From “Life-Water” to “Death-Water” or On the Foundations of African Artistic Creation from Yesterday to Tomorrow

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The foundations of African art have been the subject of numerous attempts at definition and analysis. In determining the “Year One” of African art, some begin in 1921 [1], with the publication of the novel Batouala, by René Maran, while others refer to 1906, the year in which the South African writer Thomas Mofolo published his novel The Traveller of the East [2]. In some instances, even colonial administrators, such as Charles Béart, the former director of l’École Normale William Ponty in Senegal, have proclaimed themselves as “the initiators and principal sources of inspiration” of art in Africa! To anyone who might believe him, Béart stated that it was he who was “the kindly godfather of African theater” [3], that it was he who had taught his African students to understand the...Yet to them, power was a necessary element of being. It seems to me that primitive peoples did not interpret reality in this way. Their notion of being is essentially dynamic...To them, power was a necessary element of being [5].

It is unnecessary to elaborate upon the Reverend Father’s use of the word “primitive,” loaded as it is with exclusionary meaning, as the author’s thinking was well in line with colonial ideology. Let us, however, give him credit for recognizing Western ignorance of a profound truth in Africa, a truth that Birago Diop, in a classic example of African poetry, enjoins us all never to forget: “Those who have died are never gone; They are in the water that flows/They are the water that sleeps/The dead have not died/Listen more often/To things than to beings/Hear the voice of water” [6].

It is important to note that this African ontology is monotheistic: there is one God, called Ngai by the Gikuyu of Kenya, or Birago Diop, in a classic example of African poetry, enjoins us all never to forget: “Those who have died are never gone; They are in the water that flows/They are the water that sleeps/The dead have not died/Listen more often/To things than to beings/Hear the voice of water” [6].

It is important to note that this African ontology is monotheistic: there is one God, called Ngai by the Gikuyu of Kenya, or Roog Seen by the Sereres of Senegal. Nigerian author Chinua Achebe also spoke of the existence of this one God when he wrote the following fictional dialogue between Mr. Brown, a Catholic missionary, and Akunna, an Ibo religious chief:

“You say that there is one Supreme God, who made heaven and earth,” said Akunna to Mr. Brown. “We believe in Him as well and we call him Chukwu. He created the entire world and the other gods.”

“There are no other Gods,” said Mr. Brown. “Chukwu is the only God, and all the others are false gods. You carve a piece of...
Immediately runs to find cool water to pour spills hot water onto the ground, one im-
not twain. Thus, when one accidentally ay family, water is the only force that is
in the forest but also the totem of the Ndi-
whereas the lion is not only the king of
ality of their existence. In other words,
imbued with spirituality. It is the only
Existence, because there is no non-being
this African ontology and the power of
water.

One must first understand that water
power. It is never dead, in the sense of
being unusable or spent. It is life-water
when it purifies, it is death-water when it
soils. I do not say “dead water”—I speak
of water as a sign of life, and water as a
sign of death, but always of water full of
Existence, because there is no non-being
in water.

Thus water is always and everywhere
imbued with spirituality. It is the only
being able to adapt its powers according
to circumstances, while other beings
communicate instead in terms of the du-
ality of their existence. In other words,
whereas the living, once initiated, can
speak to the dead and vice versa, and
whereas the lion is not only the king of
the forest but also the totem of the Ndi-
aye family, water is the only force that is
not twain. Thus, when one accidentally
spills hot water onto the ground, one im-
mediately runs to find cool water to pour
onto the same place in order to be for-
given. Each being can thus keep its spir-
ituity and its compass in the unreal, but
water has greater power: the capacity to
rejuvenate, to heal and especially to draw
life forth from death and to bring death
upon life.

This can be seen in the water used by
sorcerers, healers, or spell-casters. This
water is often fetid and stinking but must
nevertheless be drank sip by sip if one
hopes to defeat an adversary. Yet this
water can be neutralized by another
water, this one quite human—urine—
for, as everyone knows, the urine of men
and women is a water that is highly
sought out by anyone wishing to exercise
the effects of other waters.

The Dogons of Mali believe that it is
the union of two waters that gives life to
the human race—in this case, the en-
counter between a man’s sperm and the
moisture of a woman’s vagina. But on this
joining of waters one must add a word:
since the sole action of sperm is not suf-
ficient to conceive man, it is
the waterword that brings and maintains
the humidity necessary to human pro-
creation . . . and the Nommo [the spirit
of water], by this means . . . transforms
the waterwater into a seed, and gives it
the appearance of a human [9].

