

Post-Africanism and contemporary art in South African townships

Bernadette Van Haute (DLitt et Phil)

Associate Professor in Art History

Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology

University of South Africa

Paper presented at the Colloquium organised by SAVAH under the aegis of CIHA, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 12 – 15 January 2011

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the possibilities offered by Post-Africanism – a new perspective coined by Denis Ekpo and proposed as an alternative to postcolonialism. He defines Post-Africanism as an attempt ‘to seek newer, fresher conditions for a more performative African intellectual engagement with Africa, modernity and the West’ (Ekpo 2010:182). In this paper I use the Post-Africanist approach to reconsider contemporary art produced in South African townships. In line with Ekpo’s deconstruction of Africanism I investigate parallel notions identifiable in selected works. By diagnosing certain characteristics as symptoms of Africanism and realising their crippling effects, it is possible to suggest a way forward in the form of Post-Africanism. Ekpo postulates that, if artists are no longer weighed down by the historical burdens of the past (i.e. decolonisation), they become enabled to promote Africa’s new cultural health by embracing all of modernity’s cultural resources.

What is the role of art in Post-Apartheid South Africa? What, in turn, will contribute to the success of artists of the South African townships? I have tried to find answers to these questions relying on postcolonialism as a theoretical framework (Van Haute 2008). But this venture remained a fruitless dabbling in postcolonial theory because ultimately it failed to provide the means to arrive at – for me – satisfactory results or answers. Hence I found comfort in the fact that Rasheed Araeen harboured similar reservations expressed in his preface to the *Third Text* special issue on the subject of ‘Beyond Negritude’. Correcting the identification of postcoloniality as neo-colonial conditions (Araeen 2010:168), Araeen accuses postcolonial theory of shallow posturing, scoffing at its ‘textual coqueties’ and ‘the sophistries of Theory’s merely chic cosmopolitanism’ (2010:171). He argues that postcolonial theory has been ‘reduced to a paradigm of rhetorical devices that seeks accommodation within what is confronted and denounced’, resulting in its fossilisation. Hence it prevents an

understanding of the neo-colonial condition and the possibility of a dialogue needed for liberation (Araeen 2010:172).

In his introduction as guest editor of the special issue of *Third Text*, Denis Ekpo who teaches at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria, launches a similar attack on postcolonialism. He accuses postcolonialism of being responsible for 'delaying the intellectual maturation of the ex-colonies' by prioritising 'the ability to confront imperialism and decolonise the mind' of what he calls 'the wretched of the third earth'. He describes this aim of postcolonialism as a 'wasteful and depressive deployment of intellectual resources on settling futile scores with imperialism' (Ekpo 2010:182). Instead of continuing to blame the imperial West or seek its pity, Ekpo calls for a 'total affirmation of all that colonial history has brought down' upon Africa. He proposes an entirely new perspective which he has coined Post-Africanism.

[Post-Africanism] is a post-ideological umbrella for a diversity of intellectual strategies seeking to inscribe newer, more creative moves ... Post-Africanism was proposed [Ekpo 1995] as an attempt first to deconstruct the disaster-prone emotionalism, hubris and paranoias indwelling to most ideologies of Africanism ... and, second, to seek newer, fresher conditions for a more performative African intellectual engagement with Africa, modernity and the West. (Ekpo 2010:181-182)

Deconstruct Africanism

Let me first unpack the notion of Africanism as defined by Ekpo and then consider the reasons why it failed. With the end of colonisation African nation-states resorted to Africanism in a bid to foster national unity. In its most extreme form, namely as cultural nationalism, Africanism advocated unconditional race pride, African emotivity and an African participatory cosmology. Fuelled by anti-European resentment it resorted to an anti-modern escape into the native past (Ekpo 2010:178). This radical form of Africanism died, according to Ekpo (2010:178), 'partly through the sheer inanity of its postulations on race, Africanity and emotivity; partly as a result of the grave errors of a purely cultural-nationalistic self-understanding and apprehension of modernity'. If Africa wanted to enter and become part of the world of modernity,

it had to become not what it had been but what it had never been. ... the ancestral past, though beautiful in itself and worthy of respect, was not a directly relevant heritage or resource for the kind of unprecedented apprenticeship involved in transiting to the modern order. (Ekpo 2010:179)

