

By introducing this text we intend to continue some of the reflections proposed by [Mantia Diawara](#)'s essay. In "African Art and Authenticity: A Text without a Shadow" Sidney Kasfir questions criteria used to define 'authenticity' in African art, a concept that is still determinant for gallerists, buyers and museums in the West (and in Africa).

Notwithstanding recent alternative ways of classifying and exhibiting 'African art', several issues underlie this definition: Who classifies it? How, by whom, is it legitimated? What and who defines what is 'authentic' or 'contemporary' in 'African art'?

Such debates may however occlude, as Kasfir's text shows, another implicit, although unquestioned, premise: the notion that there is a clear distinction between modernity/ change and tradition / immobility, a dichotomy that ultimately depends on a division between the 'West and the Rest'. This distinction is still present in many approaches, namely those that intend to recognize innovation in African art, which does not always amount to dissociate it from the exotic, even when included in global art circuits under the rubric of 'contemporary African art'.

The present text selection intends therefore to suggest a point of departure to question and discuss criteria of classification and canonization, including those that visitors to this website may read in the proposals of ArtAfrica.

The ArtAfrica Coordination

Note: We thank Sidney Kasfir for providing us with the images accompanying the text.

## **African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow**

Sidney Kasfir

*There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the 'dominant ideology'; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text... The text needs its shadow... subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro.*

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

A controversial debate about African art that has surfaced in the past few years concerns its role as a mirror of Western colonial history. The criticism prompted by the 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art<sup>2</sup> was reopened, and subverted, by 'Magiciens de la Terre' at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. In the former, precolonial African and Oceanic art was presented as a set of powerful divining rods for proto-Cubists, Expressionists and Surrealists. In the latter, the enigmatic to (Westerners) nature of contemporary African, Asian, and Diaspora art was translated into the art of the conjurer (*magicien*), and at the same time, this act of conjuring was equated (quite misleadingly) with the cultural production of a Western avant garde. In both exhibitions there was an attempt to demonstrate the 'affinities' between the 'tribal and the modern', Third World and First World.

Postmodern critics have used these exhibitions (the first a powerful articulation of the Modernist paradigm, the second a flawed attempt at paradigm-breaking) to comment upon the intellectual appropriation of African and other Third World art by Western museums and collectors<sup>3</sup>.

Meanwhile, most mainstream institutions and a surprising number of scholars continue to think about African art and its public presentation as if this debate were not taking place at all. In most of the major exhibitions of African art currently circulating in the United States there is little attempt, either explicit or implicit, to subvert omniscient curatorial authority<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps it is time to cast a shadow on this authority by re-examining the way it operates in defining African art, both as commodity and as aesthetic act.

### **The West and the Rest<sup>5</sup>**

Two questions are central to this debate: who creates meaning for African art? Who or what determines its cultural authenticity? The authenticity issue has been raised many times in the pages of the journal *African Arts*,<sup>6</sup> but I want to examine it specifically in the light of the current discussion of cultural appropriation, since in the past it has been reviewed in terms of fakes, forgeries, and imitations – terms that are themselves heavily laden with the weight of earlier ideas about African art and culture, most specifically the primacy of 'traditional society'. To talk about authenticity, it is first necessary to unpack the meanings assumed for 'traditional society', and by extension, 'traditional art'.

A major underpinning for the argument I am making here is that what we call 'traditional society' is a major legacy of our Victorian past, owing as much to nineteenth-century Romanticism and the social-evolutionary notion of disappearing cultures as to any reality found in Africa itself. In African studies it continues to function as a more benign, euphemistic version of that recently shelved artifact, 'primitive society'<sup>7</sup>. The idea that before colonialism most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent, and highly integrated has been such a powerful paradigm and so fundamental to the

West's understanding of Africa that we are obliged to retain it even when we now know that much of it is an oversimplified fiction.

This assumed combination of isolation and a tightly knit inner coherence has given rise to a presupposition of uniqueness in material cultures (William Fagg's 'tribality', leading to unique tribal styles<sup>8</sup>), ritual systems, and cosmologies. Nowhere has this orthodox and conservative view of African culture been so obvious as in Dogon studies, where the Dogon were made to seem unique not only in Mali but in all of Africa.<sup>9</sup> Such ideas are losing their currency, but only slowly.

In African art studies our most uncritical assumption has been the before/after scenario of colonialism, in which art before colonization, occurring in most places from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, exhibited qualities that made it authentic in the sense of untainted by Western intervention). Most crucially it was made to be used by the same society that produced it. In this scenario, art produced within a colonial or postcolonial context is relegated to an awkward binary opposition: it is inauthentic because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently, tourists and the new African elite.

This view of authenticity, though now questioned by many scholars, is still held firmly by major art museums and the most prominent dealers and collectors. It is, almost by necessity, the implicit principle of selection for the art seen on display in large-budget, foundation-supported circulating exhibitions such as the recent 'Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought' and 'Gold of Africa' as well as in the permanent displays of the National Museum of African Art, the Metropolitan Museum's Rockefeller Wing, and the National Museum in Lagos. In addition, such art, ideally precolonial or more often dating from the early colonial period, is the subject of virtually all the advertisements placed by dealers in the pages of *African Arts* and *Arts d'Afrique Noire*.

Ironically, what we could call canonical African art – that which is collected and displayed and hence authenticated and valorised as 'African art' – was and is only produced under conditions that ought to preclude the very act of collecting. Seen from an anticolonial ideological perspective, collecting African art is a hegemonic activity, an act of appropriation; seen historically, it is a

largely colonial enterprise; and seen anthropologically, it is the logical outcome of a social-evolutionary view of the Other: the collecting of specimens as a corollary of 'discovery'. Even if none of this were acknowledged, one cannot escape the internal contradiction in the working definition of authenticity – namely that it excludes 'contamination' (to continue the specimen metaphor) while at the same time requiring it in the form of the collector.

It is possible, in wishful thinking, to circumvent this collector or at least neutralise him or her: a simple gift from a local ruler to a colonial administrator (Ruxton in the Benue), to a missionary (Sheppard in Kuba country), or to an explorer (Vasco da Gama on the Swahili coast) might seem non-interventionist.<sup>10</sup> But we know from Leo Frobenius' diaries how very acrimonious, even hostile, such exchanges could become within the web of conflicting interests that surrounded them. The notion that they were somehow devoid of political or economic motive on either side seems patently ridiculous now, yet that is the implicit assumption in the 'invisible collector' required of paradigmatic 'authentic' art.

A second fiction in the construction of the canon is that no important changes occurred in artistic production during the period of early contact collecting – that is, neither style nor iconography nor the role or position of the artist was affected in any important way by the initial European presence. That this is an equally dangerous and naive assumption can be shown by looking at the radical transformation in warrior masquerades in the Cross River and Ogoja region of south-eastern Nigeria with the coming of the British. The early documentation of these masks described them as skulls worn on the dancer's head.<sup>11</sup> Very few examples exist in collections, since these were not 'art' by any stretch of the colonial imagination. Those few still extant are starkly real skulls, over-modelled with mimetic touches such as hair and false eyes, or rearticulated lower jaws. As the *pax Britannica* depleted the availability of enemy skulls, these were replaced by carved wooden imitations, in some areas (Cross River) covered with skin for greater realism and in others (Igede, Idoma) painted white with black cicatrisation patterns<sup>12</sup>. It is these, and not the truly precolonial decorated skulls, that have been accepted into the canon and are highly sought after by collectors as authentic. Here Western taste, not Western

contamination, has dictated what is art and what is merely ethnographic specimen.

Another example is Yoruba resist-dyed textiles. Prior to the importation of factory cloth from Manchester, these were made from handspun, handwoven cotton that was too coarsely textured, too soft, and too thick for complex *adire* techniques and patterns to develop. Yet the elaboration of *adire* in the heavily missionised town of Abeokuta, and the growth of its production, were in no way thought of as inauthentic by collectors until the 1960s, when it began to be produced for a Peace Corps and tourist market in colours other than indigo. In both of these examples it was not the intervention of Europeans and subsequent modification of a tradition that marked its 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' phases. Rather, 'authentic' was defined in terms of the collectors' taste.

