

Notion of Hybridity in the Discourse of Some Contemporary West African Artists

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ABSTRACT

It has been stated that Western collectors, cultural institutions and audiences are decidedly more at ease with artists from Africa laying claim to their “African identity” than with those who do not. The art world discourse assumes that any approach to their work must centre on their own relation to a primordial “tradition”. The six cases under consideration here are no exceptions in terms of expressing their Africanness. But there is something else in them, too. Today, it sounds quite old-fashioned to talk of someone having a “pure African identity” or “a pure European identity”: in fact, it is almost a slogan to talk of “hybrid identities”. In my view, however, this slogan has not been opened too often: how is “hybridity” in various cases constructed, relatively speaking? The six artists under discussion have been classed here into two categories: those living in Africa and those living in Europe.

Keywords: “African” identity, hybridity, African artist, art(world) discourse, West African art

INTRODUCTION

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do”; and when you have arrived in the Western art world context, do as the Westerners do – talk about art and art-making. Many of the best-known artists of African origin, have been asked to do just this and, not surprisingly, most of them do accept the challenge of being interviewed. Here I am interested in the notion of hybridity by some visual artists of West African origin, or better, the mixture of “Africanism” and “Europeanism” / Islamism in their interviews. How is “Africanism” and “Europeanism” / Islamism expressed in their discourse, and what is emphasized? Are the emphases of those living in Africa different from those living in the West?

The six artists under study are, in this order, Moustapha Dimé (b. 1952), Tamessir Dia (b. 1950), Gerard Santoni (b. 1943), Sokari Douglas Camp (b. 1958), Ouattara (b. 1957), and Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962). In addition to their West African roots, common to all these contemporary artists is that none of them is so called self-taught but all have studied in various art schools and all have been acclaimed by the Western artistic world. Shonibare has had his art presented, for example, at Documenta (the International Art Expo) in Kassel, Germany, at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and at the Kiasma Museum of

Contemporary Art, in Helsinki; and Camp at the National Museum of African Art in Washington; while the others have appeared at the Venice Biennale.

1. AFRICANS LIVING IN AFRICA

Moustapha Dimé, a Senegalese, was born in 1952 in Louga, 200 kilometres from Dakar. In his area, the Moslem religion is integrated into traditional African culture, and that gives a special character to the region. “I’m a member of the Mouride sect, and we have refused to become acculturated through religion into the Arab culture.”

Dimé remembers his childhood region as very rich, especially in terms of song, wood sculpture, theater, daily life, initiation. The problem of Louga was – and still is – the many castes: of griots, leather workers, blacksmiths. According to Dimé, all these professions are inherited and regarded as lower in the hierarchy. As a member of a non-caste family, Dimé’s problem was that his father did not let him to practise the profession of woodcarving, nor did his mother like to see him performing caste activity in a public square. Working with wood was considered degrading and humiliating. But it is wood that Dimé has been interested since youth; even in Venice, the first things that impressed him were the wooden pilings, and he wanted to make a big sculpture out of them.

Dimé, who describes himself as “very stubborn”, does not listen to his parents. First, at the age of 14 (in 1966) he went to a crafts center in Dakar, learning there sculpture, jewelry, saddle making, ceramics. The training produced craftspeople for furniture and decorations for home. In the crafts center, for example French literature was taught. “Our ancestors the Gauls...” was how the textbooks began. “And that became like a rallying cry for all that was wrong with the colonials.” A Guinean professor taught Dimé French literature, but the latter “always slept in his course”, revolted by the French effort to acculturate the Africans. However, there was also a good side to the Frenchness of the artisanal school: the artisanal professions taught there were not regarded as caste professions, as they were outside, in Senegalese society. Dimé graduated from the school with specialization in sculpture, which meant wood-carving and decoration. Some other students continued in that line of work and became artisans, decorating furniture, becoming what one today calls workmen. In those days, however, the artist and the artisan were the same. It is only later that artists have been assigned their own place in society, and today there is an Académie des Beaux-Arts in Senegal.