The Dogons’ Nommo is therefore a
water god, but at the same time also heat,
sperm and word. In the Serere popula-
tions of Tooiki in the Baol region of Sene-
gal, the same force of the water-being in
the evolutionary process of man is re-
vealed in the form of Rogo Seen (the
Senegalese name for the one God). This
force is seen on three levels: the first con-
sists of the 9 months of gestation in dark
waters; the second corresponds to the du-
ration of life on earth, during which man
is but water (blood being water) mixed
with mud; the third is the end of this ter-
restrial life, when man is returned to
grains of sand and vegetable elements, in
order to nourish new lives through rain-
water or ground waters.

In Wolof society, the water handed to
a visitor, whether thirsty or not, upon
crossing the threshold of a house is not
only a token of good manners but com-
municates a wish that the water might
overflowed, with the added complication
of the West, has ever been able to diag-
nose or cure these ailments, though the
remedy is simply to bathe in the ocean or
to wash one’s face in seawater regularly.

But it is also true that rainwater and
river water can also bring about desola-
tion and disaster for humans and animals.
When this occurs, as was the case in Saint-
Louis, Senegal, in 1999 (the river bed
overflowed, with the added complication
of flooding rains), humanity, in its sins,
is designated as the one and only being re-
sponsible for the catastrophes. It was said
in this case that humans had offended
Mame Goumba Bang, the river genie.
People were then seen making offer-
ings—often in the form of curdled milk
thrown onto the waters—that modernism
had almost caused them to forget.

Water is therefore intrinsic to the
thought and practices arising from this
African ontology. The aquatic nature of
this world, consequently, has repercus-
sions in the manners of representing all
that is experienced, dreamed and imag-
ined by this society—in short, on artistic
production.

ON THE ORIGINS
OF AFRICAN ART

Whether recognized as such or not, every
work of art belonging to this sub-Saharan
African appears as a concentrate of rela-
tions between visible and invisible, pres-
cent and absent, real and unreal, because
art is, above all else, the realm of images,
suggestions and symbols; in other words,
it is the realm of all vocabulary through which the ontology of power-beings is expressed.

If one could go back thousands of years to pause at the frescoes in the African caves of the Kalahari or the Tas-sili, one would discover that these paintings express not only the self-image of the artists of that era, but also their desire to act upon the represented forces in order to appropriate them. Moreover, analyzing such works teaches us about the period’s place in the evolution of agricultural and mechanical techniques, economic activities and various other cultural occupations in which water was inevitably central. The frescoes are also evidence of proficiency in applied art, with their depiction of shepherds and their flocks, feasts and ritual ceremonies.

In these sites, the rhythm of life and the ambience of the surrounding world are portrayed with precision and refined symbolism, revealing the artists’ level of technical control. One notes that the objects of representational depiction are mainly animals in motion, whereas men and women are more stylized, as if to better underline the human capacity for abstraction; all of this is treated gracefully in chrome.

Nonetheless, it may seem audacious to seek out a relation of cause and effect between water and African artistic creation. Why, one might ask, would water—which is being—the only being amongst all others to inspire artistic creation? How can one link water to arts in Africa, when only 34 percent of African borders correspond to hydrographic supports?

While these questions may well seem legitimate to someone with a tourist’s vision of Africa, they lose sight of the fact that art does not exist outside of socio-cultural beliefs, that muses are born everywhere along with man’s environment, with the dreams, the fantasies and the thoughts of the individual. For in Africa, this environment, these dreams, these fantasies and these thoughts are jealously imprinted with the vitality of this hierarchy of power-beings, where water is the only being indispensable to all others. Thus, Abdoulaye Sadji, in his artistic rendition of the Lebou people’s founding myth [10], draws inspiration from life-water and death-water and from their mysteries. The Lebou story is set in a community of fishermen who lived peacefully until one day the sea geniuses decided to aid one of them, Ngalka, a brave among braves. Though his wedding to a water goddess was celebrated in the depths of the sea, the bride joined him in their marital hearth on terra firma. They had one child, Tounka. The water goddess was highly offended when Ngalka took on a second, and this time very earthly, wife. The manifestation of the goddess’ wrath was not long in coming: fires, floods and madness descended upon Ngalka until his death. Both life-water and death-water were experienced by the townspeople during this episode in the life of one of their own—having first been blessed by water, Ngalka later came to be ruined by it, leading him to his grave, as no remedy could ever cure him.

