

To start with, it will be necessary to address the cultural phenomenon - what is that thing we call culture? Talking about art and culture, that is, the aesthetic phenomenon, can be particularly abstract. It is necessary, if we can bring about any meaningful understanding to the subject, to move from the theoretical and the abstract concepts into the open and discernable areas of perception.

Take these two woven Kente strips from Ghana. One was woven with silk yarns, eighty to a hundred years ago (two generations); the other, also woven in Ghana but with rayon yarns only this year. There is a marked and discernable difference that is very evident, and you can see it. That difference, whatever that is (and am not talking of the difference in yarns) but the difference in approach, and therefore the end product. The difference, if we see any, is the difference in perceptions, cul-

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tural perceptions, of the two individual weavers representing their societies that produced the pieces. An objective examination (indeed even a cursory look) of the two pieces, without any bias at all, will indicate or rather reveal the cultural chasm between the two individual weavers and for that matter their societies even though they belong to the same ethnic continuum.

This is not being nostalgic about the 'good- old-days'. The evidence, in every conceivable human endeavour, points to the fact that there has been a change in perception, cultural perception, today. This change is exhibited in individual performances and endeavours, which make the individual a unique epitome of his culture. You will begin to appreciate that cultural change (in perception) resides in the individual, that is if you will buy this line of thinking. But let us not begin to draw conclusions

yet, it is necessary to examine the cultural phenomenon in greater detail.

It may not sound outrageous to premise that an individual's perception does affect his actions and performance. If a man (or for that matter a woman) perceives that there is a God that punishes (sanctions) all wrong doing, his/her wrong doing activities minimises, that is if he/she is afraid of the unknown sanctions. Likewise the one who believes his very survival is derived from his immediate environment, like the sea, treats with some awe the aspect of the environment that has control over his/her life (or death). If you belong to the forest areas of the community, and the land is your very life, the land becomes a god, so to speak. These perceptions we hold of the environment do formulate the codes and ethics by which we live, in the supreme interest of the individual and for that matter, the society's survival. By this premise you will understand the fundamentals of cultural differences and idiosyncrasies. It is therefore valid to postulate that when these perceptions are undermined, without the expected change in circumstances of the environmental dictates, then the individual is reduced (and for that matter, the society) to a vessel without a radar.

With our planet increasingly becoming one global village, and acculturation rapidly altering thinking and perceptions, without necessarily changing in any significant way the environmental circumstances, the need to examine individual perceptions as it pertains to the survival of the culture becomes apparent. I am making some fundamental assertions here that must be seriously considered: that is, when one ceases to consider issues and actions through the environmental perspective, and one finds solutions to problems which could be intelligent solutions but are not culturally based, the results become fatally dangerous. We shall examine further this angle of the cultural question later in this discourse. In the mean time let us see some slides selected to emphasise the cultural dimension to the ethnic survival (SLIDE).

These slides are a celebration of the ethnic (or traditional) culture. They show individual performances in the traditional setting, according to environmental dictates. Pottery, weaving, carving and even religion are all deter-

mined by immediate environmental promptings. Hence products of these areas of artistic performance are in consonance with the environment. By such activities discord is prevented and harmony becomes the thread that weaves the cultural (in different colours) tapestry.