If there were no such thing as collections, if the processes of appropriation, reclassification, and public display did not exist, it might be possible to push back the before/after scenario to a much earlier gate – say, to the advent of Islam in West Africa or to the coming of the Portuguese. Seen strictly in terms of their cultural impact, these earlier encounters were surely as important as colonialism. But because such a revision would limit authenticity to a handful of collected objects, almost none of which would be sculpture in wood, it could not possibly find acceptance in the world of museums and collectors. The canonical 'before' therefore was defined originally in terms of a Victorian ideology led by a felicitous combination of imperial design, social Darwinism, and collecting zeal.

But the fact is that Africa is a part of the world and has a long history. There are innumerable before and after in this history, and to select the eve of European colonialism as the unbridgeable chasm between traditional, authentic art and an aftermath polluted by foreign contact is arbitrary in the extreme. While it is very true that both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries were periods of 'fast happening', in George Kubler's phrase,<sup>13</sup> it would be naive to assume that no other such periods existed in African art history.

What is far more likely is that there were several – some associated with the spread of new technologies (brass-casting, weaving, tailoring, the introduction

of the horse), others with the spread of ideas (Islam, a sky-dwelling creator god, the concept of masking). I am suggesting that there is no point in time prior to which we could speak of the ascendancy of 'traditional culture' and after which we could speak of its decline. The old biological model of birth, flowering, decay, and death imposes on culture not only an order that is seldom there but also, in this case, the strong temptation to identify the onset of 'decay' with the onset of colonialism. This is the historicist flaw in the authenticity test used to construct the canon of African art.

The third fiction concerning African art is that it has a timeless past, that in the long interlude before colonialism, forms remained more or less static over centuries. Occasional pieces of evidence that support this view, such as the Yoruba-derived divination board collected at Ardra before 1659<sup>14</sup>, have been extrapolated to create a mythic steady-state universe of canonical art. The logical corollary of the 'timeless past' is the fiction of the 'ethnographic present', that eve of contact forever fixed in the narrative structures of contemporary ethnography. Even scholars who readily acknowledge the absurdity of the former may frequently cling to the latter as their putative time frame. In doing so they privilege this artificially constructed eve of contact as if what came afterward is by definition less relevant, and (one hardly need say) less authentic. Yet only societies in which all change was compressed into a cataclysmic surge of Western penetration could be imagined to cease to exist after that moment. For nonexistence, in the cultural sense, is assumed when change is read as destruction of a way of life, rather than its transformation. And indeed, in much of the writing on African art, this after-contact period is simply a blank white space on the page.

Thus in typical exhibition catalogues of Yoruba art, we learn that there are *orisas* and their ritual objects. but as a rule there is no mention of how these fit into the complex twentieth-century renegotiation of *orisa* discipleship, Islam, and Christianity that now characterises Yoruba religious life. Instead, the reader is invited into a fictional ethnographic present where these radical changes do not intrude.<sup>15</sup>

Just as casting African art in an ambiguous ethnographic present denies it history, insistence on the anonymity of African artists denies it individuality.<sup>16</sup>

Far from seeing this anonymity as a result of the way African art is usually collected in the first place – stolen or negotiated through the mediation of traders or other outsiders – we have come to accept it as part of the art's canonical character. The nameless artist has been explained as a necessary precondition to authenticity, a footnote to the concept of a 'tribal' style that he has the power neither to resist nor to change.<sup>17</sup> Although the principal architect of the tribal style notion, William Fagg, nonetheless recognised that 'the work of art is the outcome of a dialectic between the informing tradition and the individual genius of the artist,'<sup>18</sup> it has been more common to speak of the artist as simply bound to and by tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Among French dealers and collectors of African art, 'authentic' frequently means 'anonymous', and anonymity precludes any consideration of the individual creative act. One Parisian collector told Sally Price: 'It gives me great pleasure not to know the artist's name. Once you have found out the artist's name, the object ceases to be primitive art.'<sup>20</sup> In other words, the act of ascribing identity simultaneously erases mystery. And for art to be 'primitive' it must possess, or be seen to possess a certain opacity of both origin and intention. When those conditions prevail, it is possible for the Western collector to reinvent a mask or figure as an object of connoisseurship. But when Price asked one such connoisseur whether he thought the creator of such a work might be aware of these same aesthetic considerations, the answer was an emphatic denial.<sup>21</sup> The 'primitive' artist, in this Africa of the mind, is controlled by forces larger than himself and is consequently ignorant of the subjective feelings of aesthetic choice. In such an equation, the Western connoisseur is the essential missing factor that transforms artifact into art.<sup>22</sup> In a seminal essay on issues surrounding the authenticity of Oriental carpets,<sup>23</sup> Brian Spooner argues that an important aspect of the carpets appeal to Western collectors is this marked cultural distance between maker and collector, and the corresponding lack of information about the artist that it usually implies. In such situations the collector is able to construct a set of attributes that describes the 'real thing'. Ironically, it is not knowledge but ignorance of the subject that ensures its authenticity.

The corollary of this all-in-one anonymity is that one artist's work can stand for a whole culture, since the whole culture is assumed to be homogeneous (yet at

the same time unique). Although it is a tautology, this has long been a major argument for the concept of a tribal style: an identifiable cultural style is a major ingredient in defining ethnicity, and a Yoruba (Idoma, Kalahari, etc.) artist is one who works in that identifiable style. In a video accompanying one currently circulating exhibition, a pleasant-voiced narrator explains, 'The Yoruba believe...' I couldn't help wondering, Which Yoruba? Muslims? Baptists? Aladura? Those who still follow the *orisas*? Lagos businessmen? Herbalists?<sup>24</sup> Omniscient curatorial authority has the power to flatten out these hills and valleys, but should it? Is the public really incapable of understanding that African cultures, and the arts they produce, are not monolithic? Do we really want a 'text without a shadow'?

The faraway collector also reinvents each mask or figure as an object of desire: a projection of alterity (in earlier times, the colonised 'primitive'), seen in whatever intellectual fashion prevails at the moment. The Kongo nail figure became a 'fetish', every female image a 'fertility emblem', and so on. Naming and categorising are interventions as important as connoisseurship. When catalogues of collections appear, they are frequently organised under a dual 'tribal style' and 'culture area' rubric. While classificatory principles may be necessary to organise a large body of material, they obscure certain correspondences as well as illuminate others. Although Yoruba Gelede and Maconde Mapiko masks often bear striking visual similarities, these are never recognised or commented upon because the masks appear in widely separated parts of any catalogue or exhibition: the Guinea Coast and East African sections, respectively.

The most powerful of the classificatory interventions are the words 'traditional' and 'authentic', which become shorthand designations for 'good' and their negations 'non-traditional' and 'inauthentic', which become synonymous with 'bad'. In the same way, a Dogon mask to which a recognised expert applies the epithet 'export piece' is instantly transformed from an object of desire with a high market value to a piece of flotsam afloat in the postcolonial world. The language of classification used to canonise or decanonise a piece of African sculpture is powerful, one sided, and usually final. A sculpture's worth as an aesthetic object, a piece of invention, a solution to a puzzle of solids, voids, and surfaces, is left totally unexamined unless it first passes the authenticity



test. No Kamba carving, however brilliant or extraordinary, would get past the front door of any reputable New York gallery specialising in African art. It would be said to 'lack integrity', implying that somehow nontraditional artists have detached themselves from their cultures and that their work is therefore inauthentic.

In the earlier debates about authenticity in African art, much discussion centred on copies, replication, and fakes. We may ask what kind of assumptions underlie such questions.<sup>25</sup> What is being falsified? And in whose eyes? On the one hand the construction of the idea of 'tribal' style presumes a fairly high degree of uniformity from one artist's work to another, and such replication has been accepted as part of the 'traditional art' paradigm. But when a contemporary carver from another ethnic group (or tribal style area) intentionally takes up this same style, the resulting object is said to be a fake because, it is claimed, there is conscious intent to deceive. The same claim is made even if the carver is a member of the 'traditional' culture that produced the object in the first place, if he artificially ages the piece or allows it to be thought old by the buyer. Given the absence of a signature or known artists hand in most cases, intentionality is seemingly crucial in deciding what is authentic and what is fake.

