African Art: What and to Whom? Anxieties, Certainies, Mythologies

David Gall

It has taken nearly a whole century to publish two books on African art that recognize the continent as a complex cultural unit within which there is diversity, *A History of Art in Africa* (Blackmun Visona, M. et al, 2001) and *Africa, The Art of a Continent* (Phillips, T. 1995). Why has it taken so long for North and East Africa past and present to be included in texts labeled African art? Why were they not recognized as African? India, also a place of diversity of race and ethnicity, has not been similarly treated. The assumptions underlying the norms retarding such a representation of Africa were deeply rooted, their influence on scholarship related to African art and culture was profound and, even if attenuated at present, persistent. They have impacted on the organization of information related to Africa, influencing from library cataloging, the content of texts and videos, to museum layout and exhibitions. Only by becoming conscious of the pervasive power of this “hidden curriculum” can we take steps to counter its influence. Those underlying assumptions are symptomatic of European fears and desires related to African identity.

Why has that anxiety persisted for so long, and what has caused it to wane so that finally these texts could appear? What ideological and other forces were at work that determined the pace of change? What “new” dilemmas are replacing, or being added to (complicating, obscuring, weakening) the old? Are the old dilemmas taking new forms? What is the significance of such questions and their possible answers to art education?

Early Anthropology, Race, and Europe’s Modern Anxiety over Africa

The European anxiety over African identity was generated by its modern colonial and oppressive relationship to Africans in the old and new worlds. The need to construct European identity as essentially superior to all others was so powerful that it was imperative to remove any suggestion of civilizing influence of Africans or any other on European culture; and divest Africans generally, but black Africans particularly, of individuality and reflexivity. This is why Diop’s (1974) assertion of an African origin of civilization, and Bernal’s (1988) contention that modern historiography has been thoroughly penetrated and compromised by racism and continental chauvinism is deeply disturbing to the academic status quo.

If I am right in urging the overthrow of the Aryan Model and its replacement by the Revised Ancient one, it will be necessary not only to rethink the fundamental bases of ‘Western Civilization’ but also to recognize the penetration of racism and ‘continental chauvinism’ into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. The Ancient Model had no major ‘internal’ deficiencies, or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For 18th- and 19th-century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of a mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore, the Ancient Model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable. (Italics in the original, p.2)
Even scholars such as Wallis Budge (1973), who regarded ancient Egypt as essentially an African culture, made sure that his readers understood that it was inferior to Greece and Europe.

In order to achieve the second imperative Egypt and North Africa had to be culturally and racially removed from any influence or relation to black Africa. Here the science of Anthropology was pivotal in that it devised the categories of race. There is little doubt today that the racial categories of the nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists were conceived to legitimate the racial and ethnic apartheid hierarchies that imperial European powers needed to affirm their superiority (Diop, 1974, Bernal, 1988.). African culture identified with Negroes, pagan religions, and “tribes,” could be distinguished from North African cultures identified with Hamites and Semites. Its religions could be distinguished from world religions, especially monotheistic ones, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Its cultures were regarded as primitive rather than civilized and developed. In the racial hierarchy that prevailed black Africans, categorized as Negroes, were at the bottom of the ladder, correlated inevitably with “the masses,” intuitiveness, the collective unconscious. The majority of European scholars were persuaded by the “objectivity” of the convenient racial categories erected by early anthropological “science.” The most civilized black person was nevertheless beneath the most uncivilized white person. Combined with gender hierarchy this placed black women on the lowest rung of humanity. Altogether the black person stood precariously above the category of higher animals such as apes. As this was a structure erected to serve Europe’s imperial ambitions nothing in it anticipated the impact of “Negro” African visual-manipulative forms on European artists and culture.

Art history in Ascendance

In the first decade of the 20th century the conceptions of ‘typical’ Africans as uncultured underwent a radical change that influenced how African visual-manipulative forms were represented in texts. I am referring specifically to the impact of African objects, among others, on European artists of the early 20th century. This affected a revaluation of African objects in the eyes of European scholars. A pivotal moment in Euro-American attitudes towards works of African Culture was the Museum of Modern Art’s show of African art. The catalogue’s essay by J. J. Sweeney (1935), providing the requisite socio-historical background of the show to its viewers, lays bare the tension between his discipline and that of the “scholars of African culture,” anthropologists and ethnologists.

