

Yiran Panel Discussion

African Arts, Culture and Community in the Diaspora

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African Diaspora is the term commonly used to describe the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trades, from the 1500s to the 1800s. This Diaspora took millions of people from Western and Central Africa to different regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.

Throughout the 20th century, artists (mostly of African descent) have critically addressed the historical and contemporary migration of culture, products, and bodies from the African continent. By African "Diaspora" I am typically referring to populations scattered involuntarily or forced to leave their homeland due to political persecution or in search of new frontiers of knowledge. Questions abound towards the survival of African Arts, culture, and community in separate lands. African society has reverberated its cultural dynamism within modern day transnational artistic imaginings. The purpose is visibly to afford the opportunity of sharing work, discussing viewpoints and approaches towards enduring as Black artists—in a safe haven like the USA—free of occidental screening and judgment with no self-explanations and no obligation to represent anyone but oneself. Exploring one's craft, voice and African-ness in a picturesque and encouraging atmosphere with kindred spirits has become an essential *raison d'être* for promoting African art and culture.

There is a simple explanation for the resurgence of African art and culture in the diaspora. By way of questions:

- A. How have African artists, especially playwrights fared in the face of corrupt regimes that feel threatened by the pen and have little or no appreciation for the arts?
- B. Where do these artists or playwrights share or showcase their work and to what audiences given the limited building spaces available to them on both sides of the Atlantic?
- C. How do they engage in debates about identity and authenticity within an African diaspora?
- D. What are the different ways in which international boundaries shape the African artistic experience and how do they manifest in writing and performance?

If the notion of African diaspora is to be broadened, the specifics of these artists' and playwrights' experiences and practices must be examined. Historically, Africans brought to the Americas the greatly varied cultures of their homelands, including folklore, language, music, and foodways. In forging new lives with one another, as well as neighboring Europeans and Native Americans, rich varieties of African diaspora culture took root in a New World decidedly shaped by the cultural innovations of Africans and their descendants.

The African therefore has at his disposal a reservoir of resources, including the use of African languages, rituals, myths and other traditional and contemporary mores. Common topics include the exigencies of cultural, social and political transformation into the modern world. Storytelling in Africa has been a traditional event since the presence of the Griots who—through music and poetry—became the creative custodians of oral history.

By extension some African American dramatists view preachers, spoken word artists, stand-up comics, blues singers and playwrights as part of that tradition. They examine and record through text based platforms the trials, tribulations and conditions of a people who evolved from slavery to become one of the most celebrated cultures globally. The aesthetic values and humane concerns which hover their works clearly speak to an African continuum in the New World. Not only does the commonality of practices and history between modern day African and African American artists deserve notice, of seminal importance is their mutual struggle to devote attention to their craft—as modern day Griots.

Artists and playwrights on the African continent and in the African diaspora are well endowed with tools to provide enlightenment. Creative methodologies and thematic concerns amongst artists and playwrights in Africa and the African World of the Americas are derived from a plethora of cultural sources and influences.

African Culture is classified here as:

a) Objective culture (institutions and artifacts): This is basically a sort of idea created by individuals and residing outside them. Arts objects, work equipment, clothing and also residential constructions are core examples of Culture as a means or system of behavior. Again, institutions such as laws and marriage systems that include; (inheritance systems, taboos, etc.), and political or religious bodies, are as well more examples of invisible features of objective culture;

b) Culture as a scheme of behavior: basically, this system of culture consists of the conventional patterns of thought, activity, and artifact that are passed on from generation to generation;

c) Culture as a tradition: This reflects one of the main concerns of Western field anthropologists in the past: in other words, they had to make sense of the incomprehensible symbols, rituals, and other practices in the society that has not developed the use of writing literally from the societies that has not or yet become developed in which they studied. Furthermore, culture can be seen as defined shared meanings that are fixed into the norms that constitute it; and,

d) Individual Culture: Rational Software) culture as mental programming or software of the mind.

Folklore

These African ancestors landed in regions that featured different local foods and cuisines, as well as other cultural influences that shaped their unique cooking styles. The overall pattern of a plant-based, colorful diet based on vegetables, fruits, tubers and grains, nuts, healthy oils and seafood (where available) was shared throughout these four regions, but their cultural distinctions have reason to be celebrated.

