The Unique and the Multiple in Africa

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Among the tricky questions posed by artistic creation, some relate in particular to the capacity of human beings to reproduce things and to the right they have (or grant themselves) to act in this way. This activity, when aimed for example at identical reproduction, is called "copy" by art critics, historians, and those who take an interest in the aesthetics of objects. I will not attempt to discuss the subtleties involved in the use of different terms to describe the activity of the reproduction of works of art; when an artist "imitates," is that copying? To what extent is the new work admissible? To what category do users and connoisseurs assign it? These and other questions will be answered in the wider context of my examination of the relationship between the unique and the multiple in African societies. The problems of an original's copy or replica are not viewed in the same light in all parts of the world, not only because of the dictum "truth on our side of the border, error on theirs" but above all because the status of the plastic work is not the same and its existence and validity are not governed by the same laws and customs. However, in all societies that create, the "copy" poses problems which Africa cannot elude and which arise there in a manner at once similar and different from that of contemporary Western societies.

The societies of the book, which, indulgently perhaps, have been designated societies of *écriture* (writing)—a vague, debatable notion if ever there was one—by dissociating the religious from the profane, and by structuring around their creations such a panoply of protective rights as to make the creators nervous, suspicious, or aggressive, continually looking over their shoulder and ready to sue as soon as something "resembles" what they have been the "first" to find, have probably made the question even

trickier, perhaps due to the fact that in these cultures and civilizations creators depend primarily on their works for their livelihood. The West has passed on its protectionist reflexes to contemporary African creators, who, very much people of their time, are just as keen to make a living from their creations and who want to ensure that wherever possible authors' rights are recognized and respected.

The unique and the multiple in civilizations criss-cross to such an extent that one may wonder whether a discussion of this topic is relevant in the case of Africa in the era of globalization and the planetary village. Unique and multiple things exist there nonetheless, and they pose once again for our old cultures, torn as they are between the wish to remain themselves and the need to open up to the world, the problem of the authenticity of the piece and of its personality based always on its insertion into a system of thought and a unitary vision of the world, on the horizon of which looms a *numen* that, in spite of everything, goes on maintaining the apparent cohesion of a universe which finds it hard to collapse, or only does so in order to give birth to those hybrids thought today to be the guarantee of our future.

To reflect upon the unique and the multiple in the context of those societies that continue using the articulated word as the means *par excellence* of conserving and transmitting their wisdom is to accept the need to take into account the unequal powers which launch the object into the midst of others and make possible its differentiation and authentication.

It is important though to realize that in Africa such a study cannot be carried out unless attention is paid to time and to history, where, without waiting to find a full explanation of the problem that is my present concern, I will look for the elements of insertion in the long *durée* of anthropological data. It is in the name of that same history that I have chosen to pay close attention to the problems of the unique and the multiple essentially in "traditional" societies, in whose midst contemporary African artists derive the bulk of their creative resources and of the attitudes going to make true creators of them, that is people responsible for the unique, a fact marvelously confirmed by history.

But no one talks any more today about a single Africa; the customary plural, confirmed by numerous claims to identity and therefore difference, should not make us forget the permanence of the same cultural matrix should we care to give it our attention. If most of the examples underpinning the reasoning followed here are taken from the context of south Benin, they are not the less representative for that of the problems encountered elsewhere in the other cultures of sub-Saharan Africa.

The Common Yardstick

In most of the civilizations on our planet, creation is a privileged moment. The process itself, despite all the explanations offered for it, still remains a mystery. Those who create, like those who admire the results of their activities, cannot say precisely what inspiration, the basis of all genuine creation, is. In the eyes of all, that moment is unique, making it possible, they say, for artists to draw upon resources from their innermost being or from an elsewhere hard to locate. In common with all others, the cultures of Africa hold this moment in great respect; in order to facilitate it they accept that when artists create they have to take their distance from everyday realities and shut themselves away; and in order to consolidate that moment the work itself is never shown outside a context specifically favoring a comprehension of the greatness of artistic creation. Those who have studied sculpture, for instance, affirm that it is a chiaroscuro art, sculpted objects rarely being shown in broad daylight, while others stress Africans' predilection for total art, since most often the piece of sculpture never appears unaccompanied by movement and sound. Things are not separated here but are added to, as in the arts in which accumulation becomes a sign of wealth and of the ability to face up to the problems that may arise in different quarters.