Anthropologists and ethnologists in their works had completely overlooked (or at best had only mentioned perfunctorily) the aesthetic qualities in the artifacts of primitive peoples... It was not the scholar who discovered Negro art to European taste but the artists. And the artists did so with little more knowledge of the objects’ provenance or former history than in what junk shop they had been lucky enough to find it and whether the dealer had a dependable supply. (p. 12)

Sweeney is certain where the “new” value for African objects resides. In the end, however, it is not the tribal characteristics of Negro art nor its strangeness that are interesting. It is its plastic qualities. Picturesque or exotic features as well as historical and ethnographic considerations have a tendency to blind us to its true worth. (Sweeney J. 1935, p.21)

In short, you do not need the knowledge provided by the scholars on African culture to aesthetically appreciate “Negro” art; it is accessible to all. Sweeney is certain that the true worth of “Negro” art lies in its plastic qualities.
Doubtful that Europeans could ever fully understand the "psychological content" of African art, he was nevertheless aware that the major obstacle to understanding "black" African art was the deep prejudice existing that denied black Africa any serious contribution to human civilization. The prejudice Sweeney had to combat assumed as fact the idea that the person of black African origin was savage, without history and culture of any sophistication, bereft almost entirely of intelligence and creativity. Sweeney does his best to contradict such notions by informing his readers of the great Negro kingdoms, Ghana, Songhai, and Benin.

To inform us of the racial and cultural composition of peoples of Africa he relies, nevertheless, on the current categories constructed or used by the "scholars," the said ones that were blind to the powerful aesthetic qualities of Negro African art. Thus Sweeney confidently tells us "the population of the African continent may be divided into five main stocks: Libyan, Hamite, Himyarite (Semite), Negro and Bushman, exclusive of the modern European population and the Indian and Chinese introduced by them" (Sweeney, 1935, p. 17). The exhibition and catalogue did nothing to counter the dominant assumption that Egypt and North Africa could, indeed should, not be thought of as black and African. Black Africa's inscription in other African identities could not be recognized; just as the terms Latino or Hispanic tends to make invisible the Afro Hispanic presence in Spanish speaking cultures of the Americas, so too were the racial categories created to distance "Negroes" from "civilization." What the elevation of black African visual manipulative forms to high value did reinforce was the ascription of intuitiveness and emotionality to black persons as an essential trait, reserving for white people, men especially, rationality and self-control.

For some African intellectuals, typified by the Negritude movement, this was at last recognition of their different essential strength. However, while some black and African artists and intellectuals may have been elated by such "recognition," some black scientists were not. It is not surprising that it was Diop (1964), a scientist, who exposed the spurious objectivity and racist motives behind early anthropology's racial categories.

Such is the opinion of the Frenchman Joseph de Gobineau, precursor of Nazi philosophy, who in his famous book On the Inequality of Human Races decrees that the artistic sense is inseparable from Negro blood; but he reduces art to an inferior manifestation of human nature: ... Frequently Blacks of high intellectual attainment remain so victimized by this alienation that they seek in all good faith to codify those Nazi ideas in an alleged duality of the sensitive, emotional Negro, creator of art, and the White Man, especially endowed with rationality. (p.25)

It was imperative for Diop that black Africans should realize they are no less rational, capable of objectivity and science, than any other group of people. The essentialist apportioning of reason and intuition to racial and gender constituencies could only keep black cultures under the supervision of European power. The motivation behind such structures is to make sure that European culture was substantially uninfluenced by any other and above all others. Non-European cultures can supply raw material, but European culture transforms and elevates it.

The claim that some ineffable quality is added to imported techniques, concepts or aesthetic styles often occurs in culturally peripheral nations like England, Germany, Japan, Korea or Vietnam. Cultural pride needs to be maintained in the face of foreign borrowing that is so massive that it cannot be denied, or where borrowings run counter to a hierarchy of cultural or 'racial' superiority. (Bernal 1988, p.198)
Bernal make the above statement in speaking about European perceptions of themselves as the progressive culture. Not surprisingly for the rational limb of European art, modern criticism and history, it was the modern European artist who, not as heirs, but as transformers, carried forward African knowledge to great new heights, as only Europeans could do, not Africans of the old or new worlds.

The early 20th century texts and the change they represent on the one hand leave untouched the racial assumptions about Africans, while on the other they further a positive change in the value of Black African visual manipulative objects, but essentially in formalist terms that would prove unsatisfactory to Afrocentrists and European anthropologists. The former appear to have no impact on African art history text: hardly ever referred to, they are marginalized. The latter have an increasingly big impact and generally are certain the formalist emphasis imposes European meaning on African art, dismissing what it meant or means to its creators; in other words devaluing their reasons for making objects.

