

The Artist and the Philosophical Vision of 21st Century Ghana

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Abstract

Historical trends and critical observation suggest that nations that formulate their philosophical visions using their arts and culture as basis are not only better identified globally, but achieve substantial development. This paper gathers information from both primary and secondary sources to trace how Ghana's policy makers in the past achieved national development and identity through her arts and culture. It employs descriptive method in probing into the developmental agenda of Ghana today finding out the extent to which the neglect of the arts and culture as catalyst for national development affect Ghana in recent times. The paper also outlines a number of recommendations against the exigencies of the 21st century and the benefit thereof.

Keywords: African personality; Cognitive growth; Affective development; Avant-garde; Globalization

Methodology

This research adopted descriptive method to explore the importance of the arts to national development and recognition. Relying mostly on secondary sources of information, it traced the history of Ghana and explained how the arts were employed to attain progress and national identity during pre-independence and post-independence regimes. The study also compared the contributions of past artists to that of present in relation to national development proffering ideas to Ghana's policy makers towards the contingencies of the 21st century.

Introduction

What is national philosophy? Why is it significant for the artist to work within the philosophical frame work of his national aspirations? Philosophy deals with inquiring into, or reflecting on, questions about knowledge, truth, reason, reality, meaning and value, and allowing their widest scope to denote thought about general features of the world and human experience within it (Grayling 1995). In support, the Cambridge Encyclopaedia (1997) explains that, it is a subject that deals with the most general questions about the universe and our place in it.

A national philosophy, inferred from the above definitions, can be explained as the fundamental principles behind any national course, or the idea behind a planned agenda aimed at guiding a nation towards achieving a set target in cognizance of the contingencies of the world. Probing into the philosophical needs of a nation therefore starts by identifying basic but pertinent questions to life, where finding solutions means enhancing life; and ignorant about solutions means remaining perpetually inadequate in grappling with life.

Art is one major medium through which the fundamental needs of man such as shelter, food, clothing, tools and equipment, entertainment and education is accomplished. This is succinctly buttressed by Getlein (2002), that throughout history many questions to the basis of life have produced answers reflecting in the arts. Hence, the philosophies of major civilizations as the 'sympathetic magic' of the prehistoric era; 'life after death' of ancient Egypt; 'man as a measure of all things' of the ancient Greece; the didactic religious teachings of the Medieval periods; the 'true to nature' ideas of the Renaissance era, and the socio-religious milieu of the traditional African life, to mention but few, all had art clingingly undergirding their principles.

According to Mr. Philip Amonoo, a renowned Ghanaian watercolourist and an octogenarian, Ghana in the mid-20th century had art playing a very meaningful role in the fight for her independence. There were vigorous performing and visual art organizations that organised extensive seminars, performances and exhibitions to educate people to assert themselves and be proud as Africans. An example was the formation of 'Akuapim six' (a visual art association) in the mid 1950's with Dr Oku Ampofo as the leader. This assertion is shared by Price (1975) that, many Western trained African artists who were hitherto imitating Western styles, now turned to the arts of their own people and expressed themselves as Africans. This consciousness helped to open people's minds against colonialism.

After independence, the arts were again used extensively to establish the idea of 'African personality'. For example, the Northern smock became the preferred outfit for Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and many of his leaders at several functions; Amon Kotei and Theodosia Okoe, leading artists at the time, were made to design the National Coat of Arms and the National Flag respectively; while Kofi Antubam, another artist, was commissioned to design the ceremonial presidential seat and other national regalia based on traditional Ghanaian concepts.

African personality, through the arts, helped to fully accomplish Ghana's status as an independent nation. Kwami (2005) confirms all these by saying that the artists at the time were held in high esteem and their works enjoyed high patronage under the first president Kwame Nkrumah.

Today, the importance of the arts to a country's development in terms of infrastructure, enhancement of her commerce, pedagogy in education, national campaigns on civil rights and responsibilities, politics and social cohesion, to mention but few, cannot be overemphasized.

