

Expressionism in Africa? A Search for Traces

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If you look at the currents of modern and contemporary art in sub-Saharan Africa, you cannot help but consider the impacts of colonialism. Colonization brought with it upheavals of social, cultural and religious life almost across the entire African continent. The self-esteem and identity of the people were shaken by colonial rule. What the Europeans took to the North is still largely withheld from the people of Africa today: Burial figures from Ethiopia, bronze figures from Benin, reliquary heads of the Fang from Gabon, helmet masks of the Yoruba from Nigeria, Makonde masks, nail fetishes from the Congo, beaded throne chairs from Cameroon, wooden drums, wooden doors from West and East Africa, ruling staffs, spears, throwing blades from Sudan, bead-embroidered leather aprons from southern Africa works from all regions of the continent that were and still are a part of African culture and which, among other things, have given decisive impulses for the development of modern art. ⁱ

While the intellectual potential and religious roots of the people of Africa were undermined, the colonial vanguard simultaneously occupied the empty spaces left behind by this disempowerment. In Europe, the prevailing opinion was that the African continent had no history of its own and therefore needed to be completely redesigned in terms of European values and knowledge. The self-empowerment of the colonizers prescribed the colonized their political system of rule, their way of trade and trade in goods, their legal system, their educational concepts and last but not least their Christian religious practices. Instead of subsistence farming and exchange of goods in kind in the mainly rural regions, the dominance of the Western economy and the shaping of urban communities developed. Instead of the oral transmission of practical knowledge, missionaries established schools which, based on book knowledge, passed on European teaching, in substance and method to African pupils. Those who wanted to be successful had to acquire the knowledge and attitudes dictated by the colonizers. ⁱⁱ

How expressionist art came to Africa can so far only be traced in a rudimentary manner. The story of Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser is a groundbreaking example of the gradual infiltration of modern art into the world of traditional art expectations on the African continent. Both South African artists are pioneers of Modernism, specifically Expressionism. Irma Stern, born in 1884 in the Transvaal city of Schweizer-Reneke, met Max Pechstein in 1916, who introduced her to the circle of Berlin Expressionists and organized her first solo exhibition there in 1919. After an absence of ten years from South Africa, she returned to her homeland and had to learn there that her expressionist works were almost completely rejected. Despite harsh criticism, for example under the title - "Irma Stern Chamber of Horrors" -, the young painter made her way through and, after several trips abroad, including to Zanzibar, the Congo and Central Africa, developed her enlightening expressive pictorial language. Maggie Laubser was born 1886 in Malmesbury in the West Coast region



*Irma Stern, „Ramadan“, 1945
Rembrandt Art Foundation Stellenbosch*



*Maggie Laubser, „Oestyd“, undated
Pretoria Art Museum*

of South Africa into a pastor's family. Already in 1919, as an art student in Munich, she engaged intensively with the painters of Expressionism, especially with those of the groups "Der Blaue Reiter" and "Die Brücke". From 1922 to 1924 she lived in Berlin, where Schmidt-Rottluff, among others, encouraged her in her artistic ambitions. Shortly after the First World War, the artist finally returned to South Africa, where, after an initially equally disappointing response, she practiced an Expressionism that was primarily devoted to nature and landscape and stylistically reminiscent of French Fauvism. Although both painters took different paths, their influence should not be underestimated. Not only were there works shown in South Africa over the decades, but they helped modernism find a steadily growing resonance throughout the region. ⁱⁱⁱ

Regardless of these well-documented individual cases of the spread of artistic expressionism in southern Africa, it can be stated that the ideas of modernism developed very differently in relation to the respective regional conditions. An important requirement for this was the liberation movements that forced an end to colonial rule in the 1960s. As early as the late 1930s / and early 1940s, Césaire Aimé, who came from the Antilles, together with the Senegambian Léopold Sédar Senghor, formulated a literary movement that they called "Négritude". Aimé defined Négritude as "the consciousness of being black, which includes taking upon oneself one's destiny, history and culture". ^{iv} For Senghor, the first president of Senegal, which became independent in 1960, Négritude meant the totality of the political, social, moral and cultural values of the black world. ^v The reciprocity between cultures was one of the most important cornerstones of his conception of Négritude. According to him, young art should develop independently, without denying the contribution of Western civilization. From his vision of combining tradition and invention, however, some intellectuals drew the conclusion that "African authenticity" was to be demanded of every single work. ^{vi} The philosophy of Négritude as well as other African ideas of liberation - "Uhuru" in Kenya or Kwame Nkruma's "African Personality" - provided the artists with

material for an understanding of art that made their own position as Africans in relation to the world the subject of art.

In Senegal, the "École des Arts du Sénégal" was established in 1960-61 with the departments "Fine Arts" and "Recherches Plastiques Nègres". The starting point for the school was the concept of Négritude. Nevertheless, there were always differences of opinion as to the extent to which the artistic results should be reflected in the light of this philosophy. Influential teachers of the first hour were painters such as Iba N'Diaye, who had enjoyed an art education in Paris, and Papa Ibra Tall, who was publicly successful with tapestries and frescoes. This cultural commitment of the first art school and the poet-president was crowned with success by the development of a broad cultural-political basis with numerous artistic offers in schools, galleries and other institutions in the country. As a result, a network of artists slowly developed throughout West Africa, within which Dak'Art, La Biennale de Dakar, the most important art fair on the African continent, was established in 1990.