There are several issues we need to be mindful of at this juncture. The formalist aesthetic elevates in one way but restricts in another the representations of Africa in art history texts. Also, we should be wary of assuming that the polarization of formal against contextual frames of interpretation is as necessary as they are present to be by the historians and curators on one hand, and on the other the anthropologists who emphasize the social context. Finally, the relationship of the "mainstream" to marginalized Afrocentric scholarship underscores the different value given to the issues of race and rationality, and is itself an undervaluing of African rationality and capacity to determine what's in the best interest of Africans.

Well into the nineteen eighties the status quo on the division of African culture into north and south of the Sahara remained in force along with its racial categories of justification. About the same time the tussle between the historian/curators and anthropologist had turned more favorable to the latter. The formalism of the historian/curators ceased to be convincing and a new cadre of art historians more sympathetic but not fully converted to the anthropological position came on the scene. They were not all of one persuasion on the north south divide, yet were uniform in their substantial exclusion of North African cultures from their texts on African art.

Willett (1971, p. 109-115), even though willing to acknowledge Ancient Egypt to be perhaps African in the racial sense, and definitely so in the cultural sense, was unwilling or perhaps unable to include ancient Egypt and North Africa in any substantial way. Six pages out of 288 are devoted to Egypt, in which the only visual evidence you see of Egypt are 3 illustrations of prehistoric art in a text on African art that aims to correct misconceptions of African art. Evidently, the misconception in most urgent need of correction is the formalist exclusion of the cultural context of African art. The value that African subjects give to African objects is critical, but the attribution of complex thought to Africans, which later some ethnologist and anthropologist were willing to concede, did not necessarily imply, nor secure recognition of equal rationality. Indeed, the assumptions of the childlike irrationality of the "primitive" and "tribesman" persisted well into the latter part of the 20th Century. The following statement from no less an authority than E. H. Gombrich (1972) was not only typical, it helped to make such attitudes pervasive.

It is very much as if children played at pirates or detectives till they no longer knew where play-acting ended and reality began. But with children there is always the grown-up world about them, the people who tell them 'Don't be noisy', or 'It is nearly bedtime'. For the primitive there is no such other world to spoil the illusion, because the members of the tribe take part in the
ceremonial dances and rites with their fantastic games of pretence. They have all learned their significance from former generations and are so absorbed in them that they have little chance of stepping outside it and seeing their behavior critically. (p. 23)

This is from his text *The Story of Art* now in its sixteenth edition. With such attitudes so persistent, to ignore the anxiety of African people over the issue of rationality because it was conveniently deemed the irrational unscholarly emotional vomit of extreme Afrocentrists, not only was a poor excuse, it was symptomatic of insensitivity to African feelings on that issue. We have to keep in mind that the institutionalized exclusion of Africans of the Americas from opportunities and recognition as artists was sustained, at least in part, by a combination of the tight tethering of aesthetic notions to race with an apartheid hierarchy that used the geographical interval to keep African creativity and intelligence potent only "over there" and confined to "back then."

Bascom (1973), Brain (1980), Gillon (1991), Seiber and Walker (1987) to name a few, sustain the divide by a refusal to include North Africa in their texts. Gillon’s book, *A Short History of African Art*, includes Nubia, and is quite informative otherwise, but he too keeps North Africa and Egypt out. Bascom (1973) does not share Willett’s (1971) opinion on the place of North Africa in a text on African Art. He is unequivocal: "The validity of excluding Egypt, Ethiopia, North Africa, and the Sahara is particularly evident in the realm of art. These four areas belong to a different world of art and, except in very remote times, the influence they have had on sub-Saharan African art has been largely negative" (P. 27). This is after he states that "Culturally the affinities of this large region are predominantly to the north and east, rather than to the south" (P.27). Brain (1980) is still convinced of the racial categories of the imperial era, therefore he can write

Among the Bororo Fulani any temptation to settle in villages is countered by an intensive propaganda to encourage a confidence in the beauty of their way of life, bolstered by a pride in Fulani racial characteristics. They have an aesthetic of the body, which has helped them retain their particular Mediterranean features to a remarkable extent. Young mothers massage the crania of their babies as if to model them into the desired shape—a kind of elongated sphere. They also manipulate the nose, as if they are trying to make it long and thin, giving it an elegant, aristocratic (non-Negroid) line with the forehead. (P. 55)

There are several points we must note. First there is no distinction made between race and ethnicity. This is a conflation quite congruent with, but not exclusive to, essentialist ideas that see culture as a "genetic" product of racial characteristics; many writers are not careful to make such a distinction recognizing the separate influences of somatic and cultural factors in identity construction. Nor is there any sense that North and East African cultures, and Middle Eastern ones, are racial and ethnic mixtures. How can we account for the persistent use of such categories? Eugenia Shanklin (1994) attributes it to silence on the issue of race by anthropologists.

