

Distant voices:

Design and development from an alternative perspective.

The archeological record tells us that in pre industrial African society the makers of two and three-dimensional objects played an important social role. They were the creators of the signposts which helped people navigate successfully through the culture group they belonged to, and the guardians of the patterns and objects that their group was identified by.

It could be said that they were the glue that helped bind the social groups of the continent together.

The creative vocabulary of these societies was made up of a small set of designs that occurred on a variety of objects. These repeated designs colours and combinations formed a single style which was part of an integrated design field within agro pastoral society in Southern Africa.

In contrast to the present-day western world, traditional African societies were more homogenous and communally orientated. (Huffman. 2007.)

The makers of things therefore did not stand alone as individuals but had the social responsibility of pleasing the community. This meant that their primary role was not one of change but of perpetuating evolutionary continuity, or re iterating through the generations the ever-changing creative vocabulary of the social group in question. Although some may wish to name these important pieces of social continuity as art, I would prefer to believe that the creative vocabulary that existed in pre colonial society was of far more social significance than that. I also feel that it has the potential of becoming the basis of a new creative vocabulary for the continent of Africa.

In most pre colonial societies the patterns and shapes created by these craftspeople generally had some culturally specific meaning. In many cases the designs and colours used also had symbolic significance. Red bands on a venda initiation figurine for example would represent young unmarried women.

(Blacking 1969)

In some parts of Africa the black graphite painted on pots signified being human, while in some locations they were treated as representations of living people.

(Barley. 1994.)

The craft of pottery in most parts of Africa was associated with women, not because it was just seen as a female occupation but because the creation of hard fired pot from wet clay was seen as a transformation similar to that involved in creating human beings. Due to this, most female potters were also midwives and so therefore were individuals who played a very important role in traditional society. (Barley 1994)

In Africa it is clear that within the historical record there is evidence of a visual vocabulary that was very different from the European model adopted world wide today. It is here that I need to ask a question. Could the historically creative vocabulary of Africa be utilized in the creation of new products for the home and export market?

What untapped creative potential lies in the cosmologically illuminating ideas that make up the world view of the San of Botswana? Or the traditional symbolism of the Akan in Ghana? Where is the high value totally unique works that we regularly see and admire from the Aboriginal peoples of Australia? Where is the totally meaningful and functional in the products of this continent?

During the colonial period the west was busy collecting objects that we did not fully understand so we immediately classified them as art and presented them as such.

We busied ourselves cataloguing this “art” and placed them in our galleries and museums. It is clear now that we did a disservice to these important objects, the resonance of which is still being felt today. We reduced these culturally significant and meaningful objects to those of the primarily decorative.

We missed the point entirely. We applied our own visual vocabulary to these pieces of other people’s lives and thought we were illuminated by it. By doing so we set the trend of the visually decorative that has remained the basis for much creativity ever since.

So here we are in 2009, surrounded by objects designed using a visual vocabulary that belongs to someone else from half way around the world. A myriad of ideas using other people’s distant voices.

So how do we go about creating a unique voice of Africa? How can we develop modern products that involve the voices of the ancestors? How can we make modern products that reflect the rich sociological and cosmological world of the past?

If Africa could seriously consider the issue and challenge the western construct that we call design, who knows what would be possible?

Let’s take a look at the visual language of this continent. Traditionally all things had function. All things were produced for a use. African masks were telephones through which people could talk to the ancestors. Pots were seen in some areas as people, so much so that if one was broken a sacrifice would have to be offered. Strange shaped objects were used for initiation, and a whole cosmology existed that was completely African, and more importantly completely outside the experience and control of the western world.

Let us return to my question. How can Africa use its original traditional word of meaning to develop modern products for the world market?

Being product development leaders is clearly a much better place to be than product followers. Followers remain at the mercy of creative leaders who are clearly in charge of the next direction. Contemporary African artifacts clearly

have a market and I am not suggesting for one minute that these industries be abandoned while we search for a new direction. What I am suggesting is that a thorough re-evaluation of the historical creative vocabulary be made so that it can be used in the future to inform a totally new and unique creative direction.

When Fulani women in Ghana want to become pregnant, they have a small clay figure made by a local potter and wrap it in their clothing around their stomach. The idea, in their way of seeing the world is to attract a soul from the heavens. Once pregnant the clay figure is stored in the roof of their house. This is an important aspect because should the child die in infancy then it is possible to wrap the same figure in order to attract the soul of the same child back to the mother.

An interesting story we may say, but how can this be developed into a new product?

If those people were to injection mould a small figure in culturally specific colors attached to a key ring it would be possible, with the addition of the ethnographic story, to sell it to couples in the west who were contemplating starting a family. A functional contemporary creative object with meaning that could only have come from the Fulani. That could only have come out of Africa.

In traditional society in parts of Nigeria, women would always give an indication of how they were feeling by choosing different bowls in which to present the meal. If they were in a good-mood they would use the bowl that would convey this meaning. If they were in a bad-mood they would communicate this in their choice of a different receptacle.

If we leap in imagination we can see the potential of a new export product. Perhaps the bowl may be of a simpler nature, but the message could be conveyed by the application of a stylized happy or sad face logo in the base of the form.

I am not suggesting that we subject women to a lifetime of cookery servitude. What I am suggesting is that buyers overseas if offered the bowls with the ethnographic story may see humor and meaning in the idea and purchase a set for their own use.

A functional contemporary creative object with meaning that could only have come from Nigeria. Could only have come out of Africa.

Here is an opportunity then for Africa to re discover its lost inheritance. Its rich and vibrant way of seeing the world which they themselves controlled and could develop in their own way. The western world failed to see the real meaning of this continents design heritage. I hope the people of Africa do not make the same mistake.

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