Some Europeans, who reflected on their own intellectual assumptions and questioned colonial dominance and prejudices against the uneducated "Negro", saw themselves as people with a debt to pay. As early as the first half of the last century, individual Europeans initiated schools and artistic initiatives that no longer focused primarily on European ideas, but also wanted to make the interests and knowledge of African students the subject of their educational offerings. In Elisabethville, Belgian Congo (now Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo), the Frenchman Pierre Romain Desfossés set up the art studio "Le Hangar" in the early 1940s, which was renamed "Academie de l'Art populaire congolais" in 1947. His first students were his domestic workers, later the so-called Pili Pili style or Congo style developed in this academy. ^{vii} In 1936, the English artist Margaret Trowell founded the Makerere College of Arts near Kampala in Uganda, which taught artistic techniques and emphasized the origin and traditions of African students. Trowell, who rejected modernism, wanted to promote what she described as the "innate naivety" of her young, adult students. ^{viii} She encouraged the young Africans to take a close look at rural life in East Africa in order to create an "authentically East African visual art".

Ulli Beier and his then wife Susanne Wenger came to Oshogbo in Nigeria in 1959, where they set up an artists' and theater group together with the Yoruba dramaturge Duro Ladipo. Later, with the redesign of the Oshu Grove, they created a total work of art on the banks of the River Oshun. Beier wondered whether it was necessary for every modern African artist to follow the long road of alienation and assimilation in foreign schools and colleges in order to acquire knowledge and ideas that would prove irrelevant. ^{ix} In response to this, he and his second wife, the London-based artist Georgina Betts, set up the "Mbari Mbayo" cultural centre in 1965, which gave young people their first artistic experiences in so-called "workshops". ^x The concept of these and many other workshop schools throughout Africa was primarily to give the participants tools and painting utensils and to encourage them to independently implement their creative ideas without outside influence. Several artists emerged from this school who have received international recognition, including Twins Seven Seven, Muraina Oyelami and Nike Olaniyi-Davis.

In Johannesburg, South Africa, the Polly Street Art Centre was established in 1948 as part of a welfare complex run by the city. When four years later recreation officer Cecil Skotnes took over the management of the center, only one student was enrolled. In this state, where black primary and secondary school students did not receive art instruction, the initiator saw his main task as "decolonizing" art and developing the "intrinsic" abilities of his students.^{xi} Skotnes was one of the South African pioneers who wanted to overcome racial segregation and provide artistic and cultural education for people from the townships. With his concept, the social and political situation of blacks became the focus of artistic creation for the first time. Cecil Skotnes understood "the practice of art decidedly as a political fact" in order to bring out the "African" in the black art students. In contrast, the artist Bill Ainslie advocated an art didactics with an open outcome. In workshops, he wanted to bring together "people of all kinds, rich and poor, young and old, black and white" to promote new developments in the country's art. At the Conference of the State of Art in 1979, he said: "We don't need 'political' art or 'folk' art or 'African' art or 'suburban' art or 'township' art - it's all far too self-involved. What we need is to make progress in discovering ourselves and leave the labeling to the ideologists."^{xii}



*Sam J. Ntiro, Sugarcane harvest, undated
Collection Gunter Peus*



*Elimo Philip Njau, Milking, approx. 1972
Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt/Main*

In contrast to such initiatives, universities and schools in post-colonial Africa were mostly forced to adopt the curricula of the former colonial powers for lack of their own resources. In this way, African pupils and students were confronted more with the artistic techniques and styles of the Western world than with the art and cultural history of their own regions. For example, art students at the College of Arts at Makerere University in Uganda in the 1960s learned about modernism as an "art historical period of about a century - from the Realists in France to the Abstract Expressionists in America".^{xiii} The fact that they had been trained in a European context and – as result might lead young artists – “astray” was a matter of debate. Elimo Njau and Sam Ntiro, in particular, who had completed their art studies with Margaret Trowell, advocated an autonomously developed, purely "Africa-oriented art class". In the end, however, pragmatic considerations - such as the lack of art

teachers of African origin - undermined such approaches, which were correct but currently unattainable. Moreover, lecturers and students also saw their task as not only having an eye on local art and problems, but also on global art trends.

Parallel to this, in the last quarter of the last century, a gallery scene dominated by Europeans developed in the large urban centers. These gallery owners often played a significant role in giving young people the opportunity to be artistically active with their support and under their care. It was they who, through their international contacts, provided the artists with a living wage and bread. At the same time, these same gallery owners sometimes formulated decidedly Western expectations of African artists with regard to their clients, including the view that African art should be "primitive and naive".^{xiv} Thus, autodidacts such as Twins Seven Seven, Cheri Samba, Jak Katarikawe, or the Shona sculptors of Zimbabwe were protected more than artists who had enjoyed an academic education. In the same way, cultural centres such as the Goethe-Institut, the Institut Français or the British Council took on tasks as sponsors of exhibitions, basic art offers and international exchange projects, which should have been carried out by African institutions but did not receive the necessary support due to lack of funds and lack of interest.