It was not always the case that anthropologists dealt summarily with the concept of race; from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1940's and 1950's, the study of human races preoccupied scientists, and many ideas were put forth that we now see as erroneous, biased, or bigoted. In the 1960's, the notion of race as a valid physical or biological category was denounced by leading anthropologists and, by about 1975, discussions of race had disappeared from most anthropology textbooks. This silence has enhanced confusion about a concept that remains current in the popular imagination, one often used to justify social and legal decisions as if its scientific basis were fully established. (p.15)
The popular imagination referred to certainly includes historians of African art who continued to use the erroneous, biased and bigoted racial categories. Silence on the part of European anthropologists was complicit with the perpetuation of the categories created by their predecessors. But then whose self-esteem was at risk.

Even more indicative of the inertia of these ideas is the 1988 translation and publication of Rene Wassing's (1988) *African Art: Its background and traditions*. Originally published in 1968 in Rotterdam, Wassing's text not only sustains the north south divide, but also reproduces the racial categories of the 19th century. Amazingly it was deemed a text so important that it was worth reproducing for an English speaking audience? The motivation behind the text, like the authors mentioned above, is to place black African art in its cultural context. He is at pains to distinguish the African conception of 'artist' from that "as we know it." Individuals are certainly recognized in African culture "but the leitmotiv is function, the purpose of an object, rather than a standard of criticism founded on purely aesthetic principles, though these may not be lacking altogether" (Wassing, 1988, p. 1).

The "as we know it" signals the inextricability of the concept "art" from Western meaning European and Euro-American dominated social contexts. Wassing would have us assume that there is something coherent in the concept "art" for Western cultures, when in fact it is riddled with contradictions, especially in these latter days in which modernist notions have been severely contested by avant-garde initiatives to liberate the concept from the turn in meaning given to it by art institutions. The avant-garde's failure and the triumph of institutions and the institutional theory expose the real purpose of maintaining the term art: since objects in themselves are not art but become so by socio-cultural institutional determination, the important question is who will determine which objects and events are deserving of the cultural reverence bequeathed by the label art? Those most empowered in this respect are critics, curators, and art historians, the wordsmiths in the art business. It is interesting that neither traditional African objects, which were not art, nor European ones which are art, can do without the mediation of those empowered to designate inclusion or exclusion from art. That Africans did not have a concept of art (until Europeans came along), and Europeans have an untroubled one (or had until Africans came along), is not what is at stake, what is at stake is authority to determine value. Once the ordained institutionalized rituals have been performed passage from object to art is secured. The demarcation of the difference in this case is more for maintaining racial and cultural hierarchy than for telling us about African or European visual manipulative objects.

The resilience of the category "art" can be traced in part to the desire to maintain a civilized and superior modern West over Africa, the archetypal antithesis of modern civilization. Hence the need for Wassing to remind his readers of how "severely functional" African art is, and why "without it's collective cultural background it is scarcely understood" (p.1). This function of the category "art" has not escaped the notice of some scholars. McGaffey (1998) referring to the same observation made by Mitchell (1986), states in agreement,

Domestic debates about the nature of art thus implicitly serve to define our civilization in contrast to others. Art itself has an ambiguous position in this play of judgments: although as image it is inferior to, and subversive of, the authoritative word, it participates in the superiority of our civilization over those, which by definition are incapable of art. Or perhaps we should say art criticism. (p.222)

McGaffey titles his essay "Magic, or as we usually say, Art:" A Framework for comparing European and African art. That art depends on institutionally sanctioned belief, like the "magic" attributed to primitive and pre-modern uncivilized societies, has not escaped him. "Art" rescues European objects so labeled from the derogatory sense of the
irrationality associated with the word magic. When attributed to African objects the relation between the art not-art-ness of the objects remains to remind us all of the hierarchy involved between the two cultures, and of the basic rationality and irrationality of their members. To understand how the interplay of art/not-art and rationality/irrationality affects art history texts we must look more closely at anthropology and the scholars of African art.

