

GLOSSARY ENTRY:

SYMBOLIC CREATIVE WORK: Debates around Language Politics in the Africa Cluster

Introduction by Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa

I was personally first introduced to the term ‘symbolic creative work’ by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandes of the Toronto Working Group in a keynote address that he gave at the first NEPAD Regional Conference on Arts Education in Johannesburg in 2015. I wish I could recall the contents of his paper better, but I do clearly remember his insightful application of this term in the context of his reflections on the use of song and dance by the protestors gathered outside what I think was a trade union building near our hotel in Braamfontein that week.

The term ‘symbolic creative work’ immediately opened a range of emancipatory possibilities for me for ways to deconstruct and rethink what I felt were some of the problematic disconnects between artistic discourses imported from Europe and indigenous East African concepts of cultural production that I was encountering in the course of my research into the development of formal visual art education in the Uganda Protectorate in the mid-20th century.

And then later that year, when the Africa Cluster of the Another Roadmap School came into being, I found that many of my colleagues in other countries on the continent were experiencing similar disconnections between indigenous and exogenous understandings of cultural production that could be traced back to and analysed through questions of language.

What follows are extracts of two texts: the first derives from an interview that I gave to Start Journal, a Ugandan arts and cultural journal on the occasion of the launch of the Africa Cluster of the Another Roadmap School in 2015. The second is drawn from a collectively authored essay written earlier this year that reflects on the work that the Africa Cluster has sought to do in the intervening years.

My hope is that the inclusion of these texts in the glossary will describe some of the challenges that the language - or perhaps, better, the “legitimizing terminology” - of art and of cultural production pose for progressive art educators in certain contemporary African contexts, and elucidate the potential value of ‘symbolic creative work’ as a more open alternative term for the kinds of things we are doing and/or hope to think and to do.

‘Another Roadmap Africa Cluster to impact art education on the continent: Q&A with Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa: Interview by Dominic Muwanguzi’, *START Journal*, 16 September 2015¹. <http://startjournal.org/2015/09/another-roadmap-cluster-to-impact-on-art-education-on-the-continent-qa-with-wolukau-wanambwa/> Reprinted with kind permission of the START Journal editorial board

The idea to decolonize art education seems to me to be overly ambitious, especially in Uganda where one of the local languages, Luganda, was used as a tool of colonialism. Don't you think this is a futile agenda?

I agree that it is ambitious to attempt to decolonize artistic education. But the scale of the challenge does not mean that it is not worth the attempt. Far from it: colonial power relations,

¹ Founded in 2007, *START – A Journal of Arts and Culture* is a Kampala-based journal covering visual arts, performing arts, literature, music and other creative possibilities on the African continent.

and, in particular, the subordinate mentality that it, as a system, sought to instil in Africans, continues to impact decisively on relations of power, and on concepts of knowledge and value in ways that are perilously and generationally debilitating for far too many people on this continent.

A clear example of this is the extent to which European languages (admittedly for a complex range of reasons) continue to be widely used as what I once heard the Ghanaian academic Ato Quayson call the ‘languages of power’ in post-independence Africa. Indigenous African languages are regularly marginalized in law, in government, in journalism and in the education system within the very regions in which they originate. They are too rarely taken seriously by those with power as tools for serious discussion and debate. So-called “intelligent” people converse in the languages of former colonizers.

Immigrants settling in Africa from Europe and North America and their descendants can prosper here for generations without ever needing to acquire a proficient grasp of the languages of the people among whom they live. The obverse is decidedly untrue. In fact, it can get worse: last year I met the chairman of an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp on a beach on the shores of Lake Victoria, south of Mukono. He and his fellow fishermen were unfairly evicted from their homes on the islands in the lake ten years ago, and they have been fighting for redress ever since. When we met, the chairman of the camp expressed to me his belief that one of the main reasons that he has struggled to get anyone in the Ugandan government to pay serious attention to the plight of his community is because he cannot speak or write English. If this is true, then in this respect, this man is the victim of the colonial mentality of certain contemporary Ugandans.

The use of European languages might make the work and ideas of Africans more readily accessible to some foreigners, but it also limits the participation in discussion and decision-making of people who have not had access to formal European-style education. And ideas of such people should never automatically be dismissed as ignorant or irrelevant. People who don’t speak European languages, people who have had no formal European-style education also produce and preserve important and useful knowledges. Often indigenous knowledges. The dominance of European languages within African discourses can therefore restrict the access to and circulation of rich and valuable ideas, imaginaries, philosophies and world views.

So it’s a slow and difficult task, but part of what the Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe describes as ‘the difficult work of freedom’ in postcolonial Africa is, as I see it, to de-centre western cultures, western languages and western epistemologies, and to clear a space in which their indigenous counterparts can be reconstituted as centres of gravity.

[...]

It is extremely important to remember that ‘art’ and ‘education’ are neither self-evident nor universal concepts. Many aspects of the ‘symbolic creative work’ that is and has historically been practiced and transmitted within African societies does not fit neatly into western definitions of ‘art’, ‘education’ or ‘art education’. In many instances, under colonialism, such practices, where they were visible to colonisers, were devalued and systematically suppressed, often on the grounds of their supposed paganism or ‘impurity’. But some of these practices ‘flew under the radar’, so to speak, and have continued to flourish, largely free of the external imposition of western ideas. Other forms of indigenous symbolic creative work were, for

complex and sometimes problematic reasons, positively endorsed and encouraged by colonisers. (This was often the case with music and dance in many African societies.). And still others, as is the case with figurative painting and sculpture in Uganda, were introduced into African societies by the colonisers themselves. And in many respects, those societies have, over time, made those imported art forms their own.

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People who think together dance together

[...] our survey has been neither exhaustive nor scientific, but we are, as a group, yet to find an indigenous African language possessing words that translate directly to the English words 'art' and 'design'. Anytime that these words are required, we observe people in Africa to use their European equivalents. Now, this obviously does not mean that indigenous Africans are not creative, that they are not producing and exchanging symbolic meanings. It just means that in most indigenous African cultures, such practices have a very different social, cultural and economic distribution.

It also means that if we are to genuinely understand and to meaningfully engage with cultural production and cultural mediation in Africa today, the use and validity of European terms such as 'art' and 'design' have to be problematised. Our colonial inheritance of separating of certain practices and bodies of knowledge into 'disciplines' must be dissected and then set aside. As the Africa Cluster, we have come to believe that it is the only way, epistemically, that we will ever be able to start to understand and appreciate African cultural production over the long durée, and to create just and sophisticated accounts of how cultural and knowledge-producing practices on this continent have evolved, endured, and indeed continue to drive the discourses of the present.

One consequence of this is that we as the Africa Cluster take 'symbolic creative work' - a term we prefer over 'the arts' - extremely seriously as a form of knowledge production. And by this we do not mean that each such a work encapsulates and encodes a concisely formulated message - rather, that making, doing and participating in such work is a form of knowledge production - *a way of doing the thinking*. And very often it is also a way of doing the thinking *collectively*. So even though the sentence *People who think together dance together* might sound quite light, it is now effectively part of the Africa Cluster's manifesto, and an entry point into a set of ideas that, in our contexts, we believe need urgently to be addressed.