Where the ancestral past could, however, play a vital role was in the arts, poetry and music. These art forms were used to salvage and transfigure the past which performed a therapeutic role in reassuring Africans of 'the inherent validity and honour of their own civilisation' (Ekpo 2010:179).

On the other hand, Ekpo points out that the 'so-called African culture or Africanity did not refer to an empirical reality'. It was not recovered from a common ancestral past because 'in pre-colonial Africa there was no one shared, homogenising culture into which modernity could be fitted with necessary adjustments'. In other words, 'the traditional tribal cultures were not a modernity-compliant heritage, but rather a counter-heritage. Thus the notion of a collective African culture serving as a common national or continental vehicle for an African path to modernisation was a massive self-delusion.' (p. 180) These are the reasons why Ekpo (2010:181) considers it expedient 'to try to redeem Africa from too much Africanism'.

The case of South Africa

Turning to the case of South Africa, the picture looks quite different due to its unique history of Apartheid. Nevertheless, Pepper (2009:xvi) maintains that 'many of the signature aspects of art that anticipates the postcolonial were the same in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent: the backward glance to invented traditions, the flattening of traditional ritual arts into design elements, and the euphoria of reconstruction'. Because the ideas about Africanity also informed South African art, it may be useful to consider the implications of Ekpo's criticism of 'too much Africanism'.

Long before the end of Apartheid South African artists shared a concern 'to imagine a uniquely South African national culture for a postapartheid future' (Pepper 2009:158). One way of addressing this concern was to Africanise contemporary art. The search for traditional roots was and still is seen and used as a means to forge an African identity and to foster national unity. Fuelled by anti-Apartheid resentment this process involved, among other things, a reappraisal of African traditions and customs. According to the artist Sipho Mokwena (1960, Mamelodi), the African past is crucial to cultural renewal. He states the following about his work:

The inspiration for these works reaches back to the initial development of humankind, along with totemic symbols of survival and the taming of life –

such as the *bakwena* (crocodile) and the *ishoba* (an African fan). I am trying to connect the present generation with culturally generated icons of our past. We cannot reject where we came from. If we are to stimulate cultural renewal and development, it has to be anchored in the past as well. We are to look at them afresh. (*Resurrection* 2010:23)

The difficulty, however, with this African past is that it is not based on an empirical reality. South Africa's black population comprises various ethnic groups (Zulu, Venda, Suthu, Xhosa, etc). Each of these groups has its own traditions and Indigenous Knowledge Systems hence the notion of a common ancestral past or heritage is a fallacy. It would thus be misguided to try to build a South African cultural identity on an imagined common past. In a multi-tribal state, ethnic identity stands in the way of national identity (Ekpo 1999:12).

On the other hand, as Ekpo asserts, the past can play a vital role of therapeutic reassurance for the black South Africans. In art, poetry and music the references to a specific tribal past have a reassuring effect on those members of the audience who form part of that same ethnic group and can relate to and appreciate the validity and dignity of their particular culture. But if the references to the past are watered down to eliminate cultural specificity and address an essential Africanness, they are dismissed as inauthentic and bear no relevance to anyone. Today's public – the younger generation in particular – shows little interest in Mokwena's "culturally generated icons" of the past. As icons of an essential Africanness they are obsolete and irrelevant in a wider world where 'increased emphasis on self-criticality is coupled with a growing fluency with international art concepts' (Peffer 2009:xxii).

