

AFRICAN ARTISTS AND SOCIETY:

*A Reply*

First of all, let me congratulate you on the excellent job *Ufahamu* has been doing in its coverage of and insight into the intellectual, social and political upheavals in Africa. It is an invaluable contribution to the debate, and is certainly the kind of contribution necessary if the truth must be known.

One cannot but agree entirely with the basic assumptions and conclusions of Edward Okwu's comment on "The Traditional African Artist and his Society" in *Ufahamu*, vol. II, no. 3. It is unfortunate, however, that he seems to have laid the entire complex problem of cultural alienation at the doorstep of the African artist.

I think it is necessary to realize that the African artist is today in the hiatus of that socio-historical removal from "traditionality" to "modernity." He is thus caught in the complex of an intellectual mirage where the past is very indistinct and the future absolutely unchartable, where a return to the main tenets of traditional societies will be at best a relapse into a form of negritudinal romanticism or at worst a negation of the very concept of progress, change or modernity. The crucial tragedy of this entrapment is that the past cannot be recalled or re-convened while the future seems bereft of values or even a promise of them.

The predicament of the modern African artist is a most trying one. In fact, he is in a worse position than his modern Western counterpart whose "disenchantment" is a logical outgrowth of the technical conflict between man and machine, between man and "god." As Mr. Okwu rightly points out, while Western society evolved, the inherent tendency towards "bifurcation" was complicated by a mythical notion of "progress" as being possible only through an active cultivation of the scientific/materialistic ethic. But the Western artist evolved with and within his society, while ironically the African society, as well as the African artist, is evolving merely inside the Western womb and acquiring false values in the process. Most Africans are today made to expect the pattern of existence in Western societies, thus ignoring the age-old formula of learning to walk before learning to run. This unfortunate dilemma somehow lifts the charge of misrepresentation partly from the shoulders of "misled" artists to the

shoulders of a "misdirected" society since art, as one understands it, must be a sensitized, if quarrelsome, recreation of the life within and outside the artist.

Moreover, the post-Victorian atomisation of man's sensibility in Western societies occurred almost contemporaneously with the dislocation of social equilibrium in traditional African societies. For the Western man, the result is the cultivation of the materialist ethic urged by Darwinian and Malthusian theories of existence and sustenance while for the African the result is the current hiatus, the current lack of smooth transition from the artist of a society where things are beginning to fall apart, the artist in the infancy of society, to the artist of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*. The question, it seems to me then, is not so much how to strike a compromise between the language or postures of the "traditional" and the "modern" African artist as how to readjust the life-style of our peoples to reflect our true milieu.

Finally, even in the overt effort of our "young African artists" to show Caliban as potent as Prospero there is a strong presence of the Caliban flavor, an unmistakable effusion of his racial circumstance. No true African artist can effectively bleach away his true sources, the circumstances that informed his infancy and the environments that nurture his human development. The most outside of the African outsiders still have their works informed, though more in content than in form, by basic African artistic cadences, nuances and symbolism. It is, therefore, not impossible to save the "modern" African artist (in fact, Okwu's illustration with Chris Okigbo's later poetry as the exile's complete return confirms this point), but "modern" African society must be saved with him. If the African artist should return to dig his roots and find a cake of white ants there will undoubtedly arise for him a new literary malady: African disenchantment.

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- by Pol Ndu