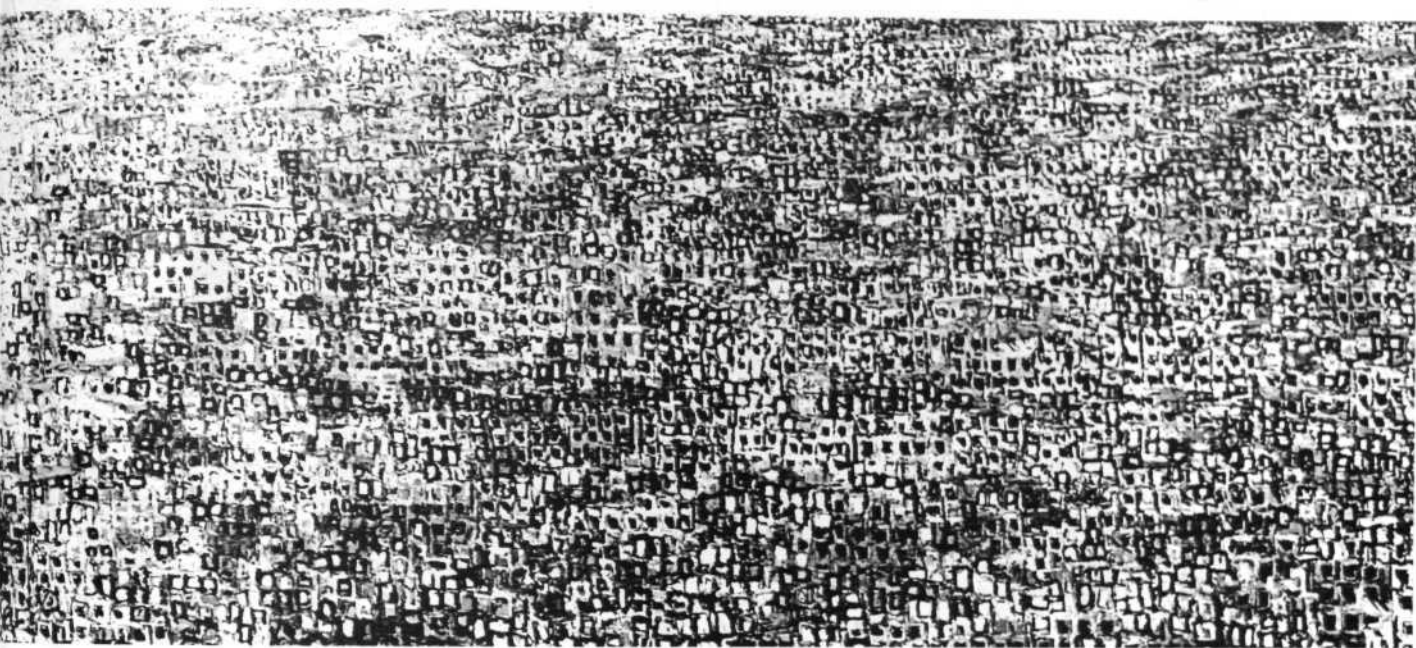
Allow me please to break the seeming monotony of this discourse by telling you a practical and true story that I encountered in my practice as an artist in Chicago. I was one of twelve artists chosen from around the world (under the Chicago Sister City's programme to paint a mural each for the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

A major aspect of the assignment was to give the twelve selected artists a treat (and it was quite a treat) for one week in the city, and after the treat for each artist to paint his impression (gathered through the one week treat) of the City of Chicago. So we wine and dined or rather our hosts wine and dined us through every conceivable restaurant and bar the city can boast of. After the week's fun of eating and drinking, we were headed into studios and each artist, set about painting his 'impression' of the City of Chicago. What came out as a result was extremely revealing for me; an amazing revelation of the individual and cultural differences that make the group. The fact is each artist painted Chicago through what I call his/her native perception. The raw nature of that revelation is on permanent display (all twelve murals) today at the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. I have not got slides on all the twelve murals unfortunately (I have only a catalogue of them here which you may examine later) but this slide is my perception, native perception, of the City of Chicago. What did I see?

Chicago slide

I perceived a huge city with all manner of cultures existing side by side in Chicago. Through the restaurants, the bars, supermarkets, stores, and even the people we interacted with, there was one strand of truth prevailing. What I recognised by my 'jaundiced' perhaps perception is a city of many and varied cultures, but without fusion. The melting pot story of America, I found nonexistent as far as Chicago was concerned. There were Italians, there were Mexicans, there were Hungarians, there were Czechs, and there were African-Americans and peoples from around the globe. The

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Chicago (Ethnic) Tapestry, 1993, oil on canvas, 122 x 274 cm

fact is, they each live a separate and distinct existence.