Resurrection

To illustrate my argument I would like to refer here to a number of artworks that formed part of an exhibition held in the Unisa Art Gallery, entitled *Resurrection – An exhibition featuring artists from the greater Tshwane region* (15 May – 4 June 2010). The accompanying catalogue included an entry on each participating artist, providing biographical details about training, exhibitions, awards, collections, commissions and a statement about his work. The following images and information were drawn from that catalogue.

The participating artists were selected from the greater Tshwane area and include both the older and younger generations. Apart from Gert Potgieter they are all black

artists living in the townships and most of them are untrained. The intention of the curators was to investigate whether democracy has brought about change in the role of and opportunities for artists living in the townships. The artists' own comments on these issues are also included at the end of the catalogue.

What struck me most about the imagery is the acute absence of a critical engagement with current issues. In a review of the exhibition written for the *Pretoria News* (June 2 2010:8, 'Giving a voice to marginalised township artists'), Miranthe Staden-Garbett also commented on the fact that

in place of protest or political rhetoric, we find in this collection of artworks a pervasive spirituality and optimism, a celebration of African culture, tradition and community life, and artists who describe the purpose of their work in terms of healing, humbleness, togetherness, joy, peace and wholesomeness.

On the question regarding the impact of democracy on their role as artists, the participants mainly commented on the challenges facing black artists. They 'cite the lack of resources and education as hindrances to their progress' (Staden-Garbett 2010:8). With the end of the liberation struggle, they find themselves with no political agendas (*Resurrection* 2010:31). They find little appreciation or recognition for their work in the black communities (p.32); there is no cohesive vision (p.33). 'Many describe their work in apolitical terms, as personal, individual, universal or communal' (Staden-Garbett 2010:8).

Countering the criticism levelled against the government, Sandile Memela, a senior manager in the Department of Arts and Culture, wrote an article in the *Pretoria News* (May 21 2010:14) under the heading 'Unity and determination will see art flourish'. He accused the 'so-called township artists' of 'wallow[ing] in self-pity and called them 'a disorganised lot who have allowed the culture of entitlement to creep into their consciousness'. In Memela's view the artists should be 'focused, hard-working and disciplined'; they should unite and form 'a powerful bloc that influences trends and developments in their sector'.

Needless to say, this letter elicited a heated debate in the media – but this is not the place to elaborate on it. What is relevant to my argument is that, following Ekpo's vision, what these artists should avoid is too much Africanism. If, as Jacob Lebeko remarked, the younger artists' 'major frustration is in selling the work and also getting accepted into the stables of commercial galleries', it would perhaps be beneficial to

free themselves from the influence of the older generation and from the African traditions. As a second step towards Ekpo's Post-Africanism, they need 'to seek newer, fresher conditions for a more performative African intellectual engagement with Africa, modernity and the West' (Ekpo 2010:181-182).

Newer conditions

Ekpo believes that Africa's recovery to cultural health requires newer, fresher conditions. One of the conditions is that

1. Africa needs to clear its mind and vision from a 'chronic cultural overload'. These historical burdens consist of not only the ethnic past but also 'anti-European paranoia and vengeful, impotent anti-imperialism'. Ekpo (2010:183) calls this a 'massive disburdening of mind and vision'.
2. Once this 'massive disburdening' has been accomplished, Post-Africanism calls for a 'pragmatic confidence' in 'manipulating modernity's tools to transform Africa'. Then, unencumbered and armed with knowledge ['all knowledge is power game' (Ekpo 1995:134)], 'Africa can embark again on its journey to modernisation' (Ekpo 2010:183).

Post-Africanism replaces negative, pointless complaining and blaming with a positive energy and a pragmatic flexibility that drives Africa on a path of transformation. Ekpo claims that '[t]he audacity of Post-Africanism is not to invent new theories or radicalise existing ones but to propose a more modest ... rescue of the postcolonial subject from the bewitchments of either paranoid Africanism or mesmerised worship of Western idols' (Ekpo 2010:183-184).