Ironically, the agitation for independence and the establishment of African personality in the past have now given way to a socio-economic paradigm that grapples with disease, hunger, unemployment, crime and ignorance. In formulating the national vision against these cankers, policy makers of Ghana fail to recognise that the arts are still relevant. On the other hand, the artist's influence on national affairs compared to the past, has also continued to wane making Ghana's development snail-paced.

This explains why after graduating from an art school, many artists find their way in other jobs rather than practicing as professional artists. Ironically, the few who brave the storm to work as artists, soon come to grips with the difficulty of practicing art in Ghana: – non-affordability of materials, lack of working capital, societal disdain for made in Ghana ideas, lack of art galleries and above all, ignorance on the part of most Ghanaians about the positive effect of the arts on their lives. Moreover, these problems are all the more compounded by parental or family demands for 'better' and 'attractive' jobs depriving the artist the vent to his creative urge and within a serene mind frame.

This is the socio-cultural and economic scenario in which the artist finds himself in Ghana today, and from which he has to carve out his art philosophy.

Art in the 21st century

Having looked at the socio-economic circumstances of the Ghanaian artist, there is the need to discuss the anticipated exigencies of the 21st century and the need for Ghana to develop and package her arts and culture towards it.

The basic needs of man in the 21st century will not change as has been the case throughout life. For, if one were to take a critical look into history, one would see that as man's life and expectations change from one civilization to the other, his philosophical needs in actual sense do not change. They have always remained the same: - shelter, clothing, food, healthcare, entertainment etc. What indeed changes is the scientific, artistic and technological aspirations which continually transforms and gives credence to human existence and redirects it into its future.

Incidentally, the 21st century is directly preceded by the strong personal idealism of the 20th century which, to Greer (1982), entrusted into the hands of the artists the ability to pursue individual styles and personal aspirations. It also awakened the avant-garde spirit of the artists to torpedo the hitherto rigid traditions and conventions that imposed age-old restrictions on the psyche of man. These culminated into highlighting the individual differences of countries and therefore made them too clinging to what they had comparative advantage of, but pretty weak and dependent on others for their complete survival.

However, the 20th century was most remarkable in one thing: - the invention of the computer with its attendant internet system. This has bequeathed to the 21st century the concept of globalization which seeks to bring countries closer through the enigma of information technology. The ultimate success of any country and for that matter, one's art, therefore, cannot be chalked in isolation but through the demands of globalization.

Undoubtedly, globalization could be understood as a pull of international resource contributed into by individuals or countries. It is then processed and packaged in the form of information to be accessed via the internet by all countries and for the purpose of global development. Thus, unlike the 20th century which portrayed individualism, the 21st century through the beauty of globalization has nations contributing and sharing their resources for the benefit of all.

Nonetheless, globalization, as suggests Wemega-Kwawu (2002), is a goldmine for those who use it to sell their uniqueness to the rest of the world. This presupposes that any nation which fails to package itself within the global paradigm fails to benefit adequately from it.

Ironically, it is not her numerous natural resources, neither is it her educational, scientific nor industrial aspirations in themselves that identifies and projects the peoples of Ghana as a nation. For, all are associated with many countries in one way or the other. Rather, it is her arts and culture that make her unique and distinguishes her from the rest of the world.

The truism of this assertion is implied by Matthews and Platt (2001) in their description of ancient Egypt and Greece, that, it was not through their achievements in philosophy, science and technology, per se, that permanently implanted their names in the annals of the ancient world, but how those achievements were uniquely packaged and propagated within the hegemonies of their arts and cultures. Their relics of today amply attest to this fact as Fichner-Rathus (1992) generally confirms that by saying that, “One of the purposes of art is to record and commemorate experience for posterity”.

Consequently, the obligation for Ghana to make an impact in the 21st century global demands, and also establish a foothold in posterity, can best be measured by the extent to which the development of her scientific and technological expertise, as well as the maximization of her exploits in her natural resources, are made to refine and project the uniqueness of her arts and culture. This can be done through any of her art forms as painting, sculpture, architecture, printing, book illustration, textiles, drama, folktales, literature or traditional cuisine, few to mention.