Dimé tried to find his own place in life and worked both in the Gambia and in Ghana, but there were language problems. He earned his living by making, for example, doors with decorations of scenes of daily life, which is a tradition in Ghana, and decorations; in addition, he made works representing women’s heads, which brought him a lot of money. When there was no further excitement

in the working process, however, he grew bored. As a result, he invented a new technique: burning wood and rubbing dirt into it, a technique that he had not previously seen elsewhere.

After having found the traditional sculptors, Dimé wanted to associate with them and to learn their technique with an adze. At school, he was taught to use the chisel because the professor was French. This started “disgusting” Dimé, and he wanted to immerse himself in what people in traditional African art did. The adze was the traditional African tool and “completely different from the chisel – a chisel is like a percussion instrument, it’s struck, it’s a cutting thing you hit. Whereas the adze, in a traditional milieu, is thrown, or stroked.” For Dimé the chisel represents the West and the adze represents Africa.

In the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Dimé learnt less about European art since, as he says, he had “vomited acculturation”. While resisting Europeanization, in the early 1980s he still had difficulties in his own society. His “whole generation was working, they had succeeded in the social milieu. I was the only one who didn’t have normal resources. I was practising a caste profession and I wasn’t accepted, I was marginalized.” Dimé’s father, who had wanted his son to go to accounting school, said that he was “the most failed of all his children”. Dimé created heads representing social outcasts – bums and beggars. The theme of marginal people was familiar to him since he himself felt he was one of them. He also was irritated by the Senegalese president Senghor’s pronouncement that he did not want to see any beggars in public – because they would disturb the tourists.

While living in the *Village des Arts* in Dakar, Dimé began recycling materials, that is, using materials that he simply found. Since the *Village des Arts* was located next to the sea, he often took stones from there; he also used iron and ropes. Dimé’s explanation for his use of recycled materials reads as follows: he wants to use material that allows or leads people to be closer to their own lives. For Dimé, it is very important to use materials that have lived in the environment, that are not alienated from the society in which he lives. Earlier, exhibitions were attended only by those who had attended school. Museums, galleries, cultural centers were all made for intellectuals who belonged to the elite. Dimé, in contrast, tried to reach the whole population.

Dimé tells a touching story about the encounter of his art and two old people from two different ethnic groups. In his room, there is a sculpture with three bowls. One bowl is on top of the other, and the base is a mortar. When an 80-year-old Serer man, who very much appreciated traditions, saw the sculpture, he threw himself on it, thus performing an old ritual. He also gave the sculpture a name and talked to it. Then he said to Dimé: “Moustapha, now I know that what you are doing comes from your soul, because there is a communication between you and other people.” And when later, at another exhibition in 1992, Dimé exhibited the same sculpture, a Diola, a member of a different ethnic group, saw it and went directly to the sculpture, looked at it and talked to it. After having first asked about Dimé what he wanted to say with it, he provided his own explanation. In the Diola religion, he said, in their concept of the universe, there

are three dimensions – the world of men, the world of spirits, and the world of god; nature also has its place. The symbolism of the mortar and the bowls is the fundamental basis of life. That is where you transform the element of life, food (mainly millet). For these people it became the meaning of the universe.

Dogon civilization and the emphasis that Cheikh Anta Diop has placed on it has meant a lot to Dimé. Learning French perfectly led him into an identity crisis, since at the same time he discarded his own language, Wolof. Dimé then put a lot of effort into getting rid of his French and was soon speaking it badly – while at the same time re-learning his own language. This involved associating with his own people, and it also propelled him into doing a considerable amount of research on cultures in different parts of Senegal.

Dimé states that he is a Moslem even though he does not practise his faith. For him, sculpture is a form of practising Islam. When Islam first came to Senegal, the Moslems destroyed Senegalese sculpture on the basis of the Islamic prohibition of figuration. Dimé's reasoning goes: "But I think that is a shallow interpretation of the Islamic text, because God created visual beauty in the world. And there is nothing more beautiful than a work of art, so the work of art is very close to God, and should be part of God's sacred text". Dimé also trusts in a spiritual guide, who has created a kind of African synthesis of the Moslem religion: Sheikh Amadou Bamba is the spiritual guide of the Mouride sect, to which he belongs.