But it is not so clear that the distinctions of these Western collectors are very resonant in the mind of the African artist. Asante carvers are an interesting case in which artists' attitudes toward copying successful forms have been well documented.<sup>26</sup> For Asante (and many other) carvers,<sup>27</sup> imitating a well-known model is considered neither deceptive nor demeaning; rather, it is viewed as both economically pragmatic and a way of legitimating the skill of a predecessor (if an old model) or paying homage to a fellow artist in the case of a recent innovation).<sup>28</sup>

This attitude stems directly from the way in which carving is regarded as a livelihood. While this view is well known, it bears repeating in this context: whereas Western artists often see their work primarily as a vehicle for self-realisation, that attitude is as unfamiliar to African artists as it is in African culture generally, unless we refer to elite artists trained in Western-type art schools. Typically, the carving profession, or any other that results in the

construction of artifacts (brass-casting, weaving, pottery-making etc.), is seen as a form of work, not qualitatively very different from farming, repairing radios, or driving a taxi. This does not mean that it is not 'serious' – work is indeed serious – but that it is viewed matter-of-factly as aiming to satisfy the requirements set down by patrons. One does whatever is necessary to become a successful practitioner.



**Fig 1. Jua Kali Blacksmith , Kamakunji Market, Nairobi, Kenya, 1987. Photo: Sidney Kasfir.**

Furthermore, in precolonial patron-client interactions, it was the custom for artists to try openly to please patrons, even if this meant modifying form. Not surprisingly, that attitude has carried over into colonial and postcolonial relations with new patrons, including foreigners. It is unclear why making what the buyer prefers should be regarded by Western collectors as acceptable in the past but opportunistic now. One reason may be that they see types of payment for traditional commissions – yams, goats, iron rods – as less commercial than currency transactions, and this has the effect of 'softening' the economic motive for the transaction. But the more likely reason is the Western collector's failure to recognise that even precolonial African art was essentially 'client-driven'.<sup>29</sup>

The other major difference between African artist and foreign collector is the antiquarianist mindset of the latter. African art in a Western (or equally,

Japanese) collection takes on greater significance, prestige, and market value if it is old. While most Africans do not share this attitude toward their art, they are willing to accept the fact that collectors prefer 'antiquities' and<sup>30</sup> consequently see nothing wrong with replicating them. The intentional deception (and it happens with regularity) occurs more frequently in the marketing of a work by traders and later by art dealers. It is usually less a matter of collusion between artist and trader than of the marked difference between African and Western thinking about the significance of one-of-a-kind originality.

On the question of imitation and its relation to deception, we could conclude, first, that Western collectors have nothing against imitation in the sense of artists following time-worn prototypes – in fact a completely unsurprising mask or figure in a well-documented 'tribal' style is usually preferable to something wildly original and idiosyncratic, since there are no standards for judging the worth of the latter. Second, the same Western collector (or museum professional) is distinctly uncomfortable with any tampering with the prototypical imitation, through attempts to make it look old or through imitation by an artist outside the group with whom the prototype is thought to have originated. Either of these serves to de-authenticate the piece, regardless of its merits as a work of art. Third, most (I am guessing here, but based on fairly broad experience) non-elite African artists, whether rural or urban, would find these ideas arbitrary rather than obvious, and more than a little baffling in their seeming inconsistency toward imitation.

If now go back to the question of what is being falsified in the case of 'fakes', we might wish to look beyond the short range, In a centre-versus-periphery view of cultural production, the centre defines legitimate means and ends, to which the periphery can only respond, If we allow that collecting became the coloniser's role, can it be surprising that the colonised responded with the willing supply of what the centre seemed to demand? That the 'antiquity' may have been new both complied and retaliated – subversion producing its 'own chiaroscuro'.

Authenticity as an ideology of collection and display creates an aura of cultural truth around certain types of African art (mainly precolonial and sculptural) But the implications of authenticity extend even further into an ideology of recording culture, whether through film or through writing, The ethnographic film is

particularly vulnerable to this form of selective perception. In 1978 in Ibadan I watched a crew of perfectly serious German filmmakers systematically eliminating the Jimmy Cliff T-shirts, wristwatches, and plastic in various forms from a Yoruba crowd scene at an Egungun festival. They were attempting to erase Westernisation from Yoruba culture, rewriting Yoruba ethnography in an effort to reinvent a past free of Western intervention – a pure, timeless time and space, an 'authentic' Yoruba world,

Charles Keil relates the story of the Tiv women's dance known as Icough and how it was modified by filmmakers (in the face of considerable Tiv resistance) to fit the requirements of cultural authenticity and the attention span of a Western audience.<sup>31</sup> A dance sequence of eight segments lasting well over an hour was reduced to three; the usual audience of 'enthusiastic supporters pushing forward for a better look or breaking into the dance to press coins on perspiring brows' was completely absent. But most serious, the aesthetics governing the dance itself – what Keil refers to as the Tiv expressive grid – were modified by the insistence of the filmmakers that the women change their costumes from the Western-style, circle-skirted dresses and pith helmets usually worn for this dance to the more common Tiv 'native' wrappers. What is subsequently lost in the film is the interaction of costume and movement that is central to this particular dance:

The dresses in the original dance, all flounced and starched out in circular hems around the knees, provided a moving circumference against which knee bends, elbow actions and neck angles could counterpoint themselves...the removal of pith helmets from the heads of the dance co-leaders seems a petty suppression to complain of until one realises that two pivotal hubs that literally cap the presentation and balance the skirt circles are missing"... *Not only were the central symbols of a 'rite of modernization' taken away or repressed, but the power of Tiv tradition to master those symbols, incorporate them into Tiv metaphor, was being denied.*<sup>32</sup>

Having been shown David Attenborough's film *Behind the Mask* (1975), my students are always shocked to learn that tourists regularly visit certain Dogon villages. The film artfully presents the Dogon as a 'pure' culture, untainted by contact with outsiders. In an equally popular film, Peggy Harper and Frank Speed's *Gelede* (c. 1982), the Western Yoruba mask festival is performed in a nearly empty space with almost no audience, even though we know that in fact

it takes place in a crowded marketplace amidst noise, dust, and confusion.<sup>33</sup> Presumably, clear camera angles took precedence over contextuality. By strict definition these are not documentary films, because they control and regulate participants. Yet they are widely used in both museums and university classrooms. Despite their flaws they have defined and authenticated the performative aspect of African art for a generation of students.

I have quoted at length the instance of the filming of the Icough dance because it provides such a striking analogy to the redefining of objects such as masks, in the process of removing them from the scene of their production and use and installing them in a museum. This reduction and stripping away of meaning by the removal of 'extraneous' facts' -whether a decaying masquerade costume or a starched dress and pith helmet – serve seemingly opposite purposes in the two cases. In the dance, it self-consciously traditionalises the performance for a film audience that expects the exotic; in the example of the mask installed in a museum, the removal of accoutrements reduces it to uncluttered sculpture that can be displayed in the Modernist idiom, as pure form. But both cases involve the same act of erasure and imposition of new meaning. And both are so frequently done that we take them wholly for granted.

### **Art and Artifact: The Creation of Meaning**

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This leads to a very troubling question: who creates meaning for African art? It is difficult not to conclude that it is largely Western curators, collectors, and critics (whose knowledge, as we will see, is deftly mediated by entrepreneurial African traders along the way) rather than the cultures and artists who produce it. This is not to suggest that the original work possesses no intentionality. It is fully endowed with intention by its creator as well as by its patrons. But the successive meanings an object is given are fluid and negotiable, fragile and fully capable of erasure as it passes from hand to hand and ultimately into a foreign collection. Here it must be invented anew, most often in the context of a museum culture dominated either by a Modernist aesthetic that looks for 'affinities' with the Third World or by a potentially deadening 'material culture' approach. A handful of museums have found other ways of reinventing African art that strive consciously to be anti-Modernist and anti-hegemonic, such as the

Centre Pompidou's 1989 installation of 'Magiciens de la Terre',<sup>34</sup> or richly contextualist, such as the Museum of Mankind's Yoruba installation of the mid-1970s; they are reinventions nonetheless, since that is an inescapable aspect of what museums do. Even the contextual approaches that are consciously designed to preserve the integrity of cultures represented are far from neutral. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that designing the exhibition is also constituting the subject, and that 'in-context approaches exert strong cognitive control over the objects, asserting the power of classification and arrangement.'<sup>35</sup>

James Clifford further reminds us that prior to the twentieth century, African artifacts were not 'art' in either African or Western eyes,<sup>36</sup> Jacques Maquet made the same point earlier,<sup>37</sup> referring to African art as 'art by metamorphosis'. In Western museums these objects underwent double taxonomic shift – first from exotica to scientific specimens when the earlier 'cabinets of curiosities' gave way to newly founded museums of natural history in the late nineteenth century; and following their 'discovery' by Picasso and his friends in the early decades of the twentieth-century, they underwent a second promotion into art museums and galleries where they were 'contextualised' as art objects.<sup>38</sup>