Following the Traces

Although until well into the 1980s Africa was still, from a Western point of view, under the general suspicion that "either 'neo-primitive' art was being produced or Western conceptual strategies were being accepted without reservation," an art scene matured in the blind spot of these prejudices that was neither concerned about possible Western influences nor failed to address its own burning questions.^{xv} Among these heralds of an autonomous artistic positioning were also artists who explicitly combined the various varieties of Western Expressionism and their own cultural and religious traditions artistically. As far as I know, their number is surprisingly small.^{xvi} In the course of my travels I have been able to identify some relevant artists in different regions of Africa. These include the painter John Yoga and the sculptor John Odoch-Ameny from Uganda, the self-taught painter Sane Wadu with his Ngecha group of artists from Kenya, the painters Luis Meque, Ishmael Wilfred and the abstract expressionist Rashid Jogee from Zimbabwe, as well as two artists from the Ivory Coast, Dia Tamsir and Watt Kang; the latter belongs to a group dedicated to Art Brut.

Uganda and Kenya

When I travelled to East Africa for the fifth time at the end of 1984, I saw in the African Heritage Gallery in Nairobi works by a painter who stood out from all the other artists I had seen in Africa before. It was John Yoga. Until then, only in the Paa ya Paa Gallery, founded by Elimo Njau, a handful of works by black African artists aroused my interest.^{xvii} In contrast, the first painting of Yoga was a revelation to me. "Faces of Spirits in the Sunset" are inhabited by figures with trumpet-shaped lower bodies, mask-like heads, one-eyed creatures that seemed to come from a strange world.



John Yoga, "Faces of Spirits at Sunset", 1984
Privat collection

Plain brown, ochre, green and blue tones dominate the scene. The bodies are suddenly cut off or go serrated patterns that split faces into other shapes. Where a body begins, where it ends or merges into another and doubles, as it were, can hardly be deduced. It is also open whether it is a representation of the present or past. Figures that appear here may embrace us in the coming night, but we suspect that they have existed since time immemorial. "Mashetani", the Lucifer of East Africa, appears, as do the ancient masks and figures of humanity who still wield their power. We can deny, cover up, repress evil. But at some point it comes back, and we cannot escape it. At the same time the world continues to turn as if nothing were happening, people live side by side as if they were not dependent on each other.

John Yoga's artistic exploration of opposites, of the current behavior of urban dwellers and the culture of his origins, of expressive style and the integration of cubistic-looking formal language has its history. Yoga himself pointed out with his so-called "Pendulum Paintings" that he moved between tradition and modernity in order "to take total Africa in his grasp".^{xviii} As a student of the Art School of Makerere University, he took part in the discussions that have moved lecturers and students since their foundation by Margaret Trowell. While the afore mentioned painters Elimo Njau and Sam Ntiro from London adopted the expressionist painting style as an adequate means of expression for contemporary African artists and for their own work, the Kenyan head of the Art School's sculpture workshop, Gregory Maloba, took a more skeptical attitude. When asked what it means when the word "tradition" is used in contemporary art, Maloba summed it up like this: "Many of us East Africans, born and grown on East African soil, feel fully qualified to state frankly that this clamour after a traditional East African culture could do much more harm than good; for the simple reason that it is a clamour which is superficial, it is a clamour which disrupts and confuses."^{xix}

Nevertheless, the sculptor promoted a "dialogical coexistence" between the old and the new, the African and the Western, the traditional and the modern.

When John Yoga left Uganda in 1980 and took a position as lecturer at the Mosoriot Teachers College of Eldoret in Kenya, he developed a new artistic concept. For his first major exhibition "Yogaabstractionism" in January 1990, organized by the Goethe Institute Nairobi, he introduced this concept with the following words: "The main objective of my Art currently is to objectify the subjective. I abandon singleview point, normal proportion in creating my Artworks. It is abstract. I seek my motifs not from the external world but from inwards so that my feelings and ideas become the springing point for me to leap into my Artwork I term "Yogabstract". I simply derive my theme from African myths, legends and stories. The motifs I use I derive them from African sculpture." ^{xx}

Like the German Expressionists, he used "the expressive value of form and color," but unlike them, he knew the African myths and combined them with his experiences in contemporary Africa. Works of art such as "Luwero Ghosts" or "People of Industry" point out that with the rediscovery to myths and design traditions, his pointers are directed at current problems. For this reason, as Mehram Yaar wrote in the Kenyan Sunday Times, "the complacent viewers" get "the shock of their lives" when they encounter "Yoga puzzles" in which people are interwoven with spirits. ^{xxi}

Sane Wadu, a Kenyan artist who did not have a university education, but rather developed painting for himself autodidactically, represents a different approach to the expressionist style. Before coming to art, Wadu worked as a teacher, court clerk and writer. At the suggestion of the Tanzanian cartoonist Makinyago Ndwiga, he took part in a cartoon competition organised by the Japanese newspaper Yamiori Shaboon in 1984, after which he decided to give up the unloved teaching profession and devote himself solely to painting. Tired of teaching, he now dedicated himself to painting alone. Initially without response, the German-American gallery owner Ruth Schaffner, who had just moved to Nairobi, discovered his talent. "You have to pay attention to him", she said to me during a visit to the Gallery Watatu. By equipping Wadu - like many other artists in Kenya - with painting utensils, supporting him financially, and offering exhibition opportunities, the not uncontroversial gallery owner made a significant contribution to his local and international career.