Nobody can create without that moment, which is like a state of grace and neither renewable at will nor entirely controllable; it has to take hold of one, sometimes after a long, tense, and laborious wait, and occasionally somewhat against one's conscious wishes. It is precisely for this reason that the Fon people, who live

on the Abomey plateau in south Benin about sixty miles from the coast, compare the creative process to an illness, and the artist to a sick person; the malady comes in cycles and is capable of altering its aspect, so that its outcome cannot really be foreseen. Artists are as unpredictable as their works, which because they are unexpected become objects of wonder. The Fon then speak of *adahun*; the term, dear to Fon creators, designated the fruit of their labors, but was not applied to all works; similarly, not all artists merited the title of *adahunzowato* (the maker of the wondrous thing), which, historically speaking, was reserved more particularly to those whose craft demanded expertise in several areas, such as, at the court of the kings of Danhomè, the makers of parasols and the appliqué engravers, whose example is all the more interesting as an object of study in that they compared their art to photography: they were aware of playing with colors highlighted against a monochrome ground. By these categories perhaps society defines those who are the true creators, the ones who can innovate, taking advantage of those unique moments that are like ventilation shafts in the mediocrity of everyday existence.

The state of grace is indeed the common yardstick for all, but much more so in the case of this continent in which the cultural matrix seems marked by the same tendencies; what it enables people to do among the Fon and the Yoruba bears similar names: the Yoruba *ara* corresponds wonderfully well to the *aca* of the Fon Adjas, the two terms designating the invention and creativity at the heart of the repetitive monotony of works that have become forms familiar to all. The *ara* or the *aca* make possible the introduction of innovative breakthroughs whose secret is well and truly that of a spontaneous upsurge disrupting the ancient order and preventing it from becoming mortally fossilized.

It is in accordance with and because of the norms governing creativity and its products that the unique and the multiple are able to sustain a more or less antagonistic relationship. At the outset, in Africa like everywhere else, it was from the unique that plurality sprang. The first time that a work was born of an artist it was indeed original, and the words, signs of creativity among the Fon and the Yoruba, show that clearly. Z.S. Strocher (1995: 24) nevertheless allows me to extend my analysis beyond the sub-

region, reinforcing the idea that invention, even if it starts with a single individual, ends up, in order to get embodied, by belonging to the collective process. "In the Kipendé language," he writes, "in order to ask who is the particular inventor of a mask, the question has to be put thus: 'whose idea is it?'" The rest of his study shows, à propos of the Gidongo(gi)tshi mask of the Kipendé in Zaire, the interaction between a dancer and a sculptor, accredited by the public's critical reception, helping to give direction and finality to the creation.

The unique thus appears in our cultures as the product of the present instant, being characterized by its unpredictability. Undoubtedly, in a system in which people are not necessarily keen to highlight individual merit, the creation of unique objects belongs collectively to those who made possible its expression through the most appropriate channel, that of an artist known to most users and consumers of art.

At History's Heart

Up till now I have been dealing with the question of unique objects. It can thus be surmised that the plural seems to me more appropriate for tackling this issue in the African context once one moves beyond the crucial moment of the first idea, which the community cannot take responsibility for even if it tends later to have it standardized. Over the long *durée* (the kingdom of Danhomè lasted from the first half of the seventeenth century to the last part of the nineteenth) history has not left sufficiently documented evidence for us to be able to affirm that, in the sub-Saharan cultures, an object acquired such a status of uniqueness that the conditions of re-creation did not accompany it. Civilizations are mortal; so are the objects they produce. It has been known for a long time that the object here was created solely to serve a functional purpose. The duration of the work's existence is in reality only of transitory importance. What counts is probably the "weight" of the work, the entire set of acts and words enabling it to take on its function. Ritual is here an important part of the process that places an object and enables it to be differentiated