For Dimé, art should not be made simply as something of commercial value, but as a kind of gift. "In my way of seeing things, I consider that we're here, we human beings, to give to one another, not to just take or to amass money. Each person can show generosity and give to another. [...] It's not a question of freedom, because to me it is not a freedom, it's a question of necessity, because you really have a need to do something that's part of ourself. And my equilibrium today is sculpture."

Tamessir Dia, a Senegalese, was born in Mali in 1950 but has lived a long time in Ivory Coast, the country to which, when talking about African art, he mainly refers. Dia remembers that when he was small he was surrounded by a traditional Moslem milieu with, for instance, many aunts and cousins.

Besides the Moslem tradition there was a tradition of African mysticism. "Even if you pray like a Moslem, you still go to a healer or a diviner to find out about your future." When asked, whether the Moslem prohibition of figurative images was in effect, Dia answers that the Moslem religion of Africans was different from the Arabic one. So, there was figurative art when Dia grew up. For example, there were images that were scenes of hell, in posters in the streets, made in Saudi Arabia or Egypt. And there were self-taught painters who painted portraits of people and sold them in the streets. It was not known, and it was not important to know, whether they were Moslems or not. Dia remembers figurative paintings from his childhood.

Dia's education was traditional at home and Western-style at school. At school it was forbidden to speak "our own dialect": only French was permitted. In Dia's family, Bambara, Wolof, Susu and French were spoken; he also knows

some Arabic, which he uses in praying. When asked, whether there was any tension felt between these two poles of education, Dia responds: “Absolutely not.” Dia’s father had three wives, and there were sixteen children in the family. Dia was the only child his mother had with his father, and his mother did not live with them.

Dia’s father was in close contact with Europeans and Dia emphasizes his “very developed conception of things”. By this Dia means that his father, for example, wanted all of his children to go to school, did not want clitoridectomy done to his daughters; he was interested in theology and read a lot of European writers. He also was against the habit of spending a lot of money on marriages and naming ceremonies. However, he respected African tradition a lot. Dia learnt to love French literature. And artists who were influential on Dia included Delacroix and Cézanne, but “the absolute most was Picasso; what he was doing made an incredible difference to me. In Picasso all of painting, universal painting, is there for me. His imagination, his creative sense, interested me a lot.” Dia states that, after the First World War, Europe suffered from a crisis of imagination, a crisis of development in a cultural sense, and so artists turned to Africa. Europeans then used Dia’s cultural heritage, so why shouldn’t he use Europe’s. According to him, he uses the African, Moslem, European, whatever heritage that inspires him; he does not want to limit himself solely to his African heritage, and “it would be ridiculous for any African today to speak of Africanity or Negritude”. In fact, the interest in African motives started even before the First World War.

According to Dia, the members of his generation do not feel the tension between Europe and Africa, and the reason is being born or at least raised in the postcolonial era. Then he names the languages he uses in different situations – Wolof, Bambara, French. On the matter of choosing a national language in Ivory Coast, Dia states that favoring some local language caused “tribal conflicts”, and ultimately French was chosen “because it was not tied to any conflict”. The interviewer comments: “to say that French is ‘not tied to any conflict’ is a very postcolonial statement indeed”. Thus for Dia, and the interviewer, ‘postcolonial’ conditions are not at all connected to the ‘colonial’ ones, nor do they have connotations with ‘neocolonialism’.

In Dia’s view, his art is completely different from what Ivorians generally do. “I hope that people in Africa get away from just doing geometric compositions. People imagine that if you do two or three African geometric signs, that will be enough. I don’t like it at all. There is one thing that you have to take into consideration in painting, and that’s the role of honesty in the work. Because you can do an African painting for Europeans to attract people’s attention – that can be very easy. Or you can go beyond that and be in trouble. I’m very marginalized.” Of Ivorians, in addition to these ‘tourist-pleasers’, Dia mentions another group of artists. Some painters have formed a so-called “Vohu Vohu” group, meaning that they take all kinds of rejected and miscellaneous things and make two-dimensional works of art out of them. Sometimes they do collages with reliefs made from cowries, sand, pebbles etc. Dia emphasizes his

solitude: although he “respects” what they do, he has nothing in common with them.