Africa is home to leafy greens, root vegetables, mashed tubers and beans, and many different plant crops across its lands. In Central and Western Africa, traditional meals were often based on hearty vegetable soups and stews, full of spices and aromas, poured over boiled and mashed tubers or grains. In Eastern Africa, whole grains and vegetables are the main features of traditional meals, especially cabbage, kale and maize (cornmeal). In the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia and Somalia are found, traditional meals are based on flat breads like injera (made out of teff, sorghum or whole wheat) and beans blended with spices, like lentils, fava beans and chickpeas. Today, many meals in the Horn are still prepared in halal style meaning that they include no pork, no alcohol, and meat only from animals who have died on their own. Across Africa, couscous, sorghum, millet and rice were enjoyed as the bases of meals, or as porridges and sides. Watermelon and okra are both native to Africa, and many believe that cucumbers are too. Beans were eaten in abundance everywhere, especially black-eyed peas, which were often pounded into a powder for tasty bean pastes seared as fritters.

Language

Africans forced onto slave ships were drawn from a large range of societies and cultures. Though Europeans tended to describe them simply as "Africans" (a term which no African would have recognized), African individuals viewed themselves according to kinship groups, lineage, and ethnicity, defined by distinct traditions and languages. In this way, those belonging to distinct groups, lineages, and ethnicities tended to view others as "foreigners." The language of race was introduced by Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century.

For the enslaved, understanding the language of European and American slave traders and plantation owners was necessary to understand the new world of Atlantic slavery that legally determined so many aspects of their lives from life to death. A new "pidgin" language evolved, first developed from the language used by early Portuguese sailors and African traders along the West and Central African coast. As more Europeans arrived, and as their trading presence became more concentrated, a similar pattern evolved for all the major European languages.

In addition, bi-racial children born on the coast to African women and European sailors or traders were often fluent in both languages and were employed as interpreters and traders. At the points of African embarkation on slave ships, and then in the Americas, African and European people worked as interpreters, using a mix of African and European languages in order to convey instructions.

In the Americas, new languages emerged and evolved. They were, again, pidgin or creole languages which emerged from the blending of African, European, and Americanized-European languages. Eventually, forms of pidgin, differing from colony to colony, emerged into fully-fledged creole languages of their own. All bore strong linguistic features of the dominant African group in the region. American-born slaves grew up speaking these languages naturally. A similar pattern happened among Europeans and their American-born offspring. Thus, white and African North Americans spoke differently from their European and African forebears. Europeans and Africans across the Americas in Cuba, Brazil, Suriname, or Martinique, for example, spoke with distinct local voices—accents, vocabularies, and intonations.

Music

European slavers deprived African captives of material possessions during the Middle Passage, but survivors throughout the Americas re-created variants of familiar instruments, if possible. When resources were not

available, they created new instruments. Materials found in diverse environments throughout the Americas varied from gourds, sea shells, wood, bones, and string. On their own time, enslaved people used available materials to construct musical instruments, such as drums, rattles, bells, banjars (an ancestor to the banjo), fiddles, and other instruments. In the process, enslaved musicians created new forms of musical expression that informed social and religious life in the Americas.

African and European cultures influenced each other in different ways throughout the Americas. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, in many places in Brazil and the Caribbean, Whites were but a small minority of the population, and their culture and lifeways were heavily influenced by those of the enslaved black majority. In British North America, enslaved people infused their musical culture with European instruments, songs, and dances, creating new forms of expression that incorporated and adapted elements of multiple cultural traditions. Throughout the Americas, the enlistment of Africans and their descendants in the military also exposed blacks to European drums and wind instruments like trumpets, fifes, and horns. Groups in the Caribbean and the southern United States, such as the Tuk Band of Barbados, are legacies of those traditions.