from others. I will come back to this. History does not take this entity into account when it puts the object before us via the published catalogs of the most famous works, reinforcing the idea of the pieces' uniqueness: the selection carried out for these publications has given rise to the belief that no repetition ever took place in the workshops, so that one ends up, after two or three catalogs, having done the rounds of all the masterpieces of African art, whereas it is hard to be sure that this selection mirrors reality. Archeological excavations, for example, without belying the choices made by such catalogs, appear to confirm the twin options forever: generally in the prehistoric caves the drawings of forms seem to exclude repetition and copy. Most of the time, the fieldwork bears out the existence of series of similar items where everyday artifacts are involved, but not of unique pieces that are objects of a sacred nature or objects intended for royal use. This is illustrated by the whole of the excavations carried out in Nigeria of which Ekpo-Eyo published an account in 1977, and confirmed by the delivery of the Portuguese order for ivory pieces during the Renaissance (Bassani and Fagg, 1988).

These two examples do not spring from the same source: the first originates from within the bailiwick of African culture, whereas in the second instance we are dealing with external creativity, but the net result in both cases is the enhancement of the value of unique pieces, of which to the best of our knowledge copies do not exist elsewhere. If these models are found only in sub-Saharan Africa, if they are solely the product of the creative effort of its artists, they confirm the view held in Europe, probably since the nineteenth century, that a work of art can exist in no more than a single copy. Nonetheless since a few years ago a better understanding of artists' workshops has given added weight to the presumption of the existence of the multiplicity of created pieces; proof of it can be found in the observations made by Bogumil Jeusiewcki of the Senegalese artist Chéri Samba (Z.S. Strocher, 1995). The studio of this "popular" artist was overflowing with seemingly identical pictures, which, in Western terminology, would amount to copies, but Samba declared that he was not satisfied until he had obtained different renderings of the same theme. So it is not a matter of copies, but rather each time of a new creation

drawing on the resources of collective memory: the copy, as it is understood in the West, may well not exist in sub-Saharan Africa.

Collective Memory and Artistic Transformation

The chief source of creativity among the peoples of Africa still remains collective memory, but what is meant nowadays by this hackneyed term needs to be defined. No better example can be found for understanding the relationship between collective memory and the problems of the multiplicity of works than that of the arts of royal courts, a fairly widespread phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa based on the patronage of a king able to surround himself with the best artists—people of attested manual dexterity and inventiveness. It is beyond the scope of my subject to examine the efforts made to attract and retain, outside their own milieu, these men of different origins, in the service of a cause, of monarchy, probably presented to them as noble and defensible. The jury is still out on the issue of whether such a framework was never broadly conducive to creation, or whether the reverse was the case. The example I shall use in conducting this analysis, that of court arts in the former kingdom of Danhomè, appears to militate in favor of their real contribution to creativity, since the royal palace situated in the capital was to serve as shop-window for the whole of the nation's wealth.

The kings of Danhomè had military objectives, of course, but they also had artistic ones. In the fundamental principle which they had adopted as their guideline in every reign—"succeed one another, without ever being the same"—the reason is to be found for the specificity of the creations of each reign, and the affirmation was being made that each one of them had invented a unique kind of weapon, built a unique palace too, and adopted a kingly title—which, while echoing shared, basic principles, differed from those that had preceded them. Numerous similar attitudes can be found in the former kingdom of Benin: further south, in the Congo basin, the Bakuba kingdom has left a famous example, referred to by most historians: that of four rulers whose representations are so characteristic without being portraits they enable each ruler to be

singularized, not only by physical traits, but also by attributes specific to the kingdom (Laude, 1966: 155).