Gerard Santoni, an Ivorian, was born in 1943 in Ivory Coast. Santoni’s father was French and his mother Ivorian. By the time he was born, his father had gone back to France. In Africa, his father had been working on a cocoa plantation, as a kind of works supervisor. Santoni received his elementary education at a school founded by the French for children of mixed blood, who were partly French. It was considered a great privilege to go to this school, and the place was “splendid”. The boy saw his mother only during vacations. The education was French in content, and it was not permitted that anyone could speak anything other than French. When asked whether he ever felt that the education was alien or artificial or imposed, Santoni answers: “There was some feeling like that, but it was offset by the fact that we were considered privileged to be there.” And even now Santoni thinks of having been privileged and of having learnt a lot of things there.

When asked whether, after receiving education both in Africa and Europe, he regards his work as primarily African or primarily European, or as having both European and African connections, Santoni responds: “The point of departure for these paintings [at the Venice Biennale] is the tradition of Baule weavings, which are tapestries made of narrow bands sewn together. The dominant color is indigo blue, and there is a little red stripe at the bottom of the cloth. White is important in them, too. I break down the traditional weavings, ‘decompose’ them, and find something personal in their decomposition. [...] The results often remind me of marine seascapes or coastal views. They can also remind me of other landscapes, like the Saharan landscapes where there is no water, only sand and rocks.” This is the clearest reference made by Santoni to his African heritage. His whole painting technique is French: works done with oil paint.

However, when asked more about the combination of the Baule fabrics from his mother’s heritage and painting in a French medium, Santoni now responds: “I don’t feel that I’m working on a specifically African fabric; I’m just using cloth. [...] To me it’s just the use of colors in themselves. The placement of the blue, white, and red is the crucial element.” Santoni stresses, not the cultural inheritance but his individual sensibility: he simply wants to express himself. When the interviewer tries to persuade Santoni to admit participating in a vast communication of humankind and in a dialogue with other artists, Santoni keeps insisting that his works reflect his own feelings. In this way he also denies the importance of a particular cultural heritage: he feels that what he does could have come out of any country.

The interviewer wants to hear Santoni’s reactions to the German pavilion, where Hans Haacke had the marble floor from the Nazi period torn up and smashed. Santoni admits that a certain kind of shocking art work would be much more difficult to do in Africa than in Europe: if he would do something like that people would just say that he was nuts.

2. AFRICANS LIVING IN THE WEST

Sokari Douglas Camp, the only female artist among the six, was born in 1958 in Buguma, Nigeria, but lives in the UK.

Camp is clear in naming her major influences in Nigeria and in the West: the Kalabari festivals – the celebration of mythological characters, water spirits, masquerades – and the fact that in the West women are allowed to make sculptures. Objects in the area in Nigeria she comes from are religious, and if she was producing them there she would be a priestess curing people or talking to spirits. But as she is under Western influence, she talks rather about art than being possessed. Camp also prefers to be called as an artist and not an African artist or Western artist: art is the main issue.

Her background of fascination in doing things with her hands lies in her memories of childhood: mother making thatching for the roof and handy women all around. Thus, Camp makes sculptures of women making things as she remembers them from her childhood. “I am forever binding my stuff, cutting it into little bits, and fixing it into something else. I think art has something to do with cooking or cleaning the house.” From her childhood at the age of six or seven years, Camp remembers a carving, a figure with its arms raised, by Ben Enwonwu. However, dancing people fascinate her even more than a physical object. And it is a masquerade that contains both movement and music. Camp talks of a special type of humour in many West African theatrical performances. “It has to do with fear and it has to do with the bitter sweetness of life.”

Camp never used to tell people “at home” – until a year or two ago, and then only to a few – that she made objects, because an object is a very powerful thing. The next example illustrates the impact of Kalabari traditional culture on Camp. In her first year at college she was doing something that was “Western sort of work” when it at once seemed to her like a masquerade. “I was terrified for about two days. I ran around saying to my tutors that I’d done something terrible – tampered with something that was spiritual. But no one really understood. I made a fuss for about two days, and then I calmed down because no one understood.” Later, however, Camp asked her guardian (the British anthropologist Robin Horton, who lived in Buguma, Nigeria) whether she might inadvertently have put a curse on anybody, including herself. He assured her that things were perfectly all right since tampering with others was not her aim.

