

Wall Pop Art in Kenya (1978-1980)

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Between 1978 and 1980 I had the chance to work as freelance reporter in Nairobi, Kenya. During that period, at least three important events happened there: the visit of recently appointed Catholic Pope Jean Paul II, the passing away of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya's "father of the nation"), and the overthrow, after a bloody revolt, of Uganda's dictator Idi Amin Dada. These events produced changes in society's mood: a widely spread sensation that adulthood was approaching for Kenya. This was also the period when Kenyan long runners started to be celebrated by their records in international competitions.

The country was in an advanced process of building a nationality or a national identity. Several ethnic groups formed part of the Kenyan territory, formerly called by Great Britain the East African Community (Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda). The borders established by the colonial power did not mean too much, as had occurred in many African countries up until that time. The *Swahili* from the coast were closer to people from Tanzania (Dar-Es Salaam or Zanzibar), and the *Luo* that occupied the Kenyan part of Lake Victoria were obviously a branch of the Uganda kingdoms civilization. People from central Kenya -- *Kikuyu*, *Akamba*, *Kalenjin* or *Masai* -- have been quarrelling during centuries for matters of land, cattle or women. And the *Turkana* and *Galla* from the deserts of the north and northeast were considered almost people from another planet.

In any case, a free Kenya, after the Mau Mau rebellion and a traumatic liberation from colonial chains, was trying to consolidate conviviality for those millions of people who had different languages, traditions, production patterns, religions beliefs and, last but not least, forms of understanding and creating art. Big religions were making their work of unification under the names of Christ or Mahomet. Politicians created slogans to make people accept the common project of creating a country. But above all the explosion of the city as a new form of existing was a major force to impulse a Kenyan patriotism.

The city was the place where people gathered to seek their livelihoods since colonial times; this now was occurring not as a member of a tribal group but as a member of a country. The British power had founded or re-founded urban life. All kinds of migrations made Nairobi from two lines of tents in 1900, erected by the constructors of the railroad Mombasa-Uganda, to a metropolitan settlement of nearly a million people when I arrived there, in 1978. The city grew by way of a melting of *Kikuyu* and *Akamba* from central Kenya; *Luo* and *Luyia* from the north; *Swahili* from the coast, and some *Masai* and *Turkana*, to mention only the principal ethnic divisions. These people are extremely different in all ways... but similar in that they seek livelihoods and the bettering of their welfare.

All this happened along with the growing of the migrant Asian community, which had entered the country to take part in trade and industry activities, professional services,

banking, tourism and so forth. Some came from Pakistan or India, and some from the neighboring Uganda, expelled by Idi Amin. A monetary economy was now prevalent in Kenya, far from the physical interchanges of the rural life. For original African Kenyans, manpower for trading and industry was one of the ways of insertion, as well as craftsmanship, tourism services, cooking and clothes washing. Add to this, preaching, prostitution, chofering and gardening; and politics, of course. In sum, this entire people who had moved from rural areas contributed to all kinds of urban needs. This included professionals of different specialties, trained in the prestigious University of Nairobi.

In such context, a need for transmitting messages from sellers to potential buyers in the form of publicity emerged, not for richer sectors, but for the *wanainchi*, the common citizens. A visually tilting publicity was needed, addressing people who were not used to read. That is why an important plastic expression was born in the streets of emerging cities; in passageways, corridors and columns all over their downtowns. A form of very archaic publicity appeared, made through drawings and painted messages, in an epoch before the development of the more modern patterns of advertisement so common today.

Certain “ad optimism” is present in many of the paintings. Such optimism is testified by the humor latent in most of the works. This humor sometimes becomes nonsense. But most of the time, and this is really interesting, this absurdity is the result of the rather uneasy conditions of working on walls, ceilings, columns and other architectonic devices not always fit for art activity. Artists did their best, with good or bad taste, with high or low capacity, to accomplish their tasks under so many constraints.

Some slight differences between open street art and production for inside places exist. Both types are for public use. In bars, restaurants, hair salons, hotels and so on, the intention was of course to attract clients. But in these inside spaces, there is also more liberty in the contents of the art production. Here we find more presence of themes of popular customs, particularly those of the interface between rural and urban life. The hunting of the lion, the herding of cattle, the gatherings around the fire to listen to tales, the proximity to wild animals, witchcraft, the depiction of a man attempting to run away from a mob that was intent on stoning him, dancing, the sharing of a beer, and much more, are taken as decorations for walls and ceilings in public places, particularly bars.

Naturally this had nothing to do with the traditional painting, nor was at the vanguard of plastic art by no means. Realism was the style, understood in a very ample way. It was not serious art, not preoccupied with individual expression. It was to a certain extent an anonymous and community-oriented activity. However, one can identify some individual authors or workshops. It is predominantly a visual testimony that brings together needs, suffering, happiness and the every day problems of people... And it is about values: to congregate rather than separate, and to integrate rather than protest.

There is not much else is possible to say to contribute to building a theoretical framework for this kind of pictorial popular expression. The only aspect that is far from controversy is that there is nothing “tribal” in Kenyan wall paintings. It is impossible to recognize the characteristics that make the craftsmanship of *Masai*, *Giriama* or the *Swahili* from Lamu,

for example, easily recognizable. In fact, this painting is a product of the melting of original cultures under patterns that derive from the needs of economic and social exchanges of a purely urban signature. However, the similarity of some schemes (photographic shops, hairdressing ads, political panels) shows that artists tended to reproduce some features probably of proved success.

Which were the properly pictorial references of these wall paintings? Firstly, the aesthetics of the comic is undoubtedly present: straight naturalism, funniness, a two-dimensional point of view, flat and plain saturated colors, emphasis on details not always important, unawareness of “correct” proportions. Secondly, a deep conscience on the ephemeral character of the works of art predominates. It is assumed that the paintings could be replaced or destroyed according to the practical needs of the client. Thirdly, a stunning absence of any feature of spiritualism is frequent, far from religion, magic or ideology of any kind. Again, there is nothing showing traditional tribal art; but nothing either of the occidental tradition of “beaux arts”.

In order to specify the terms, some additional words are necessary. This is not only “Bar Art”, and not only “Nairobi Bar Art”, as this label has been generally used to characterize these murals. Most of the photographs we are showing here were shot in Dagoretti, Malindi, Meru, Mombasa, Mtito Andei, Nairobi, Nakuru and Voi. The art of wall painting and decoration was at that time present in most towns of the country. That is why we prefer to speak of “Wall Pop Art” in Kenya. A salute of admiration to those rather anonymous artists, who gave as so much fun and pleasure, with their humble force to articulate an aesthetic job with a simple purpose, frail means and little recognition.

To finish, all the photographs were taken between 1978 and 1980, with a manual Canon AT-1 camera equipped with a Vivitar short zoom 35-85 mm. I used film slides of 25, 50 or 64 ASA. Very amateur utensils, indeed. Given the conditions of the places where the paintings were made and the techniques and/or materials used by the artists, plus the unavoidable progress in the cities, it is improbable that many of these gems of popular art exist nowadays.