The sacred music of Protestant and Catholic Christian religions profoundly influenced the instrumentation and songs of the African diaspora over the decades and throughout the Americas. Some enslaved people converted to Christianity while others rejected it as the religion of their oppressors. Those who attended church learned and reinterpreted western hymnal and choral singing for their communities. In some cases, enslaved people continued to use elements of African music in their religious expressions, including syncopation, polyrhythms, and call-and-response. In the United States, nineteenth-century enslaved people also combined dance, music, and Christian hymns in the "ring shout," as a distinct form of religious worship. Elsewhere, as with maroons in Brazilian quilombos, combined dance, song, instruments, and martial arts in Capoeira, a form of self-defense disguised as a dance.

Christian holidays and festivals were another occasion for European and African cultures to merge and influence one another.

Foodways

Africans survived on the slave ships on diets which the European captain thought were appropriate for their survival. It was a crude mix of foods acquired on the African coast, imported on the ship, and prepared on board.

Eating took place in the cramped and generally squalid circumstance of the ship and in conditions which often helped the spread of sickness among the African captives. Oats, peas, beans, biscuits, maize, plantains, and rice were boiled and mixed with oil and perhaps some pepper. The ship captain's plan was to provide foods with which Africans were familiar. Survival of the captives required the crew to carry a plentiful supply of fresh water. In order to survive several weeks at sea, the ship often used more space to carry water barrels than captives. Major disasters, and huge loss of life, sometimes occurred on slave ships because of water shortages.

In the Americas, foodstuffs from Africa such as rice, ackee, and yams, as well as imported foods from Europe and other parts of the Americas became a basic diet for enslaved communities in the African diaspora. Salt fish from Newfoundland fisheries was provided on Caribbean plantations. With these basics, enslaved people developed their own distinctive foodways.

Slave owners rationed food to their slaves. Some enslaved people fished, hunted wild animals, and grew crops in gardens allotted to them by their owners. Some domestic slaves ate food similar to their owners. In large part, enslaved people's diets depended on the culture and policies of their owners. When a slave owner fell on hard economic times, their food rations were diminished. Some owners allowed their enslaved people to roam, in order to scavenge for food, in times of drought or crop failures. When times were good for the owner and supplies were plentiful, extra rations might be granted to enslaved laborers on select occasions, such as on holidays, as incentives for increased production.

As with languages and religions, the foodways were blends of African, European, and Native American foodstuffs, spices, ingredients, and cooking methods. There emerged a distinct blend of Africa and the Americas. The use of particular ingredients, ways of cooking, and the melding of various African habits with the patterns and ingredients available in the Americas all created distinct patterns of African diet and cuisine. For example, in Jamaica, Ackee and salt fish—today a national dish—derives from the fruit, ackee, native to West Africa, and salt fish, from the teeming fishing grounds of the Newfoundland banks. And all garnished with local spices. This national dish, a mix of ingredients from Africa and the Americas, was created by people who blended their foods—local and imported—as best they could from what was available. It established itself as a palatable and tasty staple of local culinary culture.

Looking Ahead:

Let us start by noting that creativity, culture and identity are inter-related. Contemporary African Art like those represented by Mfoomi Yiran's contributions demonstrate that African artworks such as painting, sculpture, and many others, convey important messages.

1. Masquerade

In action, masks can take on a wide range of functions. In the Yiran artworks, some masks serve in judiciary contexts to depict impartiality and to demonstrate good judgement, including in the face of actual and/or perceived conflict of interests; other masquerades are deployed to educate younger generations or portray honored members of society like the King. The contexts in which masks appear are as varied as the diversity of their forms, styles, and messages to be communicated to the public.

2. Water in African Art

Water is in all of us—to live, we need water to drink. Featuring artworks from Yiran's collection proves that water is one of the most potent forces on earth. Its currents flow through myths, metaphors, and rituals. Diverse and wide-ranging in material, time period, style, and intended use. The objects in this exhibition span the continent of Africa to explore the importance of water for both practical and artistic purposes.

3. Land as Material and Metaphor

"Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in African Arts reveal the diverse ways in which African artists and communities draw power from, interpret, and protect the land.

4. Visionary Viewpoints on Yiran's Arts

When you look at the authority symbol in the Yiran artworks you realize that authority in Africa is conferred by consensus, not by one man, one vote. People debate issues until they arrive at a decision by consensus. Hence, there is no rigging of the process of decision making. This visionary approach to decision making aims to get observers to look with fresh and focused insight and, in so doing, to see works of art—and each other—with new eyes.