Some deductions can be made from the analysis of these examples. It appears firstly that the artists were unique and, for the kings, their art was marked by the same properties; in the name of difference each was invited to accompany the forward march toward progress. And progress, contrary to what one might think of societies evolving slowly (as those of Africa have somewhat patronizingly been described) was both present and sought after. The works created in that context were from the outset unique: they aimed at exalting a distinct person, considered as the epitome of society. Two examples throw light the problems linked to these "unique objects": the first that of the appliqué canvasses commonly known as "royal hangings," and the second that of the thrones of the former kings of Danhomè; these illustrate the relationship of the unique piece to history, to social structure, and to the collective memory.

The appliqué canvasses are a genre whose history in the kingdom of Danhomè is relatively well known; they are thought to originate in the cults of a *vodoun* whose followers were wont to dress in multicolored short skirts that made rainbow effects as they swirled, which in the Fon culture was a sign of the presence of the serpent *Dan Aydowedo* (which some have no hesitation in comparing to the *Ouroboros* of the Greeks). For the Fon people the serpent does not have the "malicious" character bestowed upon it by a reading of the book of Genesis. The Houeda people, who founded the town of Ouidah on the Atlantic coast before the Fon occupied them and imposed their culture on them (while adopting the Fon culture to some extent), considered the serpent a civilizing god, "The same who opened men's eyes" (in Houeda the same term means both opening the eyes and civilization, progress, and the enlightenment brought by it). This god grants wealth and happiness, and connects the fire of heaven to the water of the sea, but can only be perceived from the earth. Waterlot's 1926 study of the royal palaces of Abomey shows that space was reserved for it in the royal palace. It is not surprising that King Agadja wanted to possess such a visible manifestation of such an important principle. He wished to dress as a rainbow and asked for the *vodunsi* to

be invited to his kingdom: they—there were two at the outset—started trying to lay on a black ground the motifs of the royal titles. History informs us too that this king was behind the massive importation of industrial canvasses into the kingdom (Adande, 1977). Nevertheless there exists, for each of the thirteen kings of Danhomè, an appliqué canvas relating the high deeds of his reign. It is hard, even today, to know whether these canvasses were executed posthumously, in accordance with the tradition requiring one to give picto-ideogrammatic canvasses to one's best friends on the occasion of their funeral and to clothe them with them for a last goodbye. In this case the unique piece has a religious character forbidding its duplication in the name of the laws governing its use.

The culture bearing it had codified the work's birth at the precise moment in the individual's existence in which friends, using such mediums, were celebrating the merits and virtues of the person they were mourning. This kind of dress was intended to disappear from local consumption once it had finished playing the role for which it was designed. It was truly a question of being-for-death, and the "finiteness" vouched in this way for the non-repetitivity or the difficulty of the copy, each person being different.

Nevertheless, when the monarchy disappeared, the same genre became a way of preserving in the social memory the recollection of those whom colonization was trying to destroy, by directing artists toward more "up-to-date" and diversified forms made up of hunting or farming scenes. Synthetic formulae then appeared and the picto-ideograms of the best-known strong name of each of the kings were to be found on the same square of canvas.

The thrones of the kings of Danhomè are another example of the presence of unique objects in the court arts of the former kingdom of Danhomè. Here, too, it is very difficult to date the works. We have no idea, in the case of the *jandeme*—a seat very similar to those of commoners in the territory of the Ashanti (a people originally from western Danhomè, now in southern Ghana)—of the date of its introduction at the court of Danhomè, but a cursory examination of the ensemble constituted by these pieces used for the king's appearance in public after his enthronement upon a lower chair reveals that no two *jandeme* are alike, the difference here residing in their size and decoration while remaining in conformity with the

culture's established "norms," which were sufficiently precise to lay down the type of wood to be used, for instance.