When Camp then at last showed her work to some Kalabari people, the reaction was, in her words, “very complimentary” and “a most wonderful thing”. She “didn’t have to explain a thing about the pictures” she was trying to make. They were amused, they seemed to recognize various people in the representations of the drummers and masquerades, and could point out the origins of some of the details that Camp used in her masquerades. The scene made them tell more stories about masquerades and, all in all, they were “very encouraging”.

Camp touches on the question of material as follows. Earlier she used wood as her material, but since the death of her father she has worked with metal. In the Kalabari culture, a brass bed is the greatest thing that one can give to another person after the person has passed away. But since Camp did not know how to work with brass, she made her dead father a piece called Church Ede out of steel. Since then she has been working in steel, though unable to explain the reason.

However, she does have an explanation of the material from the point of view of the Kalabari people. It seems to be critical in distancing the “real world of masquerades” from the art by means of the theme of masquerades: “I think that [the Kalabari people] were encouraging because my work is in metal. My materials are totally different from theirs. If I were a performance artist who dressed up in natural costumes and performed like a masquerader, I think they would think that a lot more dangerous.”

The masquerades are the male world. Women are meant to stay back, to be an audience but not come too close. Camp thinks that this marginalized position of women is in fact most inspiring; and in consequence she fantasizes a lot. On the other hand, she also seems to be most excited by her special situation in Western countries: when men of the secret society came to London, Camp saw a great deal that she would never have witnessed in Nigeria. While opening the doors to the masquerades, Camp could get very close to the costumes. Indeed, living in the West has given her an opportunity not only to do art work but to work on her “own” original Kalabari culture. Being an artist has not only increased her appreciation of this culture but it has given her a great opportunity to show it as well. Camp underlines the locality of her cultural roots. For her, language defines the limits of a culture. So 25 miles from her Kalabari area people are already “foreign” since their language is different.

It is interesting how Camp has, in a way, internalized the fear element that is attached to the traditional masques – she talks of a “fear barrier”. When asked whether she hopes that people are somewhat afraid when faced with her art, she answers positively: hopefully, they feel some fear and excitement, as they might in relation to a lot of Kalabari things. According to her, the material, metal, may cause this influence since it is not something one would want to stroke. And when asked whether she thinks her future work will always be grounded in Kalabari imagery or culture, she responds: “I think there will always be something there. It’s like my name. I won’t be able to wash it out.”

Ouattara was born in 1957 in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, but lives in New York. When asked about his family, Ouattara answers that he prefers to talk about his work. His cultural and social conditions are “coincidence and accident”: he could have been born in Russia, Canada, or Africa. “But, if you must know... it’s a large family, with many sisters and brothers.” When asked how many, he reacts: “That has nothing to do with my work, and I’d rather not say.” Apparently, Ouattara is irritated by Western marvelling at the size of African families, and he keeps quiet.

Ouattara's father's profession was quite hybrid: a combination of both European and African medicine. In traditional medicine he was a healer, but in Western medicine he was a surgeon. There were certain diseases that he couldn't treat with Western medicine, only with African, and also the other way round. The family religion was voodoo. Using only Catholicism or Protestantism in Africa causes problems, according to Ouattara, so people mix them with African traditional religion. Ouattara describes his father as a shaman whose practice was based on a religion "with the widest possible scope".

From his childhood, Ouattara places little emphasis on formal schooling, but rather on his "spiritual education", meaning initiation school. At the age of seven, he went into the jungle, spending several days and nights there."The spiritual school permits you to understand the world. You are allowed a vision that is cosmic rather than nationalistic or village-orientated. Therefore, you are the sun, the rain, the Mexican, the American, the Japanese etc. It is the cosmic view of the world.". There are cabalistic objects used in the ritual, symbols that Ouattara still uses in his work, such as the bullroarer, a magical, sacred musical instrument. At the beginning of the ceremony it is used to call the spirits to pray. Certain images from the ceremony are suitable, and Ouattara uses them in his own way, but some are forbidden to use, and Ouattara wants to respect that tradition. When Ouattara was a small child, there were also Western images around in Abidjan: advertising, cars, people's clothes. And at school, Ouattara became interested in the West.