It took a while until Wadu had found his artistic way. He never lacked ideas. His closeness to the animal and plant world, his criticism of traditional beliefs, Islam and Christianity, and his view of the social upheavals in the city and in the countryside are all things that occupied the painter from the very beginning. Dealing with them artistically was a particular challenge for him. He accepted it by not sparing himself and using his paintings as "teeth... to bite with". He constantly visited the galleries of Nairobi to learn from his black African artist colleagues, but also from his mentor Ruth Schaffner. At the Paa ya Paa Arts Centre he studied the expressive painting style of Elimo Njau. In Ngecha, in the immediate vicinity of his village, he became friends with the painters Wanyu Brush and Chain Muhandi. Together with Brush, Muhandi, King Dodge and his wife Eunice, he painted expressive group pictures at times.

Later he and his companions founded the Ngecha Association, a group of artists that for several years had a great influence on the development of contemporary art in Kenya. It took a while until Wadu had found his artistic way. He never lacked ideas. His closeness to the animal and plant world, his criticism of traditional beliefs, Islam and Christianity, and his view of the social upheavals in the city and in the country are all things that have occupied the painter from the very beginning. Dealing with them artistically was a particular challenge for him. He accepted it by not sparing himself and using his paintings as "teeth... to bite with".^{xxii} He constantly visited the galleries of Nairobi to learn from his black African artist colleagues, but also from his mentor Ruth Schaffner. At the Paa ya Paa Arts Centre he studied the expressive painting style of Elimo Njau. In Ngecha, in the immediate vicinity of his village, he became friends with the painters Wanyu Brush, Chain Muhandi and King Dodge. Together with Brush, Muhandi, Dodge and his wife Eunice, he painted expressive group pictures at times. Later he and his companions founded the Ngecha Association, a group of artists that for several years had a great influence on the development of contemporary art in Kenya.



*Sane Wadu, „Hunting Hyenas“, 1992
Collection Giovanni Springmeier*

At the beginning of his work, Wadu still proceeded with downright caution. He drew the figures - whether human or animal - carefully naive, in order to reproduce a picture of his motifs as accurately as possible. At the end of the 1980s he finally found his own expression. His painterly gestures became generous, his brushstrokes loose, his repertoire of colours boundless. Wadu painted himself free. In the painting "Hunting Hyenas" the artist shows three hyenas in observer position. They lie there apparently peaceful and leisurely, almost idyllic. The only strange thing is that the animals literally merge with their surroundings. Their reddish-yellow and blue-striped bodies liquefy into the space, so that they cannot be identified as a danger by the imaginary victim. The artist makes the bodies transparent and adapts them puzzling to their background.



Sane Wadu, Home Breaker, 1996
Collection Giovanni Springmeier

Wadu now dealt with themes that no other local artist had dared to tackle before. In the small tableau "Home Breaker", for example, he presents a man who comes home and destroys everything. You can literally feel how this man wants to sweep away his home, his family, his ties with a sweeping gesture. His face is averted. He doesn't want to know what his hands are doing, hands that ghostly double to multiply his anger. But why it rages so much remains open. It is an inventory of a reality that we like to hide, ecstatically thrown onto the canvas. Sometimes the artist comments satirically and grotesquely on society, sometimes surreal, and seemingly absurd when it comes to ruling politicians. The expressive painting style is used here as an instrument to reveal human truths with all their sharpness. For Wadu, art becomes an elixir of life: "I don't mind if I'm hungry. But I go crazy when I can't find a canvas or painting to let go of those angels or wild things that keep screaming inside me and demanding that I release them." ^{xxiii}

John Edward Odoch-Ameny also belongs to those East African artists who have (re)discovered expressiveness for themselves as sculptors. His early wood sculptures as well as his stone sculptures of the 1980s deal with the human being and the interaction of body and soul in all its facets. Formally, they show extreme compression and overstretching, protruding curves, cavities and entanglements - a repertoire of forms that powerfully tries to get a grip on both the exposed human being and the belief in the irrational. Like Sane Wadu, Odoch-Ameny also strives to capture the present in all its dimensions and at the same time to establish a close relationship with the past. In this specific coexistence he brings to light sensations, feelings or even wishful thinking of a harmonious idyll.

However, he does not only use one form of expression, but experiments with all conceivable materials and forms. As if by chance, he casually carves abstract three-dimensional figures out of soapstone, reminiscent of the snappy letters of an old script. Using iron and scrap materials, he comments on the arrival of technical modernism in African society. At the same time, he uses these materials to create dancers who, from a conventional Western point of view, are too sweetly designed and are often branded as kitsch. What we see as a contradiction and can hardly accept, however, is a matter of course on the African continent.