If one should take a look at all the major sectors of Ghana’s economy today, one will see that the arts are either ignored altogether or not properly utilised to enhance the development of the nation. A case in point is the proliferation of various universities and their preferences, as if by design, for Business and Theological courses of study against that of the Arts and Culture. Again, the curriculum for the primary school level has always been deficient to the extent that art activities as colour work, clay manipulation, papier-mâché, pattern making and a host of others, which affect the three most important domains of the child, and give him a holistic development, is not given the needed attention.

These domains, according to Lowenfeld and Britain (1970), are the **Head** (Cognitive growth: – gained through activities as pattern making, imaginative composition etc.); the **Hand** (Skills development: – gained through activities that relate to the use of the hand as weaving, cutting, modelling etc.) and the **Heart** (Affective development: – gained through art appreciation and enjoyment). Again, art is therapeutic as it corrects emotional problems, and at the same time, sharpens the perceptual and aesthetic senses of children.

Thus, art should have been one of the most important subjects of study at the primary school which forms the formative years of children. On the contrary, many primary school teachers lack expertise in child art let alone use it to assist children with emotional problems. (It should be noted here however that education in child art does not necessarily mean making children professional artists in their future, but using it as a means of enhancing their education and total development.)

Another example is the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Even though many imported goods as clothes, foods and other merchandise may not match what is produced in Ghana, yet, they rake in billions in revenue to their countries of origin due to the lengthening creative prowess of their package designers who brand those goods in attractive finishing influencing buyers’ taste. By training Graphic Designers alone, one can imagine how the branding of Ghanaian products will enhance governmental efforts at propagating the patronage of made-in-Ghana goods and boosting the Ghanaian economy.

The recent establishment of The Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture is a step in the right direction. However, not only is it crippled by an insignificant budgetary allocation, its mission of projecting Ghanaian culture is inundated by a plethora of chieftaincy disputes. Thus, its activities through the Centres for National Culture have always been on the periphery with many people erroneously considering it as a venture only for the organisation of festivals and traditional drumming and dancing.

There are many other examples to suggest that taking our arts and culture seriously in the global exigencies of our times will go a long way to enhance our national development in the 21st century.

Philosophical direction of artists in the 21st century

If Ghana should have a modicum of identity as a nation, it should be for her system of chieftaincy, traditional and contemporary technology, artefacts, folktales, history and her intellectual and manpower resources among others, all of which sum up in definition as her cultural endowments. It is this that makes her different from the

rest of the world. The numerous problems that beset the art industry in Ghana as a result of lack of governmental vision, have left budding artists in a dilemma whether to lift ideas from the West with the wrong notion of breaking through, or to base their ideas either on the contemporary or the traditional Ghanaian settings. They get all the more disillusioned because they are not patronized locally while they also fall short of international expectation.

Meanwhile, the artistic and cultural heritage of Ghana abound an endless variety of subject matter. Examples are the mesmeric display of colours at a durbar of chiefs; the reverberating drumming and dancing that herald our festivals; the dexterity of our traditional crafts in the areas of carving, textiles, goldsmith etc, and indeed many other contemporary and environmental scenery. These will inspire artists to project Ghana to the rest of the world instead of appending to foreign ideas and being second rated.

Much as the ultimate aim should be to sell Ghana globally, the internet opens a vast opportunity for artists the world over, to assimilate international art concepts. This presupposes that Ghanaian artists should be computer literate and internet driven. It will not be prudent though, to jump ravenously on the net and lift ideas from it with no recourse to plagiarism, neither will it be wise to dwell alone on our traditional heritage. Certainly, Ghanaian artists stand to benefit adequately from globalization if they should sift ideas from both their heritage, and that of the foreign, and compose them into a showpiece of artistic expression fit for global taste. A lot of contemporary African artists, according to Fosu (1993), have formulated their personal philosophies along this lines and succeeded – name them: - Vincent Kwofie, Dr. Kobina Bucknor, El Anatsui, and others from Ghana; Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Twin Seven Seven of Nigeria, Papa Ibra Taal of Senegal to mention but few.

