

Book Review

Falsafa ya Sanaa Tanzania

Edited By: E. Jengo, L.A. Mbughuni and S.A. Kandoro
Baraza la Sanaa la Taifa Tanzania

1982, 133pp. Hardback Tsh. 40/-; Paperback Tsh. 30/- Reviewer: J.W.N. Masanja,

The book **Falsafa ya Sanaa Tanzania** (The Philosophy of Art in Tanzania) comprises of articles written by famous scholars and artists in the country. Their thinking in general is not confined to the school of thought of other philosophers such as Fanon, Aristotle, and Karl Marx, to mention only a few, who have written on the philosophy of art in their respective societies. The contributors feel that the true meaning of art should come from the people themselves in a particular period of their economic and cultural development. Thus, though art in Tanzania may be influenced by foreign forms of arts, its meaning must be defined by the Tanzanian people themselves.

The book has seven chapters. In his introduction, E. Jengo attempts to give a summary of all the chapters. His reaction to the chapters is clearly written to help the reader grasp the gist of each chapter. In doing so, he raises many questions concerning the development and interpretation of Tanzanian art. The question of African painting, for example, is fully analysed in his exposition. The belief that painting is a foreign form of art in Tanzania is shattered. Mbughuni, in the first chapter, discusses the meaning of Art — **maana ya sanaa**. He points out four main aspects:

“Tafsiri ya Dhana ya Sanaa” (Interpretation and concept of art)

“Matumizi ya Zana ya Sanaa” (The function of art)

“Tathmini ya Lengo na Ujumbe” (Evaluation of the artistic).

“Nadharia ya Uundaji Sanaa” (Theory of artistic creation).

In all the four aspects, Mbughuni stresses that Tanzanians do not have to read foreign art philosophies and interpretations in order to understand and appreciate their own art. A good example is the meaning foreigners give to totem-like carvings which they call “Ujamaa.” The carvings consist of a group of figures with one figure at the top. According to Wembah Rashid, the so-called Ujamaa carvings are said to represent wrestlers. This is what the carvings depict. However, more investigation remains to be done to establish the validity of this interpretation, for in most carvings of this type, it is common to find a figure of a woman on top. There is no evidence suggesting that among the Wamakonde men wrestle with women.

The chapter on “Asili ya Sanaa” by S. Ntiro and Shemsanga discusses the existence of art during the pre-colonial period and its importance today. The patterns and designs discussed by Shemsanga in part one of the chapter are said to have aesthetic value and meaning to their communities.

In part two of this chapter, Ntiro discusses the origin and meaning of art in Tanzania. He argues that the art of drawing, painting and sculpture in Tanzania was not introduced by foreigners. There are good examples of drawings, sculptures and paintings included in this chapter. The rock-painting and drawing of a hunter and the hunted animal (p. 33) shows that art in Tanzania is as old as the tropical sun. The Ilandala Igulu and Yahitinde are also good examples of drawings by Wasukuma in the cult dances depicting their secret teachings.

The dancers use their drawings as identification symbols. For example, the drawing of yahitinde would symbolise performing societies associated with a particular animal, namely the snake. The bayeye (bagika) and the batiniki would, therefore, be identified by the use of

the drawing of **yahitinde** (a famous snake charmer) on the walls of their huts. Similarly, sculpture has symbolic meaning in the community. One important point raised by S. Ntiro is the notion that art must be studied within the cultural context of the people in order to understand its origin, meaning, function and the style. True, but art can be enjoyed without necessarily understanding the culture that produced it.

Chapter three attempts to define art and crafts. Simule does not believe that in Africa art and crafts are inseparable; in his view, they can be identified as separate entities. He therefore groups art and crafts and defines their parameters. Art, according to Simule is any activity that produces an object that does not necessarily have to fulfil utilitarian needs. The purpose of art, according to him is to communicate. Crafts serve purely utilitarian needs.

The position of the artist is discussed by Kandoro and Bishota in chapter four. They focus on the freedom of the artist in the community. The meaning of art is again discussed, but this time in relation to the word **sanaa** in Kiswahili. The word is said to have originated from Arabic **sanaa aa tu** (p. 57). It is probable that the authors want to remind the readers that in Tanzania there is no word from any ethnic group with an equivalent meaning to the word **sanaa**. It is not surprising, therefore, that the word **vinyago** is used to mean **sanamu**, another word with roots from the Hindi language.

On the freedom of the artist, Bishota and Kandoro seem to agree with the school of thought that holds that the artist must conform to the values of his community. While it is true that the artists draw their inspiration from their communities, it cannot be said here that their work must conform to some ideology except in matters of a contract or commission when an artist has to produce what the client wants. Even here, some sort of artistic freedom is necessary if a work of art is to bear the stamp of the artist.

Chapter five discusses the role of art in education. Apart from merely carrying messages to the people, art is a medium of education, a basis for teaching and promoting the mental growth of the children. Mbughuni in this chapter shows that during the colonial period art was used to convey messages and to facilitate communication between teacher and pupils. But only few schools considered the subject to be as important as other subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science. To some extent, the same trend prevails even today. Indeed, art can thrive without formal guidance in schools and colleges.

Nakanoga discusses in chapter six the possibility of using art to develop the country's economy. Art and economy have lived together since ancient times. The artist makes things such as tools and utensils for the community for which he is paid. Similarly, science and technology applied works of art into mass production to meet the people's demand. Nakanoga uses data to show that textile materials decorated by artists between 1977 and 1978 at the Urafiki Textile factory in Dar es Salaam sold more than the plain textile. He does not tell us, though, whether it was the decoration that created the demand.

Chapter seven by Mbogo attempts to show the relationship between the principles of the visual arts and architecture. The writer does this by discussing the role of space, pattern, symmetry, and the function of architecture. He goes further by pointing out the relationship of the environment to the architectural productions. He gives good examples of how traditional architecture, temporary as it may seem, respects the conditions of the environment.

The writer does not, however suggest any new architectural techniques of traditional architecture in materials and design while still respecting the cultural values of the local people.

On the whole this book is not only good reading, it is the only Kiswahili book in East Africa to make an in-depth analysis of art. However, the book gives us only the guidelines for defining art, it does not tell us how to define a great work of art. What makes a great work of art? Are national criteria for defining a great work of art independent of the

philosophical yardsticks Mbughuni has attempted to expound? Is realism in art, for example, a criterion for defining a great work of art? Such then is the problem that **Falsafa ya Sanaa Tanzania** has not attempted to solve.