Anthropology and the Mind of Africa.

Within the field of anthropology there was a desire to know what African objects meant to their makers and users. The cultural context in which they were produced was the focus of anthropological and ethnographic investigation. In fact, the anthropologists assumed unlike Sweeney that perhaps it is possible to understand the African mind. They might have been driven by imperial motives, but it nevertheless resulted in an attempt to understand African culture(s) and in being better informed about ideas they held. The studies conducted by Marcel Griaule (1965) and his team is well-known examples of the insight and understanding that can be gained from anthropology. But, they are exemplary too of some of its blindness, and have been criticized from diverse perspectives that include European and African critics. Their researches will serve as an occasion for me to examine the issues provoked by anthropology and of the uses to which it has been put in texts on African art history and culture.

Griaule (1965, and Griaule and Dieterlen, 1986) and his research team found that the Dogon and related groups such as the Bamana (Bambara) possessed a complex cosmology expressed in a mythology that, he and his team believed, structured every facet of their existence, and therefore could be used to explain the significance of art objects and other aspects of the culture of these groups. The basic thrust of the criticism of the Griaule School as far as its relationship to art is concerned is captured very well by Kate Ezra (1988).

To some critics, Griaule's is too idealized a view of Dogon culture, lacking the irregularities and texture of real life. To others, his conclusions appear to be based on a limited number of Dogon collaborators, like Ogotemmeli, whose individual perceptions of Dogon culture may not always be shared by others in their ethnic group. The Griaule School has been criticized for its lack of historical consciousness in treating Dogon society as a timeless, unchanging entity. The mythological system described by Griaule and Dieterlen may not be the coherent network of correspondences they claim it to be, for some readers have found internal contradictions and inconsistencies that make the system less useful as an interpretive tool. Finally, it has been suggested that the literature about the Dogon is more a reflection of the thought patterns of the French researchers than of the people being studied. (p. 17)

It is interesting that internal contradictions have been observed and consistency demanded in view of the fact that there is hardly a system of thought that can claim to be free of inconsistencies, in this case whether it is the interpretations of Griaule or his informants. And certainly plurality itself will make for inconsistency and divergence. More reasonable is the criticism of a lack of historical consciousness. In fact, just as Ezra essentially points to the modernist Eurocentric bias of Griaule, so too one can discern in her quote the "postmodern" preoccupation with plurality of social voices, historicity, and European self-criticism operating to acknowledge shortcomings, but also to affirm and sustain the impression of a strong stream of reflexivity in European academic traditions, by which it justifies its claim to objective superiority. Nevertheless, there is something quite "modern" in the postmodern desire of Griaule's critics to capture "the irregularities and textures of real life." If one can see and feel in Ezra's statement the
liberating arm of ever more self-conscious European scholarship—by
which it obscures its subjection to its own collective mentality—then
in contrast the African person and the meaning of her/his visual
manipulative objects remain limited to village and communal contexts,
limited to the past. One does not yet see or feel the African subject as
any more reflexive and self-determinative than before, rather the
African subject is the object of another network of concepts and frames,
more subtle perhaps, but with no risk of African will behind the reasons,
no glance forward, except unwittingly in unwitting forms. We can get
a sense of this interaction of past and present if we turn to one of Ezra's

Hountonji's critique of Griaule is part of his critique of
anthropology in Africa, and is situated in his castigation of it and some
of his fellow African intellectuals for perpetrating a deception, a myth;
namely that what has been offered by traditional informants, or worse
yet, has been distilled from them by western mediators such as Placade
Temples (1969), is African philosophy. Hountonji is scathing in his
dismissal of the latter; they not only are Western constructions of African
philosophy, but reinforce the notion that Africans cannot distill the main
concepts of their philosophies themselves, Europeans have to do it for
them. In Temples' intervention the African person is still unconscious
of the philosophy he/she embodies and lives. Articulation of its
principles is a task to be taken up by a more disciplined mind, the
paternal European one. Griaule's attitude is better, but still imbued
with superiority, and still does not accord his informant the dignity of
individuality. Rather, Griaule's informant, Ogotemmeli, is the
mouthpiece of a communal mind, a mere spokesman of a mass mind:
the Dogon mind, African mentality.