Apart from the seemingly unending pandemic of hunger, war, squalor and other vices, one issue that is gradually becoming a bane in contemporary Africa is the taste for Western lifestyles. Many Africans, ignominiously including policy makers and economic think tanks, are fast losing the bearing of their heritage as Africans and yet far removed from the Western identity they so cherish.

This robs off the future aspirations of Africa leading to its extinction and rather perpetuating that of the West. Crapo (2002) cautions against this by saying that “One of the major factors that can lead to cultural extinction of a society is acculturation”, which he explains, takes place when a tradition is not strong enough to stand up against alien cultural infiltrations. If those at the helm of affairs could re-orient their taste for African products and fashion out policies to convince Ghanaians to embrace made in Ghana ideas, artists and stake holders of the arts will formulate their ideas to maximise Ghana’s stakes in global opportunities.

Conclusion

Culture is the soul of a nation; and a nation’s art forms are the pillars that will always attest to her greatness in posterity. It behoves of every nation therefore, to hold her arts and culture in high esteem. Even though technologies may differ, what can pass as true development for every nation is to be self-assertive and find ways of refining her indigenous culture to meet her changing circumstances. Borrowing ideas from different cultures to accomplish this purpose may be prudent, but dangerous if made to completely usurp and annihilate the indigenous heritage.

No culture is inferior if it has the capacity, no matter the mode, to provide her people with the basic needs of life. This is sufficiently exemplified by the history of The Presbyterian Church in Ghana. All the first batch of four missionaries, and two of the second batch of three, who set foot in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) to establish the church, died of malaria. The church only gained root when the last missionary named Andreas Riis was saved by a local traditional herbalist (Presbyterian Press, 1992). The irony is that, the missionaries thought they could fight malaria, a tropical disease, with ‘pious’ medicine from abroad rather than seeing the goodness in indigenous medical practice. They failed to recognise that their journey to ‘convert’ Africans, who had been living on earth for generations without being wiped out, was in itself an ample justification of a sustaining culture that proffered a potent medical technology akin to their environment and particular ways of living. This shows the strength of indigenous Ghanaian arts and culture, and one of many good reasons to form the bases of her philosophical vision.

Undoubtedly, Ghana has often trail blazed many major movements that have tended to push the rest of Africa forward. It is incumbent on Ghana, once again, to pioneer an Art and Cultural Revolution in policy direction towards a total national development. By so doing, not only will the crave for science and technology as the medium for development be meaningful, it will also make Ghana unique in her strides into globalisation and help break the jinx placed on her psyche by the vestiges of colonialism, which the achievement of independence

has failed to eradicate.

Irrespective of the problems in art practice, artists have a duty to be focused, and also educate Policy Makers about the importance of arts and culture to the name of Ghana; after all they may only be ignorant. It is through this that artists will know which way to direct their creativity to fully accomplish the goals with which Ghana strives to bring development to her people in the 21st century.

Recommendations

Art curricula in Ghana's educational setup should be reflective of Ghanaian culture. This will encourage future generations to be abreast with the culture, cherish it and practise it to consolidate Ghana's position as a unique nation.

The philosophical vision and the ultimate objective of the youth policy of Ghana should be reflective of Ghanaian culture. For example, there should be a craft village set up in every district and supported to absorb more youth into the arts and culture industry. This will reduce the case of unemployment in Ghana.

Established traditional designs of Ghana such as 'Adinkra symbols', 'Kente' patterns and other artefacts should be protected by patent to forestall plagiarism. This will ensure full ownership and a credible heritage for future Ghanaian designers and craftsmen to use to fully accomplish Ghana's uniqueness in the 21st century.

There should be at least one museum in every regional capital to collate and exhibit artistic expressions peculiar to that region. This will showcase the artistic and cultural diversification of the nation. It will also strengthen the tourism industry in Ghana.

The Chieftaincy institution as the major custodian of Ghanaian culture should be strengthened through the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Culture.

Ghanaian writers and researchers should be motivated to write books and journals on Ghanaian arts and culture. These should be stuffed in Ghanaian libraries to encourage readership among the youth. It is through this that the youth will appreciate and fully embrace Ghanaian culture.

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