- Who is afraid of overflowing passion?



*John Edward Odoch-Ameny, „Sitting Woman“, 1985
Collection Giovanni Springmeier*

Zimbabwe

The emergence of new artistic currents in post-colonial Africa reflects all facets of the continent's history, both locally and globally. It is not surprising, therefore, that individual regions are undergoing quite different developments and that the processing of traditional cultures such as the reception of Western art is also manifold. The countries in southern Africa in particular, which were only able to free themselves from colonial dominance at a late stage, are characterized by the fact that on the one hand European modernism was able to gain a much earlier and broader foothold there than in other African countries, while on the other hand black African artists found it more difficult to assert themselves under the white dominance.

In Salisbury, the old capital of Rhodesia, today's Harare, the National Gallery was founded in 1957. This museum was initially mainly equipped with English and European works of the old masters. However, it experienced a radical turn towards modern and contemporary African art when Frank McEwen took over the management and prepared the first International Congress of African Art in 1962. The new director made a name for himself not only by presenting artists from all over the world in his house, but also by setting up a workshop school for interested laymen, from which he later developed what he called "Shona Sculpture". Henry Munyaradzi, Nicholas Mokumberanwa, John Takawira and Bernard Matemera are some of these sculptors who have celebrated international success in Paris, New York or Tokyo. As a side-effect, other sculpture centres such as Chapungu and Tengenenge as well as a remarkable scene of sculpture galleries were created.

While McEwen's stone sculpture was brought to the fore as a "Great Excitement", painting led a shadowy existence for a few years. It is true that the Scottish missionary Canon Edward Paterson had already founded Mission Cyrene in southern Rhodesia in 1938. To promote the individuality and self-confidence of the students, he set up a "School of Contemporary

African Painting". At the end of the 1950s, Paterson left Cyrene and opened the Nyarutsetso Art Centre in Mbare, a suburb of Salisbury, which, however, neither achieved the desired recognition nor the necessary notoriety. However, it was Christopher Till, the director of the National Gallery of Harare after independence, who corrected this "imbalance" in 1981.

^{xxiv} With the support of British American Tobacco, Till set up the so-called BAT Workshop Studio, which was to offer artistic training to "disadvantaged young people, former fighters and all unemployed and talented other young people". ^{xxv} In order to give the students a professional foundation, the school later offered two-year workshops and established new artistic disciplines in addition to sculpture, including metal sculpture, painting and printmaking. And it wasn't until the 1980s that galleries such as the Delta Gallery, which was set up by Derek Huggings and Helen Lieros in an artistically ambitious manner, finally received the attention they deserved. ^{xxvi}

The roots of expressive art in former Rhodesia and later Zimbabwe can be determined relatively well. Whether Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser had a direct influence on the art scene in this country may be an open question. What is documented, however, is a genealogy that began with the abstract expressionist painter Marshall Baron in the 1960s, continued through the likewise abstract painters Stephen Williams, Rashid Jogee, and the figurative expressionists Kingsley Sambo, Luis Meque, and Ishmael Wilfred, and reaches all the way to the contemporary painters Cosmas Shiridzinomwa, Wycliff Mundopa, and Gresham Nyaude. Isolated but stylistically less identifiable, some sculptors such as Munya Victor Madzima and Sanwell Chirume can also be found among these protagonists.

One of the most important artists in this series to this day is the painter Luis Meque. A civil war refugee from Mozambique, he found his new home in Mufakose, a suburb of Harare. In 1988 he attended the BAT Workshop of the National Gallery, but had to leave it after only one year "because of misdemeanour". ^{xxvii} By a lucky coincidence he met the gallery owners Derek Huggings and Helen Lieros, who quickly grasped his talent. They provided the twenty-one year old with painting materials, allowed him to paint in their gallery courtyard and supported him by showing his works in numerous exhibitions at Gallery Delta.

In the collection of the National Gallery Meque probably also became acquainted with the works of Kingsley Sambo, who had chosen the people in the bars and restaurants of the modern metropolis as his motifs and threw them onto the canvas with a thick brush and spatula. Meque, taken with it, now knew what his task was. In the streets of the ghettos of Harare, especially in Mufakose, he found the motifs of many of his works. As a keen observer, he sketched people in all postures and situations, mostly as back figures and from the position of the one who exposes. In his early works Meque placed his figures in the foreground or in the middle of run-down houses and barracks. Gradually, however, with progressive simplification, he began to dissolve the background, just as his figures became larger and more abstract, boldly dominating the space. Meque worked quickly and spontaneously, often directly on the stone floor of Gallery Delta, where he spread out wrapping paper and his painting utensils. Apparently effortless, the painter succeeded in characterizing a pair of lovers.



