important to know or rediscover that self without rejecting a universal humanism. As we are all human, we have the same emotions; but about different things and at different times, expressed differently. And finally, he has to be persuaded that it is possible to be modern without jettisoning that essence of the historical and cultural self.

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THE ARTIST'S PLACE IN MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY

It can be said that the modern African artist labors under an identity crisis--to use the jargon of the socio-psychologists (how pervasive is their language in the everyday thinking of the West living in a society whose value system is at best fragmented); he finds it hard to maintain a credible stance in the ever shifting terrain of his time. Is he a unique voice, proclaiming his individual vision detached from ideology or the common pursuit of men? Or is he an engaged participant deploying his talents to further a cause, usually a political cause? Does he produce art for an end in itself or only as a means to a larger end? Is he a free agent or does he subordinate his freedom to the discipline of a group, a vanguard of a struggle for equality, justice, etc? Is he a black separatist or integrationist? Is he a critic of his society or its embattled defense counsel? Is he rebelliously progressive or crustily counter-revolutionary? Is he content merely to entertain or does he have to push a socially relevant message? Should his art set him apart, isolate him from the masses, or should it serve as a means of identification with them?

With so many critical options, it is a lucky African artist who not only can find his role but will have it accepted by his society.

The traditional African artist hadn't such a burden of choosing. He was so well integrated with the main concerns of his community that he tended to take his place in it for granted. I can think of two artists I had known in my childhood who are fairly representative of the traditional type. First there was my friend, Okafor Ifezue, the hunchback. We called him the hunchback behind his back, of course. When we met him we gave him his praise name which was Onyenka or approximately 'the sharp one', 'the creative eye', or 'artist' if you like, and he happily accepted.

Okafor Ifezue was a tiny, physically repulsive man, the butt of jokes and an object of derision to undiscerning children. With his physical and personality handicaps, he had little inclination and certainly scant opportunities for social or political leadership, for influencing opinion or shaping the destinies of his race. It was enough for him that he merely survived. But Okafor had one important social asset: he was a cunning maker of masks, emblems and statues, a genius in the village concept of the plastic arts. Certainly there were few ancestral masks or totems in the village which were not his handiwork. In addition, in a subtle extension of his role as a creative person, he had gradually acquired a reputation as a medium of communion with the ancestors, and there were a number of women who consulted him rather than the regular diviners. Carving was only one of Okafor's numerous labors. He was also an industrious farmer and a frugal self-sufficient householder. Although forced to be single because apparently no woman would have him, he kept a neat and ordered house. I was never able to understand what he thought of his art as an economic asset. I used to be puzzled by his apparent readiness in giving away most of his creations and never asking for pay. As for the way the village rated him for status purposes, it was ambivalent. They looked with pity and maybe a little contempt on his failures as a man but they had a sneaking admiration for his self-sufficiency, and of course they acknowledged their dependency on him for those masks and totems.

The other model I remember is my remote cousin Nwoye Azodo, a poet and singer. Nwoye was no freak physically or psychologically. He had a family and all I heard about him indicated that he was a loving father and faithful husband. Generally he was well spoken of as a man of good sense and honesty. He farmed his patch of ancestral land and from it kept his family reasonably well fed. To see him

following the routines of village life, deftly picking his way through the hazards of family gossip and litigation, it would be difficult to conceive of him as having a spark of genius. But on certain special occasions he displayed the extraordinary side of his nature. Nwoye was a poet. His poetry, like all traditional poetry, is sung; in his own case to the accompaniment of the maracas and sometimes the flute. Nwoye and his young troupe were very much in demand at ceremonies and seasonal festivals. His genius lay in his mastery of Igbo language so that he can mould it into strange and unique fashions bringing out new meanings and illumining new experiences. People walked for miles to come and hear him. But at the end of each festival or celebration he quietly slid back into the humdrum existence of the village.

The question now is, can the modern African artist, trying to find a role, use as precedent the life style of the traditional artist? Unfortunately, he cannot. Their circumstances are not the same. The traditional artist operated in a small community where his art was woven into the fabric of the society itself. His art was a functional part of that community. The modern African artist has to operate within the anonymity of the modern megalopolis. There his art is no longer spoken but is written, and so designed to reach a different kind of audience, the lonely man in the hotel room. To rule and control the new megalopolis demands different concepts of power. And the spoken and written word are weapons in the hands of those who seek to control the megalopolis. The writer who deals in the written words finds he cannot escape from the obligation to use the weapon at his disposal to fight for a cause if only the minimum of social justice.

Modern African society is a kind of society in the making. Ideas and ideals are in a state of flux. And the writer/artist has a responsibility to mirror and perhaps influence the direction in which the society develops. He is or should be the most sensitive point of his community. His greater awareness and perception are values which his society needs badly in their desperate effort to build a better life. If he is good, there is no way in which he can escape the burden of moral leadership.

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