There is a fundamental difference between the two unique "creations," the appliqué canvasses and the *akan*-type seats: they do not have the same relationship with the collective memory. Indeed what makes possible the creation of the unique canvas celebrating the king can be found in essence in a collection of extremely codified oral texts preserved and handed down from generation to generation by "functionaries" of the collective memory known as *kpanlingan*, a kind of herald who had to declaim without getting a single word wrong the names of the different kings, their great deeds, and their genealogy. Every artist attached to the king's person had access to this collective memory and could draw on it for the necessary resources to create "unique" objects characterizing each of the reigns. But there is no trace in the collective memory of the resources able to account for the non-repetitivity of the seats; besides, there is no way of guaranteeing that they have kept their original form. The unique palaces, too, where they were preserved at all, have been the victims of fire on a number of occasions, especially during the last century. The fact remains that the artists were able to give each of them a touch of individuality embodying this uniqueness, culminating in the *akan*-type seats of Ghézo, Glèlè, and Gbèhanzin: the first rested on the skulls of enemy kings, and the other two were distinguished by their height and eschewal of monoxilia to the point where it is thought that they were sponsored outside the nation's borders (Adande, 1992). There were no rules governing the reproduction of seats, so that the Ghézo one was often imitated, first by members of the royal family and then by descendants of dignitaries whose offices date back to this king; of course, wooden replicas were substituted for the human skulls, none of these imitations having any pretension to being identical to the original.

The court arts thus prove the rarity of the copy; if imitations exist, they obey the norm of the difference that allows of no possible confusion. So everything is not copied. The authorization or the permit to imitate exists only as a factor of identification to a political system or to a line of descent. The popular arts seem to function on a different register which now needs to be looked at.

Fertility Rites

A list could no doubt be drawn up for the whole of west Africa of the numerous cases of cyclical "customary feasts" in which humankind seems to be trying to remake the world. The *sigi* is one of those with the longest cycle of recurrence, being celebrated every sixty years, so that one has the opportunity to take part in it only once. This interval is not short, and it certainly has an influence on the conservation of ritual objects. The information at our disposal does not enable us to be certain that any of them was not new or what proportion could not be copied. On a more reduced scale, in a shorter cycle, the Gelede poses the problem of the repetition of unique forms.

This is a masked dance, originally common to speakers of Yoruba and of related languages, who are to be found on both sides of the border between Benin and Nigeria, where they of course spill over to the east and to the west, so that today they find themselves in the middle of Benin and Togo under different names. The aim of the masked dance, in which only males take part, is to pacify the mothers known under the general name of *Iya*, a term translated by Lawal (1996) as "Mother Nature." In the past the Gelede was danced only when serious events occurred, such as epidemics and droughts. The Gelede festivities take place according to a diurnal and nocturnal cycle, although the two movements are not of the same importance; if all the Gelede celebrations are open to everyone, the rites of the night seem to take on a more esoteric character. It is during the nocturnal ceremony that people ward off bad luck and try, through the strength of sound, language, and movement, to right the wrongs done to Mother Nature.

No Gelede society can be set up without the presence of a specific mask, the mask of the mother, a "white" mask representing a woman's face; sometimes it is extended by a long white beard which tends to make one think of the androgynous character of the being under consideration. So great a constraint is the obligation to sculpt this mask that at Ouidah, where the Gelede was established belatedly in 1913 (Adande, 1995)—while the Yoruba

communities had existed for over a century already—recourse had to be had to the sculptors of Kétou to get hold of one. Some communities do not allow this founding mask to be shown in public; others restrict its access to a few individuals, whereas others again make it the basis for various initiatory rites about which a profound silence is kept.

The example of the mask of the Mother illustrates the room for maneuver enjoyed by African communities in creating the indispensable bases for the perpetuation of their rites: no model or unique form is imposed but rather an idea, a principle freely interpreted by people according to the extent of their knowledge. There is no other way of explaining the differences between the masks of the Mother: the one that can be seen at Ouidah is not bearded and is off-white in color.