Ouattara tells that as a child he did very bizarre and mysterious drawings, which were close to surrealism, as he later understood: a mixture and combination of Western and African education. There was no museum yet in Abidjan, only a few galleries. But they showed commercial things that he did not like, Western things to be sold to Africans: landscapes in a kitsch sense.

When Ouattara was nineteen, he went to Paris and lived there for eleven years. He went to Paris mainly because of Picasso, whose works he had seen in libraries in Abidjan. Picasso, Miro, Brancusi were "people different from me but still inspired by African art, by 'first art'. For me it was a mirror; I saw myself through them." Ouattara had never shown his paintings in Abidjan, but then, after having lived nine years in Paris, a French critic came to him and was interested in the cabalistic elements in the paintings. At the moment of the interview, Ouattara had a strong desire to live in New York, which resembled, according to him, Abidjan a lot: both were new cities and very multicultural.

Ouattara's work involves sculptural elements. Or rather, according to him, there is no big difference between painting and sculpture. "If you are born in Africa, sculpture and painting are the same." In Africa, many of the power or ritual objects were assemblages; in consequence, some Duchamp or early Raushenberg were "familiar" to Ouattara. All in all, Ouattara tells how his work has two feet, involving technology in relationship to spirituality, the cosmic: a synthesis of technology and spirituality. Ouattara sees man in relationship to the cosmos; his vision is not based solely on a single country or a continent. Even though he localizes his art to make it better understood, it refers to the cosmos.

While Ouattara should be characterized as a cosmopolitan for to whom the “cosmos” is most important, it is also important to emphasize the African basis of his cosmopolitanism. The African heritage of Ouattara may be seen even in his daily routine: he always starts his work with a ceremony – a prayer, a trance. “You lose control and it is not you who paints.” Ouattara continues to do much the same as his father did, and the elders in general. While artists with a linear world view tend to speak of progress, Ouattara, depending rather on a cyclic world view, sees it differently. In creation there is no progress. “It’s a circle, you always come back to the same thing. You think that there is a break but there isn’t. You always do the same research, just four or five subjects, god, love, life, etc. So it’s always the same research, it’s a cycle.”

Yinka Shonibare, the youngest of the group selected, was born in 1962 in the UK, where he also lives; his Yoruba roots are in Nigeria. The interview does not touch on his educational background or his past but focuses on his art.

One of the most discussed of Shonibare’s works, called *Double Dutch*, was exhibited in his first solo show in 1994 in London. This painting installation consists of fifty small-scale canvases of identical size, hung in a low relief geometric grid formation on a wall painted candy pink. The canvasses are readymade brightly coloured cotton in an “African” batik print, which sometimes are left untouched and sometimes covered with heavy impasto brushstrokes. Shonibare bought the clothes at Brixton market in South London. This wax print technique was originally brought from Indonesia by Dutch colonizers, manufactured machine-printed fabrics in Holland and Manchester and then, in the nineteenth century, exported to West African markets. Ironically, in the 1960s these fabrics were adopted as symbols of identity both by Africans living in Africa and by people of African origin living in Europe and North America.

The installation *Double Dutch* has been explained on the basis of its European, African and hybrid context, as in the following ways. Shonibare himself, who has been trained as a painter, started, while moving towards increasingly abstract working, to ask a lot of questions about his relationship to both painting and Abstract Expressionism. By Abstract Expressionism he means the work of people such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman.”When I was at college, I saw Abstract Expressionism as a sign of ‘authority’. I went to places like the Tate Gallery and I remember the Rothko Room; but of course, given my generation was at college in 1985/86, my relationship to that as a sign of authority was quite complex. It was a time when a lot of feminist artists and artists of the diaspora started to question the ‘heroic white male’ notion of art. Abstract Expressionism had been in a sense an expression of that notion. What I was trying to do in my work – because I have a physical disability and I am of Nigerian origin – was to work with the idea of the ‘white space’ and the ‘heroic’ male painting so as to interrupt that space and the perception of the ‘heroic’ by producing fragmented versions of Abstract Expressionist paintings. I took fabrics from Brixton market and used them as a starting point for disrupting these concepts.” Shonibare takes something from a popular culture – a