This migration of objects through classificatory systems can be mapped topologically as well diachronically. The experienced museum-goer knows that the art-museum display policy in which an isolated mask or figure is encased in a vitrine or lit with track lights means to convey the information that the object is to be apprehended as 'art'; the same object embedded in the busy diorama of a natural history museum display is meant to be read differently, as a cultural text. In the former, its uniqueness is stressed, in the latter, its 'con-textuality'. Yet, as museums, both confer cultural authenticity upon the objects displayed there, which are canonised in the popular coffee-table title, *Treasures of the ...*

That from an African perspective these objects are not art in the current Western sense is too well known to discuss here. Our museum collections, on the other hand, are constituted by criteria that we, and not they, devise. The fact that the various Idoma (Alago, etc.) lexical terms for 'mask' are wholly non-aesthetic will not perturb even the most inexperienced museum docent. As Maquet suggests,<sup>39</sup> why not define art as those objects that are displayed on museum walls? Every

collected mask or figure is defined and given boundaries by its surroundings: the village shrine house (where it is wrapped in burlap and hung out of the reach of white ants when not in use), the trader's kiosk in an African city (where it rests among hundreds of other de/recontextualised objects and is first given an 'art' identity), the Madison Avenue gallery (where it is put through the 'quality' sieve and aestheticised with other 'quality' objects), and finally the home of the wealthy collector (where it is reincorporated into a domestic setting, but unlike the situation in the village, is on constant display, 'consumed' visually by collector and friends). Taken in sequence, the definitions overlap at least somewhat, but between the first and last there is an almost total reinvention of how and what the object signifies.

### **Tourist Art and Authenticity**

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Of all the varieties of African art that trigger the distaste of connoisseurs and subvert the issue of authenticity, surely so-called tourist art is the worst-case scenario. In the biological model of stylistic development it exemplifies 'decay' or even 'death'; in discussions of quality it is dismissed as crude, mass-produced and crassly commercial; in the metaphors of symbolic anthropology it is impure, polluted; in the salvage anthropology paradigm it is already lost. The Centre for African Art in New York decided to omit it from its supposedly definitive contemporary art exhibition 'Africa Explores', presumably for some or all of the above reasons.

At the same time it is a richly layered example of how the West has invented meaning (and in this case denied authenticity) in African art. Without Western patronage it would not exist. It is a Marxist's nightmare, hegemonic appropriation gone wild. But what actually is 'it'? The rubric 'tourist art' seems to include all art made to be sold that does not conveniently fit into other classifications. It is easier to state what it excludes: 'international' art made by professionally trained African artists and sold within the gallery circuit, 'traditional' art made for an indigenous community, and 'popular' art that is non-traditional but is also sold to, performed for, or displayed to 'the people',.

To someone only passingly familiar with the African urban scene, this definition

might seem to leave only curios – ‘airport art’ – the carved giraffes and elephants seen in any Woolworth’s or in front of any tropical Hilton. In fact it leaves a great deal more, from the ingenious (embroidered helicopters and jewellery from recycled engine parts); to the inevitable (Samburu beaded watchstrap covers), as well as various types of sculpture and painting. But by assigning everything else under one classificatory, and inevitably dismissive, label, Western art museums and galleries cause all other ‘unassigned’ forms to become invisible, to fall through the canonical sieve. The erasure is as complete as the remaking, on film, of the Icoug dance or the Gelede festival.

Conversely, the fact that considerable numbers of tourists buy a type of art does not make it tourist art by current definitions. Osogbo art is sold mainly to tourists and expatriates resident in Nigeria, but because it was canonised as authentic contemporary art back in the 1960s, most writers do not treat it as tourist art.<sup>40</sup> Yoruba *ibeji* figures, originally used to commemorate dead twins, but frequently transformed into art objects in galleries from Abidjan to Nairobi, are also sold to tourists in great numbers (being small and usually cheaper than masks) but are not considered anyone to be tourist art. The reasons are different in the two cases. Osogbo art escapes the tourist label by being the work of several individually known artists, each with a recognisable The most famous of these, Twins Seven-Seven, was included in the ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ exhibition in 1989. When he first came to prominence in the 1960s, he received the same extravagant praise and adulation from the art world as Chéri Samba garners today. But what of the host of imitations Twins’ work has spawned, each being peddled on the sidewalks of Lagos and Ibadan? Most are lacking in skill and inventiveness, but one or two are almost as good as the work of Twins himself. Is that work tourist art? Neither patronage nor quality seems to be the crucial factor.





Fig 2: Beads for sale in a Nairobi market stall, 1991. Photo: Sidney Kasfir.

In the case of the *ibejis*, this status demotion is avoided by virtue of the artist's intention: they were made to be used by a Yoruba patron in a sacred context. The fact that they are sold to tourists nowadays cannot dislodge their place in the canon. Yet even intentionality is not a reliable test for admission to, or exclusion from, the canon. Let us take the frequently cited case of the Afro-Portuguese ivories. While clearly made for foreign consumption, they suffer no disapprobation and are classified as tourist art by museums or collectors<sup>41</sup>. For one thing they are precolonial in date and therefore do not fit the view of tourist art as a colonial and postcolonial phenomenon. The antiquarianism of Western museums and collectors strongly predisposes toward their admission to the canon on the basis of age. But there is another, equally important reason: they are technically works of great virtuosity and they are carved from ivory, a material associated with expense and rarity in Western taste. Tourist art is thought to be both crude and cheap. Objects seemingly escape this classification by being old, very expensive, or technically complex.<sup>42</sup>

We have seen then that the 'tourist' in 'tourist art' is not the crucial distinction that keeps Western authorities from admitting it to the canon. Rather it is the belief that it is cheap, crude, and mass-produced. But all African art is cheap, in art market terms, prior to its arrival in the West. Much 'authentic' art is crudely fashioned – Dogon *Kanaga* masks, for example – but this seems no deterrent to

its popularity with collectors. And what of mass production? Even a humble curio is d crafted. Mass production implies the use of standardisation techniques and assembly lines – hardly a description of what goes on in a carvers’ co-operative. What the Western connoisseur imagines, with obvious distaste, is a kind of machine-like efficiency, a perception that totally obscures the fact that the working relationship among these carvers is fundamentally no different from, say, that of a group of Yoruba apprentices in an Ife workshop turning out everything from Epa masks to nativity scenes.<sup>43</sup> Even in very large Kamba co-operatives. Such as the Changamwe outside Mombasa, the hundreds of carvers are broken down into separate sheds of a dozen or fewer men who maintain close ties over many years, who train new apprentices, and who may even be relatives from the same village in Ukambani, the Kamba homeland. Within these co-operatives, apprentices learn from, and are permanently indebted to, master carvers in much the same way as in the past. The Kamba were not makers of wood sculpture in the precolonial period; they were celebrated as blacksmiths, ivory carvers, and by the late nineteenth century, as beadworkers. Their ability to take up curio carving on a wide scale did not suddenly appear one day out of thin air, was made possible by their long collective experience as craftsmen.



**Fig 3: Sculptor at work, Kamba Carvers Cooperative, Changamwe, Kenya, 1991. Photo Sidney Kasfir.**

John Povey’s comments on Kamba carvers are typical of the inaccurate way in which carvers’ co-operatives are envisioned: ‘The conveyor-belt system of their

production prevents any suggestion that they can offer career options for local artists. They require factory workers'.<sup>44</sup> There is role specialisation in many co-operatives, which leads to repetition of certain forms in response to consumer demand. On the other hand there are also superior carvers as well as 'hacks' in these groups – not everyone works at the same technical level. This fact is well documented for the Kamba,<sup>45</sup> Asante,<sup>46</sup> Kulebele,<sup>47</sup> and Maconde.<sup>48</sup> Working alongside a young apprentice who carves only spoons may be a master carver such as Lawrence Kariuki (the only Kikuyu member of the Nairobi Kamba co-operative), who may work on the same piece for weeks and carves only on individual commission. But once again, it would appear that the forced anonymity that results from collective group identity - the 'tribal style' – causes Western critics to lump together the good, the bad, and the indifferent under a single rubric.