*Luis Meque, „Couple II“, 1992
Collection Michael Drechsler, Kunst Transit Berlin*



*Luis Meque, „On Duty“, 1994/95
Collection Michael Drechsler, Kunst Transit Berlin*

In his 1991 painting "Couple II" - as in numerous other paintings - the Zimbabwean painter shows himself to be a master of reduction. In bold strokes he creates a portrait of a modern human relationship - atmospherically dense, full of movement, unsteady. The back figures move away from the viewer, towards a distance that seems to belong only to them. ^{xxviii}In her essay "Luis Meque: painting Zimbabwean darkness", Barbara Murray sees a relationship between Meque's artistic expression and traditional African art. "Traditional African art is not concerned with individuality, nor with naturalistic or anatomically correct rendition of people but rather with the representation of conceptual archetypes." ^{xxix} Meque's characters are types, they lacked the details. His interest is "less in a literal description than in symbolic relevance". ^{xxx} The artist took his motifs from the daily environment, the nightlife with its illegal pubs called "sheebens", the prostitutes called "mahoris", alcohol and noise. Meque reflects on people, he shows their passions, doubts, fears in a social milieu where money is constantly in short supply. He shows the daily struggle for survival between pump up and drudge, where life is always hanging by a thread, delicate and heavy at the same time. ^{xxxi}

Like Luis Meque, Ishmael Wilfred also attended the BAT workshop and initially depicted streets and houses of Mufakose. However, after he was hit by a severe cancer disease, he mainly dealt artistically with the horrors he suffered. He painted himself more and more as a victim, attacked and devoured alive by cannibalistic evil spirits. In his motifs, unforgiving demons dominate in large shades of red, yellow, green and black. While Meque, for all his social criticism, also aims for joie de vivre and light human experiences, Wilfred's pictures



Ishmael Wilfred, Cannibals and Victims, 1997
Gallery. The art magazine from Gallery Delta, No 16

take the viewer with them into a despair from which the artist could hardly get rid of until his early death. Both painters, Luis Meque and Ismael Wilfred, uncompromisingly show excerpts of African life and their own situation. When asked why he puts social concerns such as unemployment, street children, strikes, prostitution, and AIDS at the center of his painting, Luis Meque replied: "I am black. I think black. I paint black." ^{xxxii}

Ivory Coast

Scattered scenes of expressive art can also be found in West Africa. In Abidjan, the capital of the West African Ivory Coast, the painter Tamsir Dia has attracted attention since his participation in the 1993 Venice Biennale. His streaky, finger-painted human faces, bodies and groups of people mark the world of suffering, which is becoming more and more like a rising over the post-colonial situation in Africa. Dia called this series "Chanson Cruel", a cruel, wretched, evil song. The people Dia introduces appear as zombies, whose eyes scream and whose mouths come out of their faces. "La Mère et ses enfants" throws a single accusation in the face of the shocked viewer: 'What have you done to me and my children! How have you humiliated us so that we can only remember ourselves as the undead! You are also responsible for our disfigured faces and bodies! You, who only think of yourselves and are indifferent to our suffering! With this series, created in only three months, the painter not only meant his immediate surroundings, but also took into account the terrible conditions all over the world, at that time especially the war in Bosnia.



*Tamsir Dia, „La Mère et ses enfants“, 1993
Collection of the artist*

When asked about the cultural milieus that have particularly influenced his life, Dia first refers to African education and traditional myths. Then he attaches particular importance to the Muslim religion, but emphasizes the distinction between Arab and African Islam. And last but not least the orientation towards the French lifestyle seems to have been important for his father and thus also for his family. When it came to educational or career opportunities, his eyes were directed towards the former colonial power. When Dia attended the *École des arts appliqués* in Abidjan in 1969-70, it was a French professor who introduced him to the works of Cézanne, Matisse, van Gogh, Ingres and Delacroix. Later he immediately seized an opportunity to pursue further postgraduate studies in applied arts and art in France as a scholarship holder. In Picasso he met a master who embodied for him the "universality in painting", he developed a special closeness to Ensor and Schiele, and in de Kooning he found a painter whom he "admired".^{xxxiii}

Back in Africa, Dia was again confronted with the harsh reality of the Ivory Coast. Here the celebrated wealth and the capital bursting at the seams, there the rampant poverty and backwardness. He himself as an intellectual, internationally oriented artist, who "does not want to see himself limited to African culture", and there the traditions that he perceived as constricting. While artist colleagues from the Ivory Coast marketed "geometric compositions" in his opinion as authentically African, he rebelled, similar to his European colleagues at *art brut*, against a pleasing, ornate art that can be used so beautifully to furnish your own home. However: since singing the wretched song is dangerous in an autocratically led state like the Ivory Coast, the artist not only felt threatened but also "marginalized". Only his international breakthrough freed Tamsir Dia from the fear of being ostracized. And it was only after a few years, when he was already experimenting with other artistic methods, that the seeds he had sown began to sprout.



Watt Kang, „Femme au repos“, 1997
Exhibition in the self-initiated artist gallery in Grand Bassam

Inspired by the artistic experiments of Tamsir Dia, Watt Kang held his first exhibition in a self-initiated showroom in Grand Bassam in 1996. He equipped it with "wild" paintings and assemblages that were no less violently drawn and filled with oppositional spirit than the works of his colleague's predecessor. In addition to profane depictions, the show also contained religious motifs, such as a crucifixion scene or a entombment, which in their urgency can certainly be read as critical allusions to conflicts of the Ivorian present. So it was only logical that Kang and other young artists, such Ouakoubo and Zézé Donatien, gave their painting style the label of "art brut", which they proudly carry on to this day as a mark of their position.