Ogotemmeli can elaborate on an African perspective, but it is
not his liberated reason surveying history and ideas and arriving at
revisions. For Hountonji (1983) philosophy is a process of engagement
with historical reality resulting in a continuous revision and expansion
of ideas similar to science. This "self reflexivity" and historicity that is
the universal characteristic of philosophy is not what Ogotemmeli
offers, but he is an individual elucidating a religious system. And
systems in Hountonji's estimation are impervious to development. How
should we regard Ogotemmeli? As a theologian? Yes. As a philosopher?
No.

One can question Hountonji's assumption that all Ogotemmeli
has done is elaborate a static view. Having insisted that Ogotemmeli is
an individual, can we be sure that he has not given his spin on a more
general perspective? After all, one of the criticisms of Griaule is that he
relied on a limited number of informants, the implication being that
others may have had different perspectives on Dogon cosmology.
Regardless of such reservations Hountonji's anxiety is for an African
individuality that is marked by a critical rationality. It is manifested in
his determination not to fool himself or his fellow Africans as to what
philosophy really is (even if one questions his restriction of philosophy
to a European form, rational speculation) and in his certainty that
Africans must develop, must recover perhaps after a long interval,
science and philosophy. This desire is manifested in Hountonji's
sympathy for Diop's (1974) project of excavating a scientific African
tradition from ancient Egypt. This anxiety for an African science and
philosophy, and for an individuality and society recognized in those
terms is not the deep concern of anthropology and its postmodern
fascination with plurality and difference. The latter is still concerned
with the (very modern) project of understanding and representing more
faithfully the Other, hence the critique of Griaule's method as unable
to capture "the irregularities and texture of real life." What is critical is
that the interest of the African person in countering the stereotype of
irrationality and superstition finds very limited, if any, presence in
available texts. If the modernist tendency regards non-European culture,
and particularly African culture as raw material to be translated into the higher denominations of European cultural currency, disregarding and denigrating African reflexivity as integral to its culture, then postmodernist scholarship, even if more sensitive to African personhood, nevertheless skirts the issue of African reflexivity as if it is irrelevant to the issue of African art.

Representations of Africa go through at least two phases. First, there is the specialist of African art who, focused on a specific social group or culture, has already filtered and distilled information from other sources to be incorporated into his/her argument. Then there are the general texts that draw on the specialist, indeed, rely on editorial panels drawn from the ranks of the specialist. It is not difficult to see how all the institutional reins on what qualifies as academically sound objective studies are profoundly linked to the modern European need to ensure that it retains authority over what is acceptable knowledge. Outside these two moments is that occupied by African scholars who, often trained in European universities, are also constrained by the same norms. But, besides that they, like reflective persons in any culture, have to sift "real" knowledge from the spurious.

The focus in academia is on what visual manipulative works mean in the narrow context of anthropology. In studies of Western art one will find books ranging from *Art and Physics*, (Shlain, 1991), to Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde*, (1984). African visual manipulative works are not approached in a similar way. There is limited use of African interpretive theories as may be found in divination or other practices. A similar situation would not happen with Chinese art, where it may not be out of place to use interpretive ideas structuring the I Ching. In a nutshell, the range of interpretive strategies applied to African visual manipulative forms is limited; therefore the “mind” generating them seems limited, especially compared to Europe or Asia. Who has constrained the meaning of African visual manipulative forms in this way other than those who authorize the texts on African art.

The confluence of the narrow focus with nationalist tendencies worked not only against diffusionist tendencies that would derive anything profound in Africa from ancient Egypt, but also against pan-African tendencies generally. It is also runs counter to more generalized levels of meaning, and is more congruent with the interest of having a more "textured" view of African culture. DeMott (1979), for example, demonstrates the inadequacy of Griaule and his school's attempt to explain the meaning of Dogon sculpture exclusively via mythology. She resolves the claims of mythology, iconic images, and performed ritual, especially the former, by allowing for interplay of the three. This was justifiably corrective of the over application of mythology as an explanatory instrument. However, nowhere in her text does DeMott mention the astronomical information for which the mythology was a metaphor. That information indeed points to a tradition of thought grounded in observation of reality (even if that reality has not all been confirmed by modern science). It leads one beyond the stereotypes of superstition associated with animism, ancestors, the supernatural, and "magic," and is indicative of a more general African possession of that kind of knowledge. There is little doubt that Dogon astronomical knowledge profoundly impressed Griaule (1965) and his fellow researchers, and that he was convinced that these seemingly simple people were possessed of profound knowledge linked to ancient African and European traditions, which he called "Mediterranean" traditions.