Even originality, the *sine qua non* for 'significant' Western art, occurs as frequently in tourist art, in other types. Innovation, after all, is fundamental to a genre that depends upon its novelty for acceptance by the foreign patron. Yet this very inventiveness is found offensive by connoisseurs of African art. Why? Perhaps because it violates the canonical model of a timeless and eventless past. Paula Ben-Amos, in an incisive comparison of tourist art and pidgin languages, argued for another important difference between traditional and tourist arts: a different set of rules for the manipulation of form itself.<sup>49</sup> Whereas precolonial African sculpture was characterised by 'rigid symmetry and frontality', the deviance of tourist art from that norm results in either 'surreal distortion' or a move toward naturalism. The former is often seen as 'grotesque' by connoisseurs of traditional art – a normative judgment based on the preference for the more 'classic', self-contained precolonial styles. This comes down to the problem of taste, an important issue often neglected in the authenticity debate and one that I have treated elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

Behind and beneath many of the attempts to dismiss the authenticity of so-called tourist art is its inability to resist commodification. No collector wishes to see a piece nearly identical to his in a shop window, since in Western culture there is no prestige (and little investment potential in owning a thing that is not one-of-a-kind. Spooner calls attention to the 'obsession for distinction' that motivates many collectors of Oriental carpets.<sup>51</sup> Kirschenblatt-Gimblett notes the

same problems of commodification in the collection of American folk art and relates this to the Modernist agenda as it is spelled out by the critic Frederic Jameson: 'Modernism conceives of its formal vocation to be the resistance to commodity form, not to be a commodity, to devise an aesthetic language incapable of offering commodity satisfaction ...'.<sup>52</sup> It would be difficult not to see the relevance of these arguments to the fears of collectors or to the acquisition policies of art museums.<sup>53</sup>

Maconde sculpture,<sup>54</sup> which since 1959 has been produced in two substyles, one naturalistic (*binadamu*, 'human beings') and one anti-naturalistic (*shetanior jini*, 'spirits'), is a perfect illustration of the bifurcation between a precolonial, self-contained symmetry and a postcolonial expressionism. It is routinely rejected by fine art museums and owned mainly by those who do not collect canonical African art.<sup>55</sup> But not all museums are concerned with canonicity. A Maconde collection has been accepted by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, as testimony to the role played by aesthetics in the processes of cultural change. The ecumenically inclined organisers of 'Magiciens de la Terre' at Centre Pompidou also ignored precedent and included the work of one Maconde sculptor, John Fundi. He is quoted in the catalogue with a single sentence: '*Toutes mes oeuvres ont une histoire.*'<sup>56</sup> This storytelling is one more violation of the rules of the canon, since 'traditional' sculpture lacks a narrative character.

Fundi's art is indeed 'grotesque' by the prevailing canon of taste that precolonial art has generated. It is also an act of *bricolage*. What this means is perhaps clearer if we begin with the artist's name, one more 'subversion which creates its own *chiaroscuro*'. In Kiswahili, a *fundi* is an artisan,<sup>57</sup> but the word also carries the connotation of 'one who fixes things'. If my bicycle chain is broken, I take it to the bicycle *fundi*. Also to the point, it may connote a person who has the peculiar skill or talent needed to 'bring things off'<sup>58</sup> He is the East African equivalent of Claude Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur*,<sup>59</sup> mending what is broken with whatever materials come to hand. In the Third World, everything useful is collected and recycled: old rubber tyres become sandals, cows' tails become flywhisks, safety pins and zippers become jewellery. This inventiveness, which requires a constant shifting about of means and ends, causes the products of the *fundi's* labour to be constantly in flux.

This habit of mind, making a virtue of necessity, is as true of the woodcarver as it is of the man who repairs bicycles. The first Maconde *shetani* carving is attributed by the carvers themselves to Samaki Likonkoa, who in 1959 was carrying a 'normal' *binadamu* figure to the trader Mohamee Peera in Dares Salaam when one of its arms was accidentally broken off.<sup>60</sup> Disconsolate, Samaki returned home, where he dreamed that night of his dead father. In his dream, his father instructed him to smooth the broken shoulder socket and gouge out the eyes. It would then represent a bush spirit, a *djinn*.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that none of the Dar es Salaam immigrant Maconde had made a *shetani* before was immaterial, since this was not intended for use within the Maconde community. It would be sold by Peera to anyone who walked into his shop and fancied it. Samaki's act of *bricolage* came to him in a dream in which tradition (his father) sanctioned innovation by relating it back to tradition.

(Bush spirits are an integral part of Maconde belief.) This spiralling off into new forms would have been much more difficult in the precolonial past. But the radically different situation introduced by foreign patronage opened the way for invention. In precolonial art, object, symbol and function have represented as tightly bound up with each other in a highly structured system, leaving little for either subverting or extending meanings.<sup>62</sup> But the new genres developed under colonialism (and I include in this category both 'popular' and 'tourist' art) feed upon the fluid, highly situational patronage of the African city, not the more predictable needs of chiefs, age grades, and descent groups. This city is linked in turn to the former colonial centre, with its foreign patrons and exotic culture, and to the villages to which its inhabitants regularly return and from which they draw an important part of their identity.<sup>63</sup>

Paula Ben-Amos marshalled Levi-Strauss' argument that the semantic function of art tends to disappear in the transition from 'primitive' to modern.<sup>64</sup> In modern art (or more accurately, Renaissance to nineteenth-century European art) it is replaced by a mimetic function. That this happened in Benin tourist art is clear from Ben Amos' interview with Samson Okungbowa: 'The commemorative head (made by a traditional guild) represents the head of a spirit, not a human being. Its purpose is to instil fear and it is made for a shrine. No one was ever afraid of an ebony head!'. This example likens tourist art (the

ebony head) to pidgin languages, Ben-Amos concludes, because in both cases there is a restricted semantic level and a limited range of subject matter.<sup>65</sup>

Questioning these limitations, Bennetta Jules-Rosette has argued that the semiotic content of tourist art does not disappear but only becomes hidden.<sup>66</sup> Although operating in a few standard mats and a more or less 'generic' style of representation, both tourist and popular painting 'use metaphor, metonymy, and allegory to point to an unvoiced layer of meaning that remains implicit in the artist's rendition'.<sup>67</sup> Significantly, the subject here is painting, not sculpture. Painting has a more literary, 'message bearing' character than the plastic arts and is also a greater artifice, collapsing three dimensions onto a flat surface. As such, it is riper for semiotic analysis than sculpture. Building upon the classificatory system of Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian,<sup>68</sup> Jules-Rosette extends it to include tourist as well as popular art. In her argument, both tourist and popular Zairian (Congolese) painting express collective memory and consciousness through the employment of stereotypic themes such as idyllic landscapes ('things ancestral'), *colonie belge* paintings ('things past'), and scenes of city life ('things present').<sup>69</sup>

An interesting question then is how applicable these categories are to other forms of so-called tourist art. Transferring this typology to Maconde sculpture, one might classify *ujamaa* poles (family trees) and Mama Kikamonde ('Mother of the Makonde', derived from the matrilineal ancestor) as 'things ancestral', the well-known caricatures of Europeans, especially priests, as 'things (of the colonial) past, and genre pieces such as the barber giving a haircut as 'things present.

Unfortunately, the most innovative sculptures, the *shetani* figures, are too complex to work into a simple chronological scheme such as this. In a memory frame they represent a qualitatively different dimension, a persistent 'past in the present'. Yet except for the 'things ancestral', they are the most powerful examples of collective memory at work in Maconde sculpture, referring as they do to a set of beliefs about nature spirits, *nnandenga*, embedded in Maconde oral traditions and masquerade performance. At the same time, as *shetani*, they are inventions for a modern audience of foreigners. As effective as this schema is for eliciting the 'messages' of popular and tourist paintings in Zaire (now

Democratic Republic of Congo) and Zambia, it requires recasting to fit the problem of Maconde sculpture. The issue of collective memory, I will argue, is crucial in this rethinking, though not in quite the same way as it works for the patrons of Zairian popular painting.