Senghor interpreted the importance that Sadji had attributed to water in this work as a characteristic of all African artistic creation: “In truth,” he said, “we are like manatees which, according to African myth, go to drink at the source as in the days of yore, when they were quadrupeds or men” [11]. This point of view is fully shared by Tchicaya U Tam’Si, who underlined that his poetry was “like the river Congo, which carries as many corpses as water hyacinths” [12]; this quote pertains not only to the fluidity of his poetry, but also to the variety of its content. One must read Tchicaya to see how these irregular verses within regular stanzas cause us to bob in the waters of a poetry that speaks nature’s truth.

On another level, one may cite the example of the sculptors who chose to work close to the Cross River to emphasize, once again, the importance of water as a foundation of African artistic creation. Calling upon the water genies enhanced their skillfulness in working the hard basalt. To them we owe famed sculptures with expressive facial traits that defy posterity. Also notable is the example of certain populations living by the mouth of the Congo River, whose typical sculptures depict a mother and child figure—these peoples turn out works, dictated by water genies, that symbolize fertility. Women seeking fertility wear such figures to ensure healthy and abundant maternity.

Other examples illustrating the importance of water to artistic creation include the Fon people’s bas-relief sculptures, depicting a jar pierced with holes, supported by a pair of hands, symbolizing the union of all Fons to save the kingdom, as well as the Baoule doors that depict male and female elephants, symbols of the strength and longevity that characterized the reign of Queen Abraha Pokou in Côte d’Ivoire mythology. Both Fon and Baoule artists make constant references to the power of water, which symbolizes for them the common riches that must be preserved and represents the sacrifices made to the water genies, which allowed their people to align themselves with Queen Pokou.

In the same vein, Olympe Bhely-Quenum recalls an African legend in which two young people in love, unable to obtain their parents’ consent for their relationship, throw themselves into the waters of a lake. Fifteen years later, they are changed into water genies, and from then on the lake itself sings, enticing generations of young lovers to its waters, where many pay with their lives for the intransigence of the first couple’s parents [13].

This legend attributes the origins of music to water, reflecting a major African belief according to which, in ancient times, the kora, an instrument with 21 strings, was fished out of the water where water genies had beautifully (and jealously) played it. The Dogons also preach that musical rhythm was the first of all the arts, with dancing, sculpture and painting appearing afterwards.

Even within the context of a modern artform such as cinema, African creation contains the inspiration of water. Carmen (2001), Joseph Gai Ramaka’s latest film, is a good example. It is true that both Bizet’s opera and Prosper Merimee’s Carmen provided the basis for Ramaka’s character Karmen, a woman whose passion devours the men and women she meets along the way. But for his own version of the story, Ramaka chose to make the ocean itself the central character, competing even with the character of Carmen.

Indeed, it is water itself that witnesses Carmen’s trials and tribulations, just as it serves as the final resting place for the lesbian prison guard who could not survive the end of her love affair with Carmen. It is water again that is the confidential listener of Yande Codou’s daily singing in the film. Most importantly, water is at the center of all of the dissolve, zoom-in and zoom-out effects, which the director achieves brilliantly, so that the beauty of the ocean at all times of the day renders Carmen’s various moods and attitudes, and those of her conquests, mere ephemeral episodes in the life of a society.

Given these examples, it is as though, in the midst of modernism, African ontology were avenging itself by influencing African artists, whether or not they accept this ontology consciously. Thus, the cause-and-effect relationship between water and the sources of African artistic creation is not fortuitous—it is at the heart of life and death in the...
STUDYING THE PRESENT STATE OF AFRICAN ARTS and their environments reveals one certainty: that the past has not simply survived, but exists in the entirety of daily life. Water is still poured onto the footstools of university professors on their way to or back from Europe; water over which words of good omen have been pronounced is still kept in a small vial at the bottom of one’s travel bags. Whether it runs from a hotel faucet or is bottled spring water purchased at the supermarket, whether it was drawn from a well or a river, water remains the power-being in the minds and practices of many Africans.