It would seem, therefore, that the Zodiac of the Mediterranean peoples could be explained from the point of view of Dogon cosmology and metaphysics. But the European [Griaule] had no illusions about how such an argument was likely to be received by recognized specialists in academic circles. . . . Has it not been established once for all that the African has nothing to give, no contribution to make, that he cannot even reflect ancient forms of the world’s thought? Has he not always been relegated to the level of a slave? (p.215)
Yet this astronomical knowledge is left out of DeMott's specialist text, and also never finds a place in general texts on African art otherwise. Why? The distance between black Africa and "Mediterranean" cultures must be maintained at all costs. The modern "Aryan Model" (Bernal, 1988, p. 1) did it by denying any influence of Egypt on Greece. More recent anthropology and archeology's bias for indigenism, and postmodern emphases on plurality and difference arrive at a similar end through sympathy for nationalist tendencies and by downplaying—even dismissing pan-African suggestions. Masolo (1994, pp. 68-83), an example of one of the "otherwise," leaves Dogon astronomical knowledge out of his text on African philosophy in which he discusses Dogon ideas, He sticks quite safely to the metaphysical ideas but never refers to the astronomical information to which they are related. Most academics, European or African, do not want to look stupid by siding with something so incredulous as a "primitive" tribe of Africans having astronomical knowledge that modern science has only recently arrived at. Such concerns are not stuff "on the ground" as a bias for historicity may prefer, being more concerned with ideas. Rather, it is "too" up in the air and to that extent ungrounded and unreal. What is critical then, is not so much the meanings that Dogon mythology and objects can hold, but the sense of effrontery to the ego of Western science and civilization that they may present. Because it is unwise to trouble this ego, effectively guarded by a very dubious objectivity, Dogon astronomical information is filtered out of art texts.

There is also the unwillingness to accept the coexistence of science and religion together in African contexts, in an equation different to the estranged one that was imperative to European progress. A similar attitude is directed toward all non-European traditions of scientific knowledge, whether it is the science of yoga in India or concepts of the "chi" force in Far Eastern traditions. African cultures are far more susceptible to European tendencies to dismiss their knowledge as unscientific than those of India and the Far East because generally information is oral, without a textual tradition.

How can such information be irrelevant to the "meaning" the dances, masks, and rituals hold for Dogon culture, and from them for African cultures generally? Space suits, panels with lights and buttons, connotate and symbolize to any viewer the scientific knowledge and related space exploration that is the achievement of modern science. What has determined that African visual manipulative works cannot have that kind of range of meaning? Only the peculiar kind of objectivity that will not acknowledge scientific thought to non-European traditions. Therefore, the impression that must prevail about Africa and African peoples, which the mediating scholar has decided is truer, is of a superstitious people with fantastic mythologies that have no ground in reality.

Others have been critical of the narrowness of frames used by art historians. In a review of a Bamana exhibition and catalogue Sarah Brett-Smith (2002), while complementing the contributions to the catalogue, is of the opinion that failure to take into account the practice of slavery in Africa's past not only gives a distorted view of the past, but also reduces the significance of objects.

The problem with the ahistorical viewpoint from which most of the otherwise excellent contributions to this book suffer is not just that it provides us with a sanitized picture of the African past, but also that on a purely intellectual plane it may stop us from a truly profound understanding of the powerful objects in this exhibition, and the creative invention and risk taking to which they are a witness. (P. 942)
Such is the way meaning shifts within frames, and from one frame to another, and expands to cumulative value when diverse frames held together lift an object from banal and limited meaning to complex and profound value. Just as information about African slavery makes a difference to the meaning of Bamana objects, so too would Dogon astronomical knowledge make a difference to how any reader regards Dogon objects. The expansion to frames other than the art historical or anthropological clearly is necessary if we are not to be left with restricted notions of meaning for African visual manipulative objects.

**Conclusion**

What forces delayed the writing of texts that included the arts of African continent as a whole? The most powerful drag on change is the deeply and subtly embedded assumptions generated by European imperialism and global dominance. This is true of racial categories, as well as through the use of the category "art." The assumed superiority of European science above all others in every respect, serves to keep the range of interpretive frames from which art historical texts view African cultures in narrow bounds. It is a modern presumption that others did not reach where European science has reached today, contradicted by confirmations by the said science of things propounded by non-European traditions. A confluence of the national identity interests of African states and cultures with trends in anthropology and archeology biased toward indigenous development overshadows pan-African aspects. Ironically, even in this postmodern moment that sees culture as a collage, the overly organic concept of culture persists, so that cultures cannot be seen to "meet" or coincide in terms of ideas in moments of similarity that transcend time and space. These are the forces that delayed the vision of African culture we are now seeing.