The Maconde carvers of Dares Salaam and its environs are immigrants from Cabo Delgado province in their Mozambican homeland. They reinvent their culture in the alien landscape of Tanzania, usually in scattered settlements outside Dar and Mtwara. In the early 1970s they still harboured a reputation for fierceness among the local Tanzanians, partly because they chose to live apart and partly because they alone continued to cicatrise their faces and file their teeth: the same acts of cultural inscription that appear on their *mapiko* initiation masks. This high visibility is shared by their *shetani* figures, which deviate so radically from the typical curio shop repertoire. One might say that the uneasiness felt by the Dar es Salaam locals is equivalent to the discomfort of 'proper' art collectors, both of whom see the Maconde as culturally alien to their landscape. How then are we to understand what the Maconde are doing? And why should it be rejected by Western cultural institutions as inauthentic?

My own sense is that they are engaged in a complex renegotiation of Maconde identity, particularly the identity of the artist, in this new cultural setting. It is this that gives *shetani* carvings their 'emergent' quality, identified by Karin Barber as the most distinctive feature of the popular arts (which, ironically, are rejected by fine art museums and collectors for this very reason).<sup>70</sup> In Dar es Salaam the Maconde carvers were at pains to separate themselves from local Zaramo carvers who produced small curios. The Maconde, unlike the Zaramo, could not be commissioned by a trader to produce a certain number of carvings of a certain type in a certain number of days. To the consternation of the traders, they regarded themselves as 'artists', meaning that they made whatever they felt like making that day, week, or month. They would also travel back and forth frequently, crossing the Rovuma River and ascending the Maconde Plateau in northern Mozambique.

This seemingly casual attitude towards carving could not have improved their financial status, since an unpredictable output could only make an already meagre living more precarious. Rather, it had to do with the Maconde carvers'

self-perception. Carving is work, but it is also a form of mediation between the old life, still very much alive in collective memory ('We come from Mueda, we all come from Mueda'), and the new one outside the Maconde homeland. Some carvers continue to make the *mapiko* masks for initiation rituals while fashioning *binadamu* or *shetani* figures for sale to foreigners. There is no overlap in style, content, or clientele between these two types of transactions.

But it would be wrong to conclude, as Vogel has done,<sup>71</sup> that only the *mapiko* masks are authentic cultural expressions. In the artists' eyes, all of their sculptures are equally so: one makes 'what people want', whether in the indigenous or the foreign patronage system.<sup>72</sup> Barber's example of West African bands who record different music for the local and the foreign markets is an excellent analogy.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, as Jean Comaroff comments, in a situation of contradictory values introduced through radical social change, 'traditional' ritual (or here, art) serves increasingly as a symbol of a lost world of order and control'.<sup>74</sup> But we might also hypothesise that new forms of cultural expression serve to anchor the immigrant's experience in a series of mediations required by the adopted culture and its setting.

The *shetani* carvings do this very successfully because they are in demand by a new clientele and also serve to legitimate a set of beliefs about the Wild that encompass both the old and new lands. They are 'signs ... disengaged from their former contexts' that 'take on transformed (and visually concrete) meanings in their new associations'.<sup>75</sup> In short, the artist continues to play the role of the *fundi* or the *bricoleur*.

Why this role should be regarded by Western connoisseurs as inauthentic is perhaps because until now, authenticity has been intimately associated with that 'lost world of order and control', but not with any of the cultural renegotiations following that loss. We need first of all to recognise that the precolonial past, seen from the present, is an idealisation for Europeans and Africans alike; second, it is crucial to relocate the notion of authenticity in the minds of those who make art and not those on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean who collect it.

### **Context is Everything: The Street, the Trader, and the Market**

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It is not only in museum displays and in the houses of connoisseurs that the meanings of African art are reinvented. Until now, I have focused on the contemporary artist and the collector. But unless we consider the intermediary in this transaction, the description is incomplete in an important way. In two seminal essays and his book *African Art in Transit* (1994), Christopher Steiner has drawn attention to the mediation of knowledge by traders in African art,<sup>76</sup> using as his example the Hausa, Mande, and Wolof traders in Cote d'Ivoire. I will attempt to expand this world to encompass their counterparts in Nairobi.

Unlike most cities in West Africa, Nairobi is awash with tourists every day of the year.<sup>77</sup> It has many more boutiques and galleries than one finds in a typical West African capital, and these exist at every rung of the economic ladder. Most noticeably, there is almost as much West African and Zairian (Congolese) art for sale in Nairobi as there is art emanating from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia. Yet these are surface differences: underneath, the same principles apply as in Abidjan, Douala, or Kano. The dealer, whether a Kamba market trader, a Gujarati shopkeeper, or an expatriate gallery owner, plays the same role in framing, contextualising, and authenticating the artifacts on sale.

For example, a brisk business exists in Maconde sculpture as well as in copies of it. The Maconde do not live in Kenya, but it is still profitable to take their work across the Kenyan-Tanzanian border from Dar es Salaam. First, there is the fully-fledged gallery treatment given to major works by established Maconde sculptors. These are displayed in isolation under spotlights and authenticated by stories about origin myths concerning the image of Mama Kimakonde, the first woman.<sup>78</sup> As with Zairian painting, sellers understand that the storytelling aspect of the figure is important to Western buyers. As a result, ingenious hagiographies of this or that *shetania* bound ('the *shetani* who causes road accidents', 'the *shetani* who lurks in the pit latrine and causes dysentery', etc. Everyone is satisfied: the gallery owner makes his sale, the buyer feels she has bought an authentic artifact, and the Maconde carver is allowed to keep his own cultural knowledge to himself. There is also an active book market for Maconde sculpture. Its inventiveness knows no bounds, and every year the pile of romanticised fiction (mainly by German authors) written about the Maconde grows a little higher:

While a practised eye can tell the difference, street hawkers in both Nairobi and Mombasa manage to sell 'Maconde' carvings that are made by non-Maconde carvers working in the industrial area of the two cities. Various hardwoods can be made to look like ebony by a judicious application of black shoe polish. (The Maconde themselves do not use these other woods, but ebony is scarcer in Kenya than in Tanzania.) Smaller in scale and price and more clearly commodified, these are often the 'Maconde' carvings that make their way to American department stores. All of these marketing strategies correspond closely to Steiner's observations on the presentation, description, and alteration of objects by Ivorian traders.<sup>79</sup>

Not only Maconde and pseudo-Maconde sculpture but other popular artifacts can be purchased, on a sliding price and quality scale, in galleries or boutiques near the large international hotels, from *dukawallahs* (petty traders in small Indian shops near the city centre, in the city market or in one of the nearby overflow markets, and finally from street hawkers. Between the sidewalk entrepreneur and the well-appointed boutique or gallery there may be a ten-fold difference in price. But technical quality will vary too, because boutiques are willing to pay artists more than a street hawker would. For example, Maasai women from the Ngong hills outside Nairobi go to the city once a week to sell their beaded neck rings and ear pendants. First, they take their work to Alan Donovan's African Heritage Gallery where his buyer will evaluate it and purchase only the best pieces. What is left over is then taken to street vendors, who will pay considerably less for it (and sell it for less). Finally the women visit Lalji and Sons, the trade-bead shop that has been in business on Biashara Street since the early 1900s. Here, they stock up on bead supplies for the coming week and return to Ngong.<sup>80</sup>



**Fig 4: Artisans selling their work to African Heritage Gallery, Nairobi, 1987 (foreground: Nubian baskets, middleground: Maasai decorated milk gourds). Photo Sidney Kasfir.**

Inside African Heritage, a combination of sophisticated marketing techniques and superior quality merchandise makes it an irresistible beacon for both collectors of ethnic jewellery and collectors of art.<sup>81</sup> Original designs by Angela Fisher,<sup>82</sup> as well as new and old pieces of Maasai, Samburu, Rendille and Turkana beadwork are sold in an ambience of authenticity and casual chic. Mijikenda grave markers sprout in the garden beside the coffeeshop. West African sculpture, from the strictly canonical (Yoruba *ibejis*) to the recently invented (large Akan masks), graces another section. Decorated gourds and intricately woven baskets mediate the art/craft boundary. Upstairs there are batik shifts and safari clothes. Like a Ralph Lauren advertisement, African Heritage evokes the quintessentially Kenyan Settler/Hunter style of Karen Blixen or Denys Finch-Hatton. It reminds us that objects have the ability to create personalities for their owners, not just for their makers. And no one is more aware of this than the trader. Not only is the Maasai woman renegotiating her own identity as an artist by selling her work to a boutique, but the woman buying and subsequently wearing it is also inventing a new persona for herself.