If art may be defined as the graphic expression of all that causes emotion and pleasure in men, whilst offering a support through which the invisible may be read, then African art remains a bridge between the past and the future, because, if yesterday’s beliefs inspired certain forms in African art, their survival has brought about the realization of artforms and contents not identical to their predecessors, to be sure, but just as full of the colors and life of the past.

However, this survival does not solely consist of traces. It is pulsating life that plunges its roots into the thought patterns and lifestyles of Africa’s children so forcefully that the future is already at hand.

An example of this phenomenon is the work Le rêve aquatique, by the painter Jacob Yacouba [14]. This painting expresses the artist’s thirst for communion with his vital element: water. The marine background color that covers the totality of the pictorial space is lit up in its center by a full spectrum of blues, not set in graded shades but harmoniously superimposed. The artist also consciously offers a reading window through a tiny central spot painted all in white. Here again, we find the same yearning for timeless fluidity, that same human dream—to appropriate the power of water.

Baye Mouké Traoré’s tapestry entitled Mbaan Gace [15] is another artistic expression seeking to tame the water-being. This work is a mixed composition in which calabashes, beads and fishing nets are used to represent the working of wool. Every means is used to make the representation of the marine environment an alphabet with which to read the symbolic system of images.

Sculptor Babacar Sédikh Traoré was the first to use the power of water at the forefront of his design [16]. In his work, he depicted live animals at the circumference of a large amount of water. His aim was to symbolize the concept that being, in its natural state, which is water, is aesthetically as well as spiritually immeasurable.

On the basis of these works, it can be argued that, today and tomorrow, as long as African artists maintain their presence in the world of beings, neither American globalization nor the tendency towards standardization of behavior will erase the bases that make African creation unique. Regardless of the warmth of their words and their music, the smoothness of their colors and forms, and the length of their visits to other cultural worlds, such African artists, suffused with being, will always be characterized by the “DNA” of their education and cultural environment.

Of course, one will never be able to say anything about any work of art that is 30 percent Baoule, 15 percent Mandingo, and the remainder French or Canadian, since what we have inside is integrated into our flesh and irrigated with our blood; these elements are indivisible. This is what makes us not hybrid monsters, but men and women of synthesis who do not hide their origins, who are proud of what the present has made of them and enthusiastic about their participation in building tomorrow.

The work of Amadou Sow, an African painter who has lived in Vienna for decades, says this with eloquence. Though he is familiar with every curve and corner of Western art, Amadou breathes into each of his works the primeval African savannah, with its ochre tones and its contours always rising to the call of the heavens. This creates images powerful enough to transport its viewers into the architecture of Timbuktu, into the black holes of the Djenné people’s dwellings, which bring to mind the theoretical black holes of space that science has not yet deciphered. Anyone looking at an Amadou Sow painting can immediately tell that it is not German or Polish art, but also that it is certainly not “cow-tail and voodoo” African art either, and yet that it is definitely art created by an African.

The same feeling would arise from listening to the rhythmic percussion pieces performed by Doudou Ndiaye Rose and his Rosettes; they would demonstrate that the symphony has permutations beyond those taught in Western academies. In following the choreography of the Rosettes, one would inevitably turn to dictionaries of African culture in order to search for the meaning of each galan, the variations in rhythm and the aesthetic value behind each pause and occasional silence.

In Africa, each contemporary artistic practice carries the seed of what its rhythm will become in the future. Therefore, there are no artistic constants, but a dynamic system of continuous change.

One must therefore conclude by stating that the future fertility of African artists will depend on their capacity to listen to water and upon their willingness to allow themselves to be imprinted by the call of all beings that dwell in the day-to-day existence of their society and of their world.

It is essential to avoid nostalgic platitudes for the past riches of Ibo, Yoruba, Wolof or Ashanti art; it is also out of the question for artists to hole up in a cultural cave of sorts in the hope of creating the new out of the old. Rather, artists of both today and tomorrow will have to know how to answer, through art, such questions as “Where am I?” “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” This must be done not only from a metaphysical perspective, but with total consciousness of the place and role of science, economy and politics in the communications of men. And in this search for practical and artistic answers, the power of the water-being-power over any being, over Existence, shall not be ignored.

Acknowledgment

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References and Notes

1. Edouard Eliet, Panorama de la littérature noire-afro-occidentale (1921–1962) (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965). Eliet justifies his choice based on the fact that this novel, written by a Caribbean colonial administrator, was in his opinion the first work that unveiled the “DNA” of African culture.


Bibliography


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