Has expressionism returned to Africa? Yes and no. We can register artists in the most diverse regions of Africa who specifically use Expressionist language as a means of expression. Whether one can speak of "African Expressionism" or "neo-African Expressionism" in the "social realism" of many black artists, like E. J. de Jager, I think it's questionable. ^{xxxiv} De Jager already sees sufficient evidence for this characterization in artistic expression, which is characterized by an urban consciousness and its connections to the past and tradition. He subordinates "Expressionism", so to speak, as the very own African style to a part of black African modernist artists in South Africa. In my opinion, the typically "expressive" that de Jager believes to see in contemporary South African art works seems to be more of an interpretation from a Western perspective than an artistic attitude that the creators on the African continent have adopted themselves.

Other authors, for example Alexandra Gabriel, want to "avoid European-influenced terms such as expressionist, surrealist etc. if possible". However, when, as in Sane Wadu, they come into play when it is a matter of emphasising characteristic stylistic features, they cannot avoid using them. ^{xxxv} References between European-style expressionism and the

decidedly expressive contemporary artists in Africa cannot and should not be ignored. Just as the often robbed traditional works of art from Africa served as a source of inspiration for artists of the Brücke, the Blauer Reiter, Cubists or Surrealists, their ideas return to the African continent to reverberate as an offer with which the artists reaffirm their own culture and history. Those painters and sculptors who have discovered the power and energy in expressive expression choose an artistic approach that is impressive and enlightening in its response to the local and global challenges of its environment in our time.

In the postcolonial art of Africa there is "no more certainty, no more holistic, no more fixed structure".^{xxxvi} African artists go their own ways. Tamsir Dia puts it this way: „In France, I took what belongs to me. Picasso came and took things from my home, I went to France and took things that are mine.” For me the European tradition was a way of reunderstanding my own civilisation’s value, because Europe after the First World War was having a crisis of imagination, a crisis of development in an artistic sense, a cultural sense. And they turned to Africa. I also understand that they used my heritage to develop their own, so why can’t I take theirs, whatever is technically useful to me, to express myself?”^{xxxvii}

ⁱ see: Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 1. Auflage, Leipzig 1915, Ed. Rolf-Peter Baake, Berlin 1971; William Rubin (Ed.), „Primitivism“ in the 20th Century Art, New York 1984

ⁱⁱ Using the example of the Colon figures, E. G. Norris points out that although "external manifestations of European culture have been adopted, the traditional beliefs have not been abandoned. The material symbols produced by the Africans showed that their "world of symbols and thoughts ... was by no means so defensive and immobile that it was not possible to 'work' on the change of the foreign and evil by visible action and spiritual instruction for the benefit of the own community". Cf. Edward Graham Norris, *Colon im Kontext*, in: *Colon. Das schwarze Bild vom weißen Mann*, Ed. Jens Jahn, München 1983, pp. 50

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Esmé Berman, *Painting in South Africa*, Pretoria 1993

^{iv} quoted from Georges Ngala, *Négritude*, in: *Das Afrika-Lexikon. Ein Kontinent in 1000 Stichwörtern*, Wuppertal / Weimar, 2001, p. 443

^v cf. *ibid*, p. 444

^{vi} cf. Issa Ramangelissa Samb, *The Social and Economic situation of the Artists of the „École de Dakar“*, in: *Museum für Völkerkunde, Bildende Kunst der Gegenwart in Senegal*, Frankfurt/M. 1989, p. 117

^{vii} cf. Elisabeth Court, *Movements, centres, workshops and collectives*, in: *Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, seven stories about modern art in africa*, Paris / New York 1995/96, p. 299

^{viii} cf. Sunanda K. Sanyal, „Being Modern“: Identity Debates and Makerere’s Art School in the 1960s, in: Gitti Salami, Monaika Blackmun, Dana Arnold (Ed.), *A Companion to Modern African Art (Blackwell Companions to Art History)*, Hoboken (New Jersey) 2013, pp. 255-275

^{ix} Beier certainly also had in mind the example of the Nigerian artist Aina Anabolu, who in 1906 created the first portraits in oil of Europeans and in 1920 acquired academic degrees in Paris and London, before founding the first art school in Lagos. Cf. Everdine Nicodemus, in: *Clementine Deliss, 7 stories about modern art in Africa*, London 1995, pp. 29

^x Mbari Mbayo is a word used by the Yoruba market women of Oshogbo, which means something like: When we see this, we will be happy. Cf. Wolfgang Bender, Claus Peter Dressler, "When we see this, we will be happy", in: *Kunst aus Afrika, Horizonte ,79‘*, Berlin 1979.