The Chicago Ethnic Tapestry as I titled my painting, is a manifestation of my personal perception of a city that is supposed to be part of the American Melting Pot - It simply was not melting. Now that amazed me; it was a profound truth that never quite settled with me. So my statement through my painting was: I found a city of many cultures, but no acculturation. Now other painters painted the city as they perceived it by their native perceptions. One thinking also came to the fore, that all of us, the artists were all very much unique, but absolutely different in our thing; so that not only the City of Chicago is multifaceted, the artists that saw it were multifaceted too. The results were therefore multifaceted, naturally.

Let me backtrack and address an issue I raised earlier. I made the assertion, that when one ceases to consider, for whatever reasons - (some of which I may touch on later) issues and therefore actions through the environmental perspective and one finds solutions to problems, (may be good solution), but are not culturally based, the results become fatally dangerous. This implies that having been raised in a particular environment - that environment moulds your thinking, your very personality, and for that matter the way you see things (I have been using perception earlier). So that when you are confronted with a problem, your solution to that problem must generate, must be rooted, must of necessity originate out of that fertile womb of perception, or personality. I went on further to say that if this is not the case, if you do not beget your 'children' (solutions to problems) from your own God-given fertile womb, the children surely must be surrogate.

Let me illustrate this in practical terms. I recently visited a

home belonging to one of the famous families in Accra - The Muffo Addos. The home was built by the late President Muffo Addo, an eminent lawyer and former president of Ghana. The house is massive, beautiful and grand; simply magnificent. When you enter the gates, the hustle and bustle of Accra are left behind you although it is next to one of the major highways in Accra. The house is completely buried in a kind of forest (created forest I believe) and the atmosphere is one of heaven - even though I am yet to go there. When we entered the house, we were shown around by the host (I said we - that is myself and my wife). One thing I noticed was the airiness everywhere, in the rooms and out, definitely impressive. Not being able to contain my admiration, I asked how come so much fresh air everywhere. Our host told me: 'oh simple, the house was built when there were no air-conditioners and therefore the windows were made to face the flow of natural air then it is naturally airconditioned'. It certainly dawned on me that the architect, whoever that was, had used his native sense, call it a creativity. That house had been borne out of the womb of cultural or native perception and creativity. In our northern part (of Ghana), in spite of the scorching sun, I have had the same feeling of naturalness and airiness in traditional homes - when I had visited with students on excursions.

In comparison to this scenario, very evident around us are homes and edifices you cannot enter when the airconditioning breaks down. I don't know about Abidjan, but I certainly do know about Accra, that most of the high-rise buildings and indeed even contemporary homes have airconditioning.

The irony is that the flow of electricity to work the air-conditioners is not constant, not even reliable, and therefore

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these impressive looking houses/homes become uninhabitable both day and night. The solutions our architects are applying to the problem must be definitely alien - borne or conceived out of a womb that is not culturally rooted. These solutions are therefore surrogate, and cannot solve the problems of 'airconditioning'. The question of solving problems outside the environmental context is tantamount to seeing or perceiving out of context.

Now it is evident at least logically, that any solutions to problems out of context, out of the cultural context cannot be valid, can it?

You may have noticed my intermittent use of the words 'culture and environment' as though they are one and the same thing; even though because of the focus on today's environmental issues, the word has gained greater currency. In my thinking, the issues are intertwined which makes it impossible to discuss the environment without a consequent mention of culture or the vice versa.

I wish to say that the environment moulds our perception, and determines our culture. Today's frenzy about the environment tends to limit the greater dimension of culture, to a small area properly termed ecology. I am making these differentiations because I wish to turn the discussion on culture, which happens to be my topical issue this morning.