That the Maasai make subtle differentiations in the colours and patterns of things made for strangers versus those made for each other does not matter here. What is salient is the playing out of new identities on both sides.



Fig 5: Handwoven straw mats for sale, African Heritage Gallery, Nairobi, 1987. Photo Sidney Kasfir.

In the none-too-distant past (say, fifteen years ago) it would have been claimed that both of these renegotiations were culturally spurious and that only a Maasai woman making beadwork for herself and other Maasai could lay claim to cultural authenticity: anything else would be an illustration of the cultural 'decay and death' theme that inevitably follows colonial contact.<sup>83</sup> But this nomadic jewellery, now much in demand, coexists simultaneously in four or five distinct cultural settings in Nairobi alone. Unlike precolonial African sculpture, which migrated over time from cabinet of curiosities to natural history museum to fine art museum with accompanying changes of status, we can, on the same day, see all of this and more. Beginning at the ethnographic gallery of the National Museum in Nairobi, we may view Maasai or Samburu beadwork displayed as part of a standard 'natural history' functionalist array with gourds, spears, and the like.



Fig 6:Ethiopian trader selling amber beads, Nairobi, 1987. Photo Sidney Kasfir.

Near the front entrance, the museum shop does a brisk business in pastoralist jewellery, especially earrings, as souvenirs. At African Heritage, we may see not only this same work being sold as aesthetic objects but also (on Tuesday mornings) the Maasai women selling it to the buyer and at the same time wearing it themselves. Or the artifacts may be seen on dancers performing at the Nairobi tourist village, Bomas of Kenya. Finally bookshops all over Nairobi sell Tepilit Ole Saitoti and Carol Beckwith's *Maasai*, Mirella Ricciardi's *Vanishing Africa*, Angela Fisher's *Africa Adorned*, Mohamed Amin's *Last of the Maasai*, and Nigel Pavitt's *Samburu*, in which photographs of the same objects and their wearers are now recast as evocations of a vanishing 'golden land'.<sup>84</sup> In fact, we recognise that coffee-table books such as these are the twentieth-century's 'cabinets of curiosities').

Each of these realities – functional artifact, art object, souvenir, article of dress, and body art refracted through the lens of the camera – exists simultaneously in a dialogic relationship to the others, each with its own fragment of the truth.

But the ultimate artifacts in this freeze-frame view are the Maasai themselves.

In 1987 one enterprising Mombasa curio shop employed a Maasai *moran* (warrior) resplendent in all his finer to stroll about the premises and attract potential buyers. Tourism itself is a form of collecting, and taking photographs its most aggressive act of appropriation. The Kenyan parliament finally felt impelled to pass a law forbidding tourists to take pictures of Maasai, a self-defensive act analogous to those taken by tribal councils much earlier in the American Southwest.



Fig 7: Mondo, a Samburu warrior fashioning beaded spear cover, near Mombasa, 1991. Photo Sidney Kasfir.

But where is the 'authentic' Maasai culture in all this? As with the Maconde *shetani* carvings, if we shift the locus of authenticity to the minds of the makers and not the collectors, the issue must be recast. The more in the curio shop is real; he is neither David Byrne playing at being a mambo king,<sup>85</sup> nor the folkloric 'Indian' of cigar-selling days. He has lived in cattle camps and been initiated with his age group into *moran*-hood, which does not normally include wage employment. But perhaps he needs money school fees or to pay a fine. By the act of standing outside the curio shop he has become, in effect, living sign of himself.<sup>86</sup>



Fig 8: Kirati, James and David, Samburu warriors with tourist spears on the beach in Mombasa, Kenya, 1980s. Photo Sidney Kasfir.

I began with the questions of who creates meaning for African art and what determines its cultural authenticity. In one sense they are rhetorical, because we already suspect the answer. If 'tourist art', the lowest common denominator of what is thought by Westerners to be inauthentic in African art, can be deconstructed in ways that make the definition of authenticity full of self-contradictions, then the same kinds of questions can be asked even more readily about other non-canonical categories such as 'elite' or 'international' art. Now, in the closing years of the twentieth century, it is perhaps time to bring the canon into better alignment with the corpus, with what African artists actually make, and to leave behind a rather myopic classificatory system based so heavily on an Africa of the mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> William Rubin (ed.), *Primitivism in Modern Art. Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vols. I and II (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Rasheed Araeen, 'Our Bauhaus, Others' Mudhouse', *Third Text*, no 6 (London: Spring 1989), pp. 3-14; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Thomas McEvelley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief', *Artforum* (New York: November 1984), p. 59; McEvelley, *Artforum* (New York: March 1990), pp. 19-21; Yves Michaud, 'Doctor Explorer Chief Curator', *Third Text*, no 6 (London: Spring 1989), pp. 83-88.

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- <sup>4</sup> A partial exception to this is the contemporary art exhibition 'Africa Explores', organised by Susan Vogel for The Center for African Art in New York. I have tried to address the somewhat different problems raised by this exhibition in another article, 'Taste and Distaste. The Loaded Canon of New African Art', *Transition*, vol. 2, no. 3, issue 57 (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 52-70.
- <sup>5</sup> Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> See especially the symposium in *African Arts*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Los Angeles, 1976).
- <sup>7</sup> Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society* (London: Routledge, 1988).
- <sup>8</sup> William Fagg and John Pemberton III, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).
- <sup>9</sup> An important recent study by Walter E. A. van Beek, 'Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule', *Current Anthropology*, vol 32, no. 2 (Chicago: April 1991) pp. 139-67, attempts to return the Dogon to the same universe as other Sudanic West African Cultures.
- <sup>10</sup> Seen in Gramscian terms, the giving of such gifts simply underscores the hegemonic relationship of the coloniser over the colonised.
- <sup>11</sup> P. Amaury Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, vol. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 788-89.
- <sup>12</sup> Sidney L. Kasfir, 'Celebrating Male Aggression: The Idoma Oglinye Masquerade', in Sidney L. Kasfir (ed.), *West African Masks and Cultural Systems* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de L' Afrique Centrale, 1988).
- <sup>13</sup> George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 84-96.
- <sup>14</sup> Jan Vansina, *African Art History: An Introduction to Method* (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Diaspora studies are of course the exception. Here, change is the *sine qua non* of aesthetic activity of all kinds and is thought to be axiomatic.
- <sup>16</sup> Kasfir, 'One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art', *History in Africa*, no. 11 (Waltham, MA: 1984), pp. 163-93; Sally Price, 'Our Art, their Art', *Third Text*, no. 6 (London: Spring 1989), pp 65-72.
- <sup>17</sup> Kasfir, *op. cit.*; Kasfir, 'Apprentices and Entrepreneurs', in Christopher Roy (ed.), *Iowa Studies in African Art*, vol. 2 (Iowa City: 1987), pp. 25-47.
- <sup>18</sup> Fagg and Pemberton, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Daniel Biebuyck, *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 7. Anonymity is an issue on which scholars (who in most cases have done field-collecting themselves) tend to part company with dealers and collectors, who are far from homogeneous on either side of the Atlantic. A number of American collectors take pains to discover the authorship of pieces they own, while the conversations Sally Price reports would seem to reflect a more European (and more romantic) sensibility toward the art of 'exotic' people.
- <sup>20</sup> Price, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>22</sup> Price quotes the well-known dealer Henri Kamer, who makes this point precisely: 'The object made in Africa ... only becomes an object of art on its arrival in Europe.', (*ibid*, p. 70).
- <sup>23</sup> Brian Spooner, 'Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 199, 222.
- <sup>24</sup> The problem is historical as well as sociological: the idea of 'being Yoruba' as a commonly held cultural identity dates only from the nineteenth century. See Michel R. Doortmont, 'The Invention of the Yorubas: Regional and Pan-African Nationalism Versus Ethnic Provincialism', in P. F. de Moraes Farias and Karin Barber (eds.), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Birmingham University African Studies Series 2, 1990), p. 102.
- <sup>25</sup> Herbert M. Cole, *et al.*, 'Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art', *African Arts*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Los Angeles: 1976), pp. 20-31,48-74.
- <sup>26</sup> Harry R. Silver, 'Calculating Risks: The Socioeconomic Foundations of Aesthetic Innovation in an Ashanti Carving Community', paper presented at the 23rd Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Philadelphia, 1980; Doran H. Ross and Raphael Reichert, 'A Modern Kumase Workshop', in Doran H. Ross and Timothy F. Garrard (eds.), *Akan Transformations* (Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1983).
- <sup>27</sup> My own fieldwork was based on many Idoma, a few Tiv, Afo, and other carvers in Nigeria, Maconde immigrant carvers from Mozambique in Tanzania, and Kamba carvers in Kenya; all support the Asante data.
- <sup>28</sup> Silver, *op. cit.*, p.6.
- <sup>29</sup> Susan Vogel *et al.*, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1991), p. 50.
- <sup>30</sup> Because Nigeria has an antiquities law and considerable illegal trafficking in sculpture, 'antiquity' has become the pidgin term for any artifact that changes hands illegally.
- <sup>31</sup> Charles Keil, *Tiv Song* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 249-50.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250 (emphasis added).
- <sup>33</sup> Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983). McEvelley, *op. cit.*
- <sup>34</sup> McEvelley, *op. cit.*



