

Freedom of Expression versus Cultural Sensitivity (*Restraint, Respect and Revolt*)

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It could have been possible to title this panel session “Culture and Democracy” or “Culture and Human Rights” seeing the organic link between our desire as human beings but more so people of the Arts to expand our spaces of freedom of expression beyond the limitations imposed on us by our value systems or ecosystems.

Back in our traditional African context it is still anathema for young people to express themselves in the midst of the old. This generational restriction in communication could be out of the culture of respect rather than fear or out of the claim that the wisdom of the old reigns supreme over the knowledge of the young. Yet it may account for the early inhibition of artistic flowering in children’s art and culture. It is also taboo in some African societies for women to hold effective dialogue in the presence of their male counterparts. This gender restriction in communication is informed by the controversial claim that men are guided by rationality and women by emotions. Today modernity or if you will the western canons of human rights and democracy continue to rubbish the dogma of traditional power and male chauvinism thereby heralding a new form of inter-generational and cross-gender dialogue based on restraint, respect and revolt.

It is against this background that the artist who is a product of the dynamics of his or her society is faced with the challenge of striking a balance between message and mode, between confrontation and conformity and between defiance and dogma.

It is true that the artist speaks on behalf of the speechless; they arrogate to themselves the role of a compass directing the ship of society to the shores of sanity and holding high the mantra of freedom to the land of equality. Indeed the artist may lose his or her sting if he or she does not possess the independence of mind, the freedom of thought and the courage of action that breaks the walls of societal ills caged in cultural sensitive identities. But let us be careful, the line between confrontational expression which is the yeast of revolt and

co-operative expression which is the yoke of restraint is getting thinner as the definition of freedom itself becomes more contextual than conceptual. Let us look at these two categories of artists. The first category holds that if the artist is the product of his or her society then he or she must be rooted in the multicultural norms of that society not to rock the boat of the values, beliefs and orientations. Proponents of this argument hold that the beauty of art lies in both the message and the style. They argue that by defying the value system or cultural sensitive identities of any community the artist draws more attention to himself than to his work of art. Would the death penalty over Salman Rusdie have been necessary if his satanic verses also included some angelic voices of his religion? Would the work titled “Vagina monologue” whose tour in Uganda met with stiff status quo resistance have been otherwise if the authors had chosen a more subtle title yet maintaining the message? Would the graphic drawing of South African cartoonist Zapiro depicting a rape encounter that involved a highly placed South African politician gone unnoticed if the drawing had not carried with it obscene interpretations? I suppose this school of thought believes every artist should employ their creative skills for social cohesion. To them it is freedom of expression AND cultural sensitivity.

On the other hand the apostles of art as a shock therapy believe that conformity with all its subtlety is mere cowardice and cultural liberty or call it total freedom of expression is the only key to the doors of any society that has chosen to imprison itself and its citizens in the fortress of cultural conservatism. In a world where the vacuum of lackluster political party action and impotent civil society activism needs to be filled by “*les artistes engages*” conformity is suicidal. The proponents argue that only confrontation beyond cultural sensitive frontiers can empower the voiceless and precipitate conservative societies into entering the global village. They further hold that since the artist does not impose his or her work on society, society should not impose their taste on the artist. In other words the debate should move from freedom of expression to freedom of consumption. After all, were traditional African societies to remain fossilized in their generational and gender communication stereotype would our democracy not have been one for the old men and by the old men?

Can we fathom the new dress language that Sudan is bound to speak in the future simply because one trouser lady journalist chose revolt over restraint? I suppose this school of

thought borrows a metaphor from the natural world that says that a weed always outgrows any danger of extinction. To them it is freedom of expression VERSUS cultural sensitivity. So let us address the crucial question of this panel which is How can society manage freedom of expression on the one hand and on the other, the need to integrate communities into the cultural mainstream that may be offended by some artistic expressions of freedom? Let us look at the BRIDGE.

Being sensitive to especially minority cultural identities is crucial to cultural diversity. Ursula Owen argues that the fact that cultural diversity is on the agenda in Britain is due not so much to the decision makers at the top. It is due to the social and political activities of minorities. In the same vein activities like Awards, Fellowships, artist residences that seek to integrate and highlight minority cultures should be encouraged.

Respect even if you do not agree with certain cultural sensitivities. The Owen report says we may not like what an artist tells us but we must give him the freedom of expression or our cultures become simply safe and predictable.

Interface between civil society working on human right issues and interest groups based on cultural identity in order to explore common ground on negative values of culture that are inimical to the positive development of society and that alienate other cultures.

Decision-makers need to be more proactive than reactive in changing cultural norms that tend to be repressive on agents of change.

Going Global is definitely an advantage to fossilized societies as long as this does not mean going Western. This is more evident if such freedom of expression is homegrown rather than having an “outsider” agenda. There will be rupture in our community cohesion if the interpretation of value system is monolithic, patronizing and bordering on Western cultural hegemony.

Education of our culture and the “other’s” cultures should be a permanent menu of multicultural societies whether in the home, in our schools and in the media targeting especially young people.

Be that as it may even in the face of hyper-cultural sensitivities, artists keep mutating their spaces of freedom seeking alternative strategies and safe havens to pass on their message. And through this we are observing new forms of creativity that create meaning in our art and that enrich and beautify the cultural landscape of our society. Long live freedom of expression; long live Cultural sensitivity.