^{xi} cf. Esmé Berman, *op. cit.* p. 247

^{xii} quoted from Monika Stölzel, *Zur traditionellen künstlerischen Produktion, modernen Kunst, Kunstausbildung, Kunstmarkt, Kunstkritik*, in: *Museum für Völkerkunde / Dezernat für Kultur und Freizeit, „Botschaften aus Südafrika“*, Frankfurt/M. 1987, p. 132

^{xiii} Sunanda K. Sanyal, *op. cit.* p. 269

^{xiv} quoted from Kahare Miano, in: Margaretta Sigert, „Globalizing Kenyan Culture“, *Dissertation an der Loyola University Chicago (Illinois) 2011*, p. 76

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- ^{xv} cf. Angelika Sommer, Aktuelle afrikanische Kunst, Unpublished manuscript, Berlin 2006, p. 2
- ^{xvi} It would require a separate art historical investigation to make these artists visible.
- ^{xvii} cf. Judith von D. Miller, Art in East Africa. A Guide to contemporary Art, London / Nairobi 1975; Alois Krammer, Gegenwartskunst in Kenia – Über sechs moderne Maler, Essen 1994; Margaretta Swigert, Globalizing Kenyan Culture, „Jua Kali“ and the transformation of contemporary Kenian art: 1960 – 2010, Chicago 2011 et al.
- ^{xviii} cf. Mehram Yaar, John Yoga goes back to the roots, in: Sunday Times, 14. 1. 1990
- ^{xix} cf. Sunanda K. Sanyal op. cit.
- ^{xx} John Yoga, Towards understanding Yoga's Artworks, Information sheet for the exhibition "Yogaabstractionism" at the Goethe Institute, Nairobi 1990
- ^{xxi} cf. Mehram Yaar, ibid.
- ^{xxii} Sane Wadu's art was political at a very early stage, as it never shied away from revealing even uncomfortable truths and, as Godard demanded in relation to film, "to use images and sounds as teeth and lips to bite with"; cf. Jean-Luc Godard, "Was tun?", in: Godard/Kritiker. Ausgewählte Kritiken und Aufsätze über Film (1950-1970), München 1971, p. 188
- ^{xxiii} quoted from Fred Mbugua, Sneers for art!, in: Now magazine, 17. 5. 1992. The exhibition "Michael Armitage. Paradise Edict" at the Haus der Kunst München (2020/21), a video will be published under the title "Künstlerportrait Sane Wadu", which conveys the artistic work of Sane Wadu in a limited space.
<https://hausderkunst.de/entdecken/videos/kuenstlerportrait-sane-wadu>
- ^{xxiv} cf. Derek Huggins, The Beacons – Zimbabwean Painting in the Last Fifty Years, in: Kunst aus Zimbabwe – Kunst in Zimbabwe, Iwalewa-Haus / Kunstmuseum Bayreuth, Köln 2001, p. 26
- ^{xxv} cf. National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Mapping - Zimbabwean Modern Art development (Internet presentation of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe)
- ^{xxvi} A lively insight into the history of the Delta Gallery is provided by the film "Art for Art's Sake - the Story of Gallery Delta" by Nigel Hulett (Juni 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvMCppR8OGw>
- ^{xxvii} cf. Derek Huggins, An African Genesis, in: Galerie Münsterland / National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Emsdetten / Zimbabwe 1995/1997, p. 31
- ^{xxviii} cf. Michael Drechsler, 95 Pinselstriche, in: Kunstwerk des Monats November 2013, www.kunst-transit-berlin.de
- ^{xxix} cf. Barbara Murray, Luis Meque: painting Zimbabwean darkness, in: Gallery – The art magazine from Gallery Delta No 13, Harare 1997, pp. 4
- ^{xxx} ibid.
- ^{xxxi} quoted from Derek Huggins, The Beacons..., ibid.
- ^{xxxii} cf. "An Interview with Tamessir Dia Thomas McEvelley", Venice, 10 June 1993. In: Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale
- ^{xxxiii} The much younger painter Gopal Dagnogo, also from Côte d'Ivoire, admits that he was inspired by de Kooning and others.
- ^{xxxiv} cf. E. J. de Jager, African Expressionism: On black visual art in South Africa, 1981; E. J. de Jager, Contemporary African sculpture in South Africa, 1979; E. J. de Jager, Art, artists and society: a social-historical perspective on contemporary South African black art, 1990 et al.
- ^{xxxv} cf. Alexandra Gabriel, Zeitgenössische Malerei in Kenia unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Künstler Joel Osswago, Meek Gichugu und Chain Muhandi, Freiburg 2001, p. 17 and p. 180
- ^{xxxvi} cf. Angelika Sommer, op cit., p. 9
- ^{xxxvii} Tamsir Dia, in: op cit., p. 61.

Images: p. 2, Irma Stern und Maggie Laubser, in: Esmé Berman op cit., Plate 22 and 19; p. 4, Sam Ntiro, in: Kunst aus Afrika, op cit., p. 34; Elimo Njau, in: Wegzeichen – Kunst aus Ostafrika 1974-89, Museum für Völkerkunde, Frankfurt/M. 1990; p. 12, Ishmael Wilfred in: Gallery. The art magazine from Gallery Delta, No 16; p. 13, Tamsir Dia, in: Fusion op cit., p. 63. All other images from Michael Drechsler ©