decorative pattern – and uses it for its decorative impact. While for some (older) artists calling their art decorative would be an insult, people of Shonibare's generation celebrate the use of popular art and like to incorporate the decorative element in their work. However, Shonibare also consciously wants to interrupt or challenge the fixed notion (in the Western world) of what is 'high art' in painting. It is neither pure nor autonomous but contaminated. In addition, as he sees it, the small size of the squares – or the minimalist grid – of the *Double Dutch* challenge the macho, heroic gesture of modernist painting. But Shonibare's thinking does not end in this antithesis: his painting also subverts, as he points out, the minimalist grid by introducing bright colours and decoration.

It has been noted that the "unconscious echo of African tradition" adds another voice to Shonibare's dialogue between his Western experience and his distant roots. The installation may be read as a whole or as separate elements, and in both cases one may see dark and light alternating checks, which is a frequent design in many traditional Asante cotton textiles, or the checkerboard pattern of adinkra cloth. For instance the Dogon people perceive the checkerboard motif as giving structure to the unformed words of spirits.

While Shonibare's work may be said to echo both Western and African artistic heritage, at the same time it attacks the notion of a fixed identity, whether Western or African. Shonibare's understanding of 'identity' follows very much along the lines of some of the work of Benedict Anderson or Stuart Hall, and in general shares in quite a common contemporary postcolonial notion of hybrid identity: "I feel very strongly that identities have to be constructed because of the nature of them. Identity always requires a relationship to others and cannot exist in isolation; that relationship, in turn, is always constructed by your own relationship to others and that is always some kind of fiction. It is the 'fiction' that creates an 'imagined community' and I don't deny the use or value in creating a community in itself. It has always been a survival strategy for various groups, from African women to women, to the notion of a gay community. Identity formation in this sense is a defensive construct. I don't believe that there is such a thing as an innate or intrinsic identity and I am very sceptical of fixed notions of identity that seems to be a way to group different races together."

Shonibare has talked about excess as the only legitimate means of subversion. If one wants to make a point or challenge people, (s)he has to be exaggerative in her/his gestures. The notion of comedy or parody is linked to excessive gestures. Shonibare views art as a form of opera, and opera is excessive: it is beyond the real, and therefore it is hyper-real. Humour is part of this operatic excess. And when explaining his type of humour Shonibare uses the concept of trickster which may be seen to come from his African heritage (for example, there is the Yoruba trickster Eshu): "His [the trickster's] humour is a type you cannot actually place but it is always politically astute. I am not talking here of the passive clown, but something more dangerous than that. You

may begin by laughing but the more you think about it, the more you realise that this is not merely comedy.”

How could we interpret for example the title of the installation *Double Dutch* in light of Shonibare’s ‘theory of humour’? As Jean Fisher (29) states, “[t]he phrase ‘Double Dutch’, aside from making reference to the multiple cross-cultural trajectories of the fabric (originating in Indonesia, manufactured in Holland and Manchester, bought in the markets of Africa, New York and Brixton, and identified as ‘African’, the fabric follows the old colonial trade routes) means ‘gibberish’ – a pejorative xenophobic colloquialism insinuating that the speech of the cultural ‘other’ is incoherent, meaningless, untranslatable. *Double Dutch* elegantly announces the double standards that position the ‘other’ artist, the ‘outsider,’ who claims the right to the language of modernism, but who is expected to dwell in a fictitious and inscrutable past.”

In the context of Shonibare’s works we should refer here to two further examples: *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) and *Dorian Gray* (2001), which are installations of photo serials, in both of which Shonibare presents the role of the protagonist. In addition to the trickster we must also mention the other African notion that is important to Shonibare: the masquerade. As he puts it: “what I like most about the concept of the dandy is that it is the masquerade par excellence. It is a disguise where you appear to be a member of the aristocracy but you are always on the outside. [...] The dandy’s practice takes something that you are supposed to be outside of and re-appropriates it for a different use: to be subversive and challenge the establishment.”