The white masks of the different Gelede societies cannot be called "copies" in the pejorative sense of the word: they are the ways in which the different groups express themselves. Their value and their power derive from rites that have helped consecrate them. The words and incantations used, the authority of those who hallow and animate, their own initiation comprehensible only within the chain carrying it, all help to strengthen the power of the object and confer upon it the entirety of the meaning to which it can aspire. Perenniality is ensured and periodically updated if need be on the occasion of every public appearance, when the mask's wearer must himself have undergone the various preparations of transformation and adjustment throughout his life and more especially as the period of festivities draws near. The word participates here in the establishing of a new order that stabilizes in a particular object, like the mask of the mother; this lies at the source and heart of all the events and can suffer irreparable damage, which people guard against as much as possible by entrusting it to the care of the president of the association. It is not uncommon however for masks to be abandoned or thrown away; children then can take them and play with them. The object has fulfilled its "mission" and is not longer fit to transmit the energy it bears. One can then provide for its replacement the context of the world of today. Knowledge of the wood to be used no longer suffices, even if it allows an idea to be given body and shape. The spirit will not take possession

of this "material envelope" without the strength of the word which transmits all its expected operational capacities.

The system has at its disposal, nevertheless, a method, developed by the users themselves, for the differentiation and authentication of every mask: the respective power of each of them establishes a hierarchical structure that is one of its chief criteria. In this culture, power is acquired only with age, an important criterion in a society where it constitutes an important landmark.

So the question of the copy is not posed in the same terms as in the West, and it may well be that a good few of the words used and received in this critique would not be suitable to characterize what goes on in most African societies. Copies—exact replicas that is, point for point, of an original—are rare, not so say nonexistent: artists rarely keep an original model in front of them in order to make another like it; they reinvent each time, but only allow themselves to do so for sacred objects when the latter have lost their charge or suffered irreparable damage. The social attitudes and behavior lead to a reconsideration, in the framework of traditional societies, of what is a copy and what is a fake. The wish to deceive, the attempt to get one work taken for another, is rare: the powers that the objects have to release are hardly compatible with the institution of untruth in the making of art.

To Interpret Is Better Than to Copy

The examples offered for analysis here help us understand that, taken as a whole, African cultures have opted in most cases for a specific way of looking at the important pieces of the culture. In both theory and practice objects are not copied. The traditional arts, those I have been analyzing, seem to have no knowledge of this process. In both the long run and in the short term they have left artists with the plenitude of their means by allowing them to interpret, each time it is needed by the community, a work whose meaning and symbolism are known and accepted by all the initiated. Some interpretations are sublime, others fall short of one's expectations, because they are not content just with departing from the original model but transform it to the point of giving

birth to another object. The culture takes responsibility for these new pieces without ever confusing them with the originals. Often it is from these works that new rites and forms of worship are born: the copy is frequently an infringement of the presumed immortality of the work. The African cultures seem to have opted, in order to ensure the immortality of the unique piece, for resistant materials different from those available in most of the popular workshops. The practice seems to have very ancient historical roots; the stone sculptures from Ésie in Nigeria, and the objects in cuprous alloy from the civilizations of Ifé and Benin that go back at least to the twelfth century, are evidence of it. With this kind of object one realizes that the raw material alone is not enough; very often the contemporary populations who have inherited these pieces transform them into religious objects and easily attribute them to deified ancestors. The interpretation in this process is on two levels: it concerns the rereading of ancient objects in the language of today, and the attribution of metaphysical values that introduces them once again into other planes of the same reality. The world cannot, in this case, be divided in two; the metaphysical maintains constant links with what is seen every day without ever being confused with it, and transcends it on all sides, enabling the individual to escape the constraints of daily existence.

The numerous values of the object become clearer and appear when the problem of the copy, indissociable from the status of the object and from ways of looking at questions of the fake and the genuine, is tackled. In African societies there is not one single attitude that allows the uniqueness or the multiplicity of objects. The communities here—no doubt because the object constitutes the basis of a discourse directed essentially toward an impossible happiness, when the forces from another plane mediated by the object cannot be called upon—have allowed the multiplication that permanently leaves artists faced with their responsibilities as creators. In a sign that times really have changed, contemporary creators in the age of globalization are less tolerant and are more reluctant to accept anything short of full recognition of their authorial rights, but is copying the other person the only way toward a development of the arts in these societies which cannot do without the arts?

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Translated from the French by John Fletcher

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219804618304 Published online by Cambridge University Press