That the recent general texts on African art finally acknowledge the continent as a whole, its diversity, difference, and plurality, that it is multiracial and multicultural, indeed anciently so, is a step forward.

It promises to be a trend that will take texts out of the old formulas of representation of African cultures. A sad aspect of these changes is that many of those who battled against those norms we now see displaced, are labeled simply Afrocentricist, and major concerns articulated by them for all people of African origin have not been properly addressed by any of the texts including the recent ones, especially those related to "civilization" and black Africans.

New dilemmas will emerge. Ruth Phillips' (2002) review of three exhibitions of African art signals what the "new" dilemmas are like. The key point she made that is relevant to my argument is captured in the following quote:

"Under colonialism, and even more after its formal ending, the West has been exporting museums and their technologies of representation as integral parts of modernity's achieving, memorializing, and nation building practices... What these three exhibitions show, then, is how successfully museological conventions have been exported and, to some extent, translated, so that now, in the era of globalization, museum savvy can be reimported to the "mother countries" through collaborative curatorial processes (p.951).

Phillips tends to see only how Western culture successfully dominates others, even subtly in so-called post-colonial postmodern times. While there is truth to that, what is also true is the subtle influence of the others on the West, and this subtle influence remains unrecognized and unacknowledged. The terms postmodern and postcolonial are too linear to accommodate the fact that different cultures had arrived at structurally similar realizations at different times. What is needed are studies of the subtle influences of the others on European and Euro-
American thought; and of how others, in this case people of Africa and its Diaspora, are incorporating European ideas and reinterpreting those derived from their own traditions.

Of the two texts that have dealt with the African continent as a whole, *Africa: the art of a Continent* is not without its critics. Rankin and Liebhammer (1996) for example regard it as perpetuating ahistorical notions of African visual manipulative forms and of keeping in place Eurocentric notions of the civilizational priority of North African cultures. Yet, the fact that prior texts seem to accept the exclusion of North African cultures from Africa makes such an inclusion a sign of progress. On the other hand, the narrow interpretive frames used by art historians makes the Eurocentric priority given to North African cultures, result not only from persistent ideas about cultural hierarchy, but also from the failure to see deeper connections between them and African cultures south of the Sahara which the use of more diverse frames would have facilitated. The lingering problem of “priority” based on racial or cultural difference cannot be resolved by simply flipping around the emphasis from south to north and visa versa, nor by affirmations of plurality and difference fashionable in this postmodern moment, but requires a more complex use of diverse frames of interpretation to allow the complexity of African culture to be seen. It will also allow the cognitive side of African objects to stand beside the emotive one, allow a more rich aesthetic to prevail, and dispel the notions of African irrationality that persist. What is needed above all is more writing about African visual manipulative forms by Africans from diverse perspectives, for this is why one never thinks about European objects in limited frames, their producers and consumers have viewed them from many perspectives.

There are also questions art educators have to ask themselves. Have we been critical enough of the assumptions of anthropology and African art history? Are we perpetuating myths about African visual manipulative objects? Have we taken sufficient account of the impact of non-Western cultures on the West? A deeper understanding of African visual manipulative traditions will offer insights that we art educators have overlooked because we are still working from within contexts that are limited. Given the move in such academic projects as material culture studies, and the thesis by Bürger (1984) and Huyssen (1986) that the avant-garde was a drive within Europe to reconnect art with life, how can we maintain such an unbridgeable gulf between African visual manipulative traditions and European ones? A related problem is the notion that African art is almost all religious, any notion that science is involved is suppressed, as it would seem to fly in the face of mainstream science. It may be that art educators will need to be less restrictive than their historian and anthropologist colleagues in seeking perspectives from which to interpret Africa’s visual manipulative traditions, objects and practices. Also, the failure to take into account African anxieties related to rationality not only contributes to the persistence of “aesthetic” emphases in African art exhibitions and texts, but to the perpetuation of a condescending portrayal of objectivity and rationality in African culture, in which the “difference” in African objectivity is more often than not a euphemism for irrationality. The stakes involved are too high for people of African descent, and all others, for art educators to ignore.

References