3. CONCLUSION

Moustapha Dimé is the rebel in the group. While struggling for his right to establish his own path, he has resisted his father (his father wished him to become an accountant), his society (and its view of regarding wood carvers as caste people) and also the values of the previous colonizer (the French language and the hegemony of Western art in general). In the process of resistance, Dimé has become sure of his profession and his chosen path. In addition, the earlier rebel has calmed down and become quite a spiritual artist: his notion of hybridity consists of a spiritual world view and an Africanized Islam. His art works at the Venice Biennale undoubtedly look ‘African’ rather than ‘European’. In his discourse, he also clearly emphasizes his closeness to African culture.

Dimé and Tamessir Dia are both Senegalese and about the same age. While both of them are Muslims, they are not Arab Muslims: in Africa, Islam has been made suitable for Africans, that is, it has been Africanized. In other respects their stories seem to be very different. While the mental heritage of Dimé’s home, and especially his father, consisted mainly in obstacles, Dia’s home, and especially his father, seems to be a great role model for the his son. While his

French education in various schools was for Dimé sometimes colonial and disgusting, Dia does not see any problem in the Western education he received. While the direction of Dimé's development as an artist has been from an outward resistance towards an inward spiritualism and a deeper appreciation of his African heritage, Dia has come to emphasize rather his remoteness from his African colleagues and his difference and distance from art produced in Africa.

Of the six artists under discussion here, Gerard Santoni is the oldest. Thus, he has the largest personal experience of colonial times. This experience has not, however, sharpened his critical eye towards the colonial policies continued in his country; on the contrary. One clear reason is that he was privileged – as he also claimed when interviewed – to gain entry in Ivory Coast to a special school for children with at least one French parent. While Moustapha Dimé received his schooling in arts in Africa, Tamessir Dia and Santoni acquired their main qualifications in art from France. In this instance, it is easy to see that those who studied in France emphasize their self-expression and individualism rather than their belonging or connections to the African world of art, whether past or present. All have decided to live and work in West Africa. In the hierarchy of art institutions, Santoni, professor of mural arts at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Abidjan since 1973, occupies an influential post.

It has been suggested that Western collectors, cultural institutions and audiences are decidedly more at ease with artists who lay claim to their African identity than with those who do not. The art world discourse assumes that any approach to their work must centre on their own relation to a primordial 'tradition'. (Kasfir 208–9) The six cases under consideration here are no exceptions in terms of expressing their Africanness. But there is something else in them, too.

Today, it seems quite old-fashioned to talk of someone having a "pure African Identity" or "a pure European identity" – in fact, it is almost a slogan to talk of "hybrid identities". In my view, however, this slogan has not been sufficiently questioned: how is "hybridity" in various cases constructed?

The six artists under discussion have been classified here in two categories: those living in Africa and those living in Europe. One could have thought that the African influence characterizes rather the discourses of those living in Africa, and vice versa. This is not, however, the case. The emphasis of Dia and Santoni, who live in Africa, is in the influence they have received from European; and the emphasis of Camp and Ouattara, who live in the West, is on their African heritage.

Because of their emphasis on an older African cultural heritage, I would characterize the hybridity of Camp, Ouattara and Dimé as traditional. For example, Camp, living in the West, is most interested in masquerades. All three also emphasize the importance of spirituality in the same way as many African religions do.

I would then characterize the hybridity of Dia and Santoni, the two living in Africa, as modern: not only because of their emphasis on European (mainly modern) art and their distance from African (mainly tradition-based) local art,

but also because of their emphasis on their self-expression and individualism, that is, “originality”. According to Western-derived ideology, it has been claimed that, in order to be significant, works of art must place a high premium on originality, which is quite the opposite of the traditional African understanding of winning competence through emulation, a kind of copying. (See Kasfir 125–130.) I am inclined to see Dia and Santoni in this context. Further, as France regarded the assimilation of French cultural values as its greatest gift to its colonies, and the policy affected both colonial subjectivity and the postcolonial construction of national cultures, I cannot help seeing Dia and Santoni as products of this politics as well.

Shonibare is the one who most consciously plays with the African (“African”) and European heritage, and is openly political as well. If postcolonialism is seen as offering a critique of colonialism and if postmodernism is seen as offering a critique of modernism, Shonibare’s hybridity could be characterized as postcolonial and postmodernist.

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