Whatever value we hold, whatever dreams we have, or whatever aspirations we desire, tend to have been borne of the culture, which in turn has been moulded by the environment. Environmental issues are therefore basically cultural issues, and cultural issues are issues borne out of perception. How we 'see' and what we 'see', are therefore culturally based. Let me illustrate this with another anecdote.

My brother had returned from the USA with a beautiful Mercedes Benz car that has all the 'extras', if you know what I mean. He wanted to sell this car and we had driven to a suburb of Kumasi to contact a prospective buyer. We had parked the car with me in it, while my brother had gone to the house to check on the prospective buyer. While alone in the car, two young, very young kids came around with profound admiration, plus argument. One said 'TV wom', the other said 'Tvnnirn' (meaning: there is TV inside and the other: No, there is not TV inside). They came to the front where I was sitting and looking inside the car, saw the

small TV mounted on the dash board. In their constellation, one of them shouted in exclamation: 'Yice, wo agye wei, na wo agye wo girl, wue ewie' (meaning: If you get this, and you get your girl, you have finished). The boy's cultural perception, world view, is that all you need in this world is to get a car like this, and a girl, and you have made it (finito).

I wish at this point to relate what I have said so far concerning culture to aesthetic perception. This has to do with what we call 'beautiful', even though that word is limited (in scope and shades or meaning).

It has been said that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, but the beholder's eyes have been influenced or affected by what is perceived as beautiful (or sometimes honourable) within the culture. You may be amazed to discover (if you have not done so ready) perhaps that a whole array of attributes of beauty considered by one group may be ugly or even grotesque by another group. When I see a 'beautiful' woman, that implies that that woman has been endowed generously with certain attributes generally considered as elements of beauty within my culture. She must be fleshy, bosommy, long wrinkled neck, a dimple smile perhaps, huge eyes and definitely having 'anieku' (parting in the front teeth). Beholding a girl like this is an encounter with beauty itself, culturally. I say culturally because that is how the environment has influenced my thinking, including my tastes and for that matter desires; creating for me my cultural Venus.

When my mother goes to the market to buy a piece of cloth, she looks at a whole array of fabrics in endless colours. She eventually zeros in on one and says 'I like this one'. And she chooses that one she likes. That sensation of like and dislike are the results of subtle cultural innuendoes that we have been brought up with, and have influenced or rather must influence, our desires and aspirations. Any desires and aspirations that do not respond to this cultural mechanism, we usually consider as queer. We therefore type people by their responses to what we consider are the cultural norms. And it is by these cultural norms that aesthetic pursuits are followed or pursued.

African artists therefore must of necessity pursue certain aesthetic goals that though may be universal yet are rooted



in the cultural ethos. Indeed there is an African ethos, 'the characteristic and distinguishing attitudes', that must transcend every area of human endeavour (including aesthetic pursuits). In the final analysis therefore, if we declare a piece of work as ART, that art, must be imbued with the individual's personality and idiosyncracies as well as the cultural ethos. This is and must be the universality of art.

I see the contribution of African artists, both traditional and contemporary as validly distinct and recognisable addition to the universal tapestry of creative endeavours. In essence therefore, even though the contemporary African artist may employ foreign tools and/or medium in his/her work these may only be potent medium and/or tools by which to record the visual richness of the continent, as well as celebrating the culture as an inalienable heritage, and a further contribution to an ever increasing cultural change. Using the Ghanaian example, let us now look at the celebration as well as the celebrants (however, small) of the vibrant artistic/cultural scene. (SLIDE SHOW).

Having seen some of the contributors to the cultural tapestry, it is necessary to hint at the lurking dangers and frustrations that are likely to dilute, if not pollute, this contemporary cultural phenomenon. In recent times, there have emerged usually out of academic institutions intellectuals who ascribe to themselves the ability to know what African art is or must be. I think of the activities of this class of specialists as intellectual arrogance. Having read a few books on African art, and perhaps having visited Africa a couple of times, they see themselves as authorities on creative endeavours of the continent. These 'authorities' or 'specialists' usually propound theories as to what African Art should be like, based usually upon their knowledge of the African cultural artefacts that are passively displayed in

European and American galleries and museums. (SLIDE SHOW).