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- <sup>35</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Press, 1991), pp. 389-90.
- <sup>36</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 226-29.
- <sup>37</sup> Jacques Maquet, 'Art by Metamorphosis', *African Arts*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Los Angeles: 1979), p. 32.
- <sup>38</sup> Clifford, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-28.
- <sup>39</sup> Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.15.
- <sup>40</sup> The Nigerian art historian Babatunde Lawal formerly argued that it was, but once again, this was an attempt to deny its authenticity.
- <sup>41</sup> They were included, for example, in the exhibition 'Circa 1492' (1992), a show intended to display masterworks from around the world, at the National Gallery in Washington.
- <sup>42</sup> A parallel example is the intricately carved Chinese ivory puzzles intended for the export trade but now seen as works of art in their own right.
- <sup>43</sup> Kasfir, 'Apprentices and Entrepreneurs', *op. cit.*
- <sup>44</sup> John Povey, 'The African Artist in a Traditional Society', *Ba Shiru*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Madison, WI: 1980), p. 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, 'Aesthetics and Market Demand: The Structure of the Tourist Art Market in Three African Settings', *African Studies Review*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Waltham, MA:1986), pp.41-59.
- <sup>46</sup> Silver, *op. cit.*
- <sup>47</sup> Dolores Richter, *Art, Economics and Change* (La Jolla: Psych/Graphic Publishers, 1980).
- <sup>48</sup> Kasfir, 'Patronage and Maconde Carvers', *African Arts*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Los Angeles: 1980), pp. 67-70, 91.
- <sup>49</sup> Paula Ben-Amos, 'Pidgin Languages and Tourist Arts', *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, vol.4, no.2(1977), pp.130, 132.
- <sup>50</sup> Kasfir, 'Taste and Distaste', *op. cit.*
- <sup>51</sup> Spooner, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- <sup>52</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Mistaken Dichotomies', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 101, no. 400, (Bloomington, IN: April-June 1988), p. 148.
- <sup>53</sup> For an incisive treatment of the issue of collectors and commodification in African art, see K. Anthony Appiah's review of *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* exhibition catalogue, The Center for African Art, New York, 1987), in *Critical Inquiry*, no. 17 (Chicago: Winter 1991), pp. 338-42.
- <sup>54</sup> I use the spelling 'Maconde' to differentiate the immigrant Mozambican carvers from the indigenous Tanzanian Makonde whose cultural production is distinct and who are only marginally involved in the carving profession.
- <sup>55</sup> The typical collectors of Maconde sculpture are academics and journalists, people who cannot easily afford to collect 'traditional' African art. Thus there is a class distinction implicit in the purchase and display of an accepted canon on the one hand and 'tourist art' on the other. The latter is much cheaper to own.
- <sup>56</sup> 'All my works have a story'; *Magiciens de la terre*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1989), p.137.
- <sup>57</sup> In Dares Salaam the dominant language is KiSwahili. The KiMakonde term is *puundi*. See J. A. R. Wembah-Rashid, *Makonde Art: The Mask and Masked Dance Tradition* (Nairobi: Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, 1989), p. 5.
- <sup>58</sup> I am grateful to Allen Roberts for this second meaning. East African and Zairian usage appear to be similar, though not identical. on this point. See also Roberts' discussion of *bricolage* in his article, 'Chance Encounters, Ironic Collage', in *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Los Angeles: April 1992), pp. 54-63, 97-98.
- <sup>59</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind [La Pensée sauvage]*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966), p. 16 ff.
- <sup>60</sup> Kasfir, 'Patronage and Maconde Carvers', *op. cit.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Jini*, or *shetani* in KiSwahili.
- <sup>62</sup> See for example Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 26. The formulation is necessary to Levi-Strauss' argument, but is overdrawn. As I indicated earlier, this sense of 'oneness' about precolonial art is as much a Western predisposition to idealise Primitive Society as it is an observable fact.
- <sup>63</sup> I am grateful to my colleague David Brown for urging me to re-examine the concept of *bricolage* in this context. 'John Fundi' was of course a happy coincidence. For a treatment of *bricolage* in an Afro-Cuban Diaspora context, see Brown's description of the self-conscious cultural style of *los negros curros* in early nineteenth-century Havana, 'Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York', Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1989, pp.35-38.
- <sup>64</sup> Ben-Amos, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>66</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, 'What is "Popular"? The Relationship Between Zairian Popular and Tourist Paintings', (paper presented at the Workshop on Popular Urban Paintings from Zaire, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, 1987), p. 3; 'Rethinking the Popular Arts in Africa', (commentary), *African Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Waltham, MA: 1987), p. 93.

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<sup>67</sup> Jules-Rosette, 'What is "Popular"?', *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian, 'Art, History and Society: Popular Painting in Shaba, Zaire', *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1976), pp.1-21.

<sup>69</sup> Jules-Rosette, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Karin Barber, 'Popular Arts in Africa', *African Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Waltham, MA: 1987), pp. 1-78. Barber's typology does not demote tourist art to a liminal category but refers to it as commercially motivated popular art, 'produced but not consumed by the people', p.26.

<sup>71</sup> Vogel, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42, 238.

<sup>72</sup> Vogel herself makes this point earlier in the same text (p. 50). Part of the difficulty is that very few art historians have done field interviews with those who make tourist art.

<sup>73</sup> Barber, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>76</sup> Christopher B. Steiner, 'African Art in Movement: Traders, Networks and Objects in the West African Art Market', in *Discussion Papers in the Humanities*, no. 3 (Boston: Boston University African Studies Center, 1989); Steiner, 'Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: The Mediation of Knowledge by Traders in African Art', paper presented at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Atlanta, 1989. See also, Steiner, *African Art in Transit*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>77</sup> Tourism has now replaced coffee as the major source of foreign exchange earnings.

<sup>78</sup> Although this story has been published several times, I was never able to find a Maconde carver who had any knowledge of it.

<sup>79</sup> Steiner, 'Worlds Together, Worlds Apart', *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> I am grateful to Maasai art specialist Donna Klumpp for numerous insights concerning the bead trade in Nairobi, and to Melania Kasfir, who was then a secondary-school student, for helping me to trace the Ngong-Nairobi bead circle outlined by Klumpp. Since the original publication of this article, Lalji and Sons has ceased to trade in beads, but their former competitors continue to operate.

<sup>81</sup> Donovan is in a position to do both very well: he is trained in marketing and is also a field collector and connoisseur of pastoralist arts. See his essay 'Turkana Functional Art', *African Arts*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Los Angeles 1988), pp. 44-47.

<sup>82</sup> Author of *Africa Adorned*(New York: Abrams Publishers, 1984).

<sup>83</sup> The parallel debate in folklore studies ('folklore versus fakelore') engaged many of the same issues, though the battle-lines were drawn somewhat differently, between purists and popularisers rather than their texts. See Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Fakelore* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.1-29.

<sup>84</sup> Tepilit Ole Saitoti, *Maasai*, with photographs by Carol Beckwith (London: Elm Tree, 1980); Mirella Ricciardi, *Vanishing Africa* (London: William Collins, 1971); Angela Fisher, *op. cit.*; Mohamed Amin et al., *Last of the Maasai* (London: Bodley Head, 1987); Nigel Pavitt, *Samburu* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1991).

<sup>85</sup> Donald J. Cosentino, 'First Word', *African Arts*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Los Angeles: 1990), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> For a discussion of the same phenomenon in the sponsored cultural festival, see Kirschenblatt -Gimblett, 'Objects of Ethnography', *op. cit.*, p. 388.