Applying the Post-Africanist approach to the field of the arts, Ekpo maintains that Post-Africanist art must serve to stimulate the new future and hopes of Africa and to promote Africa's new cultural health:

A Post-Africanist art is summoned by positive force to the role of an avant-garde to imagine and play midwife to a redeemed future. In other words, art in the Post-Africanist sense is the requisite pregnancy that can deliver a *counter-future* to the current postcolonial stillbirth of modernity (Ekpo 2010:186).

The problem with current postcolonial art in Africa is that many artists 'are still busy mining or recycling, from the many real troubles of the postcolonies, faked tribal authenticities or old nativist identities and selling these to the West as postcolonial

art'. Ekpo (2010:186) rightly regards such art as an opportunistic appeasing of 'the exotic itches of blasé Westerners with simulated ethnicities'. As a cure to the anachronistic nativism of postcolonial art, Post-Africanism proposes to suspend 'the past and ethnicities in a purely aesthetico-cultural museum so that truly modern African art can be birthed and deployed in the service of Africa's modernisation'. The 'new artist must necessarily desist from all defensive cultural protectionism and no longer adopt the victim's mien' (Ekpo 2010:186): the Post-Africanist artist must mobilise 'all of modernity's cultural resources to put modernity properly to work in an Africa of the future' (Ekpo 2010:187).

The South African art scene

The lesson to be learnt from this African history is that Africanisation in South Africa should not be understood as an anti-modern escape into the past nor should it be motivated purely by anti-Apartheid resentment. One of the conditions for South Africa's cultural health is that artists need to clear their mind and vision from that 'chronic cultural overload'. They should discard the historical burdens of both the traditional and the Apartheid past. This is not to say that the far and nearer past should be forgotten: they constitute the nation's heritage and as such belong in a museum where they can be preserved, honoured and treasured. Once the artist's mind has been unburdened and freed from the 'artificial Afrocentric trap' (Ekpo 1995:134), he/she can develop the pragmatic confidence in gaining cognitive control over and 'manipulating modernity's tools to transform' South Africa. The challenge for the post-Africanist artist is to promote South Africa's cultural health by repossessing all of modernity's cultural resources and using them as a power tool. Then their art will have the potential to be 'an act of decolonisation'.

Select bibliography

Araeen, Rasheed. 2010. Preface. Why 'Beyond' Negritude? *Third Text* 24(2) March:167-176. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org.10.1080/09528821003722074> (accessed on 29 March 2010).

Ekpo, D. 1995. Towards a post-Africanism: contemporary African thought and postmodernism. *Textual Practice* 9 (1):121-135.

Ekpo, D. 1999. The aporia of post-colonial anger: dissidence and difference in Africa's contemporary literary discourse. *Social Semiotics* 9 (1):5-22.

Ekpo, Denis. 2010. Introduction. From Negritude to Post-Africanism. *Third Text* 24(2) March:177-187. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org.10.1080/09528821003722108> (accessed on 29 March 2010).

Lebeko, Jacob. 2010. What drives South African art in the 21st century? Invitation to a seminar held on September 23, Unisa Art Gallery.

Malatjie, Seefane. 2010. State must come to the party on arts and culture. *Pretoria News* August 14.

Memela, Sandile. 2010. Unity and determination will see art flourish. *Pretoria News* May 21:14.

Peffer, J. 2009. *Art and the end of apartheid*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Resurrection: An exhibition featuring artists from the greater Tshwane region. 2010. Unpublished catalogue accompanying the exhibition held in Pretoria, Unisa Art Gallery, 15 May – 4 June 2010.

Sick of Society. 2010. Writer displays ignorance in the world of art. *Pretoria News* May 28:16.

Staden-Garbett, Miranthe. 2010. Giving a voice to marginalised township artists. *Pretoria News* June 2:8.

Van Haute, B. 2008. African tourist art as tradition and product of the postcolonial exotic. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 3 (2):21-38.