What these specialists fail to appreciate is that, a mask on a museum wall is not a mask until it begins to perform, and it is in the swirl and tempo that one can properly perceive the creative endowment of the mask. In the same vein, a piece of hanging kente cloth cannot effectively exhibit its aesthetic qualities until it is worn in motion. These are salient elements pertaining to traditional art. The notion that is being peddled about that contemporary African art must of necessity be like traditional art (in quality and content), I see as one of falsehood. Unfortunately, for some African artists, with the bid to meet the art market half way are turning to creating 'art' that I see as neither 'art' nor even valid. These products abound all over the tourist markets in Africa and I consider them as a danger as well as pollutants to the cultural heritage.

This specific Ghanaian story about the development of contemporary art, is one that I need to mention here, since I was personally and emotionally involved. I include the story not to highlight any contribution I have made, but to show the almost impregnable wall of officialdom and sometimes governmental pigheadedness that any innovator (leadership) is likely to, and will face in these developing countries. The struggle to show a direction is further intensified when you realise that your own colleagues (academics and intellectuals) who are supposed to be supporting you in the first place, have joined the 'opposition', you feel like hitting your head against the nearest wall.

At some point of Ghana's Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) there was a genuine desire to diversify the economy - that is looking at some potential foreign exchange earners other than the almighty Cocoa and Gold,

the main traditional sustenance of Ghanaian economy. One area that was mentioned as a possible contributor to the economy and was actually embarked upon was Tourism. This was laudable in the sense that it would exploit the many historic slave forts and castles, and perhaps, if planned well, take advantage of traditional festivals and celebration - this all sounds beautiful. The authorities saw hotels in the line of things, so the development of hotels started in earnest.

What the planners either failed to appreciate, or refused to appreciate was the abundant creative enterprise, both traditional and contemporary. The slides you have just seen are testimony to this fact. I thought the development and exploitation of this area would indeed be the real factor by which tourism can be a foreign exchange earner, that is the tourist does not only come, look around and return, but must be made to willingly and joyfully part with his loaded wallet. When you visit a country, you take a souvenir, usually a precious souvenir, not a junk. In my capacity as head of the department of Art Education, dean of the College of Art, and chairman of the National Art Collection Committee, but above all, trained and educated with the tax payer's money, I found it a responsibility to point out this simple fact at every turn, nook and corner. And at every turn, nook and corner, I met a stone wall. Of course the more you are turned away, the more you get convinced. The idea became an obsession - Ghana needs a place that when a visitor comes,

will see under one roof, the state of the arts, period. With all the frustration, I set about to go on retirement at sixty, and instead of building a house for my retirement, my wife being my only convert, we set about building an art gallery. It looked a foolish venture at the time. Today that gallery, the Artists Alliance Gallery stands out in the Accra skyline as a national monument for the celebration of the arts. The gallery has not only helped in solving an aspect of the Tourism problem, but has brought about, indeed generated self-employment opportunities for a substantial number of performers in the arts and crafts. For the first time in our history, we are seeing arts graduates coming out of our universities and heading off into their own private studios, thereby deflating the unemployment statistics. The results are simply beyond our wildest dreams. You will forgive me if I have blown my own trumpet by including the story of the Artists Alliance here, but somehow, I have come to believe in its efficacy.

The purpose of this story is to underline a salient fact, that vision is fundamentally and essentially crucial to leadership in every conceivable area of human endeavour. Indeed it is my conviction that leadership is actually vision made manifest. In other words, we must dream, and our training allows us the scope to dream wild dreams - now that is the support system for cultural survival.GR

