

A Sense of Becoming



AJ Ngwato (aka Prophet JD) is the owner of Right on the Rim Cultural Productions, which brings artistic projects to communities and commercial spaces in order to build new audiences for the visual and performing arts in South Africa. He curated and managed exhibitions in the Right on the Rim Project Space at Arts on Main with South African and international artists such as Dr. David Koloane, Senzo Shabangu, Mongezi Ncaphayi, and others. Prophet produced the NAC-funded theatre writing process and performance, *Black Reflections*, which featured on the Grahamstown National Arts Festival fringe. As a poet, writer and performer, Prophet has worked with film maker Steve Kwena Mokwena on three films.

“My concern in socio-political matters and contributions to the furtherance of disadvantaged black South African artists during and after the apartheid era is evident. My work can be said to reflect the socio-political landscape of South Africa both past and present. The socio political conditions created by the apartheid system of government have to a large extent transfigured the human condition as the axis around which my work evolves. The human figure has become the icon of creative expression.”¹

It is very confusing at times when you start doing your work in the advanced spaces of the creative industry in Johannesburg. You talk to the construction manager about the leak on the property and she pulls out a big word about what causes the leak. You stand there lost, thinking: what’s the point? Then she says: do you know what that means...?

I cannot stop being astonished by the new country I began to inhabit after 1994. It remains unclear for me what history I have to tell about this country through art. Is Johannesburg my country? Where do I as an artist fit, when the everyday logistics, the motivations and conceptualisations, and the content of art reflect and affect issues of race, culture and ethnicity?

Deep down in the township, I still feel the echoes of my eroded history. We have been told so many times about discovering the city, but the city discovers and binds you in its social trends and economic machinery. When the city discovers us, for those who come from the rural and under-developed areas there is a constant question screaming in our heads: where is my country? This notorious question that haunts the livelihoods of young black lives in the townships, the place where institutional and street education has lost the way of dreams and motivation. This lack of access to empowering knowledge is the issue of ‘development’ – the steady growth of mental, social, spiritual, infrastructural, institutional capital – which has been stunted, the time taken away from man by the affirmation of brutal oppression, even when freedom is in reach. Much time is still needed to reestablish the oral structures of development that Afrikans2 once practiced to support educational processes.

It is here where my urge to practice the arts has taken shape, to seek within the human creative spirit the point of recovery from an enslaving system of education. However this kind of seeking has taught many of us that there has to be a practical point. We express our human conditions in order to grow out of the desperation of poverty and lack of progress. The process of development for black youth is one that is very intense and painful: it is double the struggle to achieve an original and contemporary cultural voice. Even once educational enslavement has been overcome, the culture of the oppressed becomes overwhelmed and thus eroded by the lack of economic outlets. This is where art for me presents the opportunity to insert my discourse into a history that has until now been an articulation of the progress of the master.

There is a reality in our country, where many, poor and rich, live in willful ignorance of inequality. But anyone can grasp a moment away from this bliss to see the brutal acts of greed that have left the majority of the people poor. We all know as much as we need to know to move forward. The ghost that haunts us is a lack of equal participation in the economy, the production of fruitful labour, combined with the self-reliance mindset.

The challenges that are faced in artistic and cultural practice in South Afrika and by every black creative worker here, particularly in Joburg, stand in relation to these broad national challenges of inequality and ignorance. In this context of disassociation and dispossession, the strength of the creative workers is drawn from the experiences and reflections of where they come from, mostly the rural and the township. But this strength is also ambivalent. When using this powerful subject matter to break into the artistic 'mainstream', which remains largely culturally white, does this contribute to the dispossession, by creating work about people and not returning the created work to the people it talks about? This means that people cannot own their history and stories and use these to overcome the dissociation of impoverished educations. But there is a Catch 22 situation. It is not that poor black communities cannot afford to engage with art: it does not require material resources as much as the cultural and spiritual awareness to see through their own processes of development and how art offers an alternative into the development of social culture that articulates the economic (not only consumerist) participation of a society or community.

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That is why art in Afrika constantly expresses the importance of the land – its ownership, meaning and development – to the people. It is embarrassing when people do not have a relationship with things they are entitled to, but rather continue to chase other people's identities without a sense of history or context. This is the situation in South Afrika. In the past 16 years we have experienced what, in my perspective, was cultural assault. Native ethnic groups have been alienated

from recognising their own cultural history as human, and have in turn ridiculed themselves by seeking to imitate other, foreign cultures. Everybody wanted to be everybody else, black wanted to be white and white wanted to be blacks. Being black was hip, but it provided no substantive advance in the black cultural economy. Rather there was an accumulation of uncultured debts: financial debts of overconsumption but most importantly, debts of borrowed content.

So while after 1994 an illusory 'peace' allowed us to consume culture, there was a total absence of cultural justice. Many of us have learned and come to understand this the hard way, by finding closed doors and closed minds where we should find political and cultural allies. With our art we treasured the articulation of self and the aura of our religions, even though these have been reduced to myths. But after all this treasuring, the majority of the people in this country continue to live with the disease of poverty – poverty of the mind, the spirit and of physical existence. The obsessive culture of possession has crept underneath the skin of our traditions, reflecting things only according to the value of monetary consumption.

My artistic culture and creative practice began in these desolate spaces, where our people had lost the relevance of being present in the time of freedom. Rather than

allow a lack of education to trap me in a mode of survival, I used art to move out of these circumstances. If I had stayed much longer in the township, my spirit would have died. Others have also taken this path and been caught in the culture of the city, where we get on with life and lose interest in our beginning. In my transformation, however, I believe in a circle of continuity in the search of wholeness and harmony—continuity through time (past and present) and space (township and city). In the struggle to own the city, as a means to free ourselves from the history of labour reservation, which made us temporary residents of the city, we are in danger of neglecting the values of a continued link with the township and the rural areas. The aim of a socially mobile society should not be to leave behind the spaces, people and cultures you come from. From my position in the city of the present, I need to return to the township and mine the treasures of the past. What arts and culture mean is always two-fold. One side is mental liberation: the articulation of experience, knowledge and reflection. The other side is economic liberation: the imagination of alternatives to the various challenges of the socio-economic and political landscape of our country and continent.

Prof. Eskia Mphahlele expressed this clearly: “it can be appreciated that over a period of hundred years, millions of children will have been born in urban areas. Several parents and their children will therefore know nothing of rural life and the traditions that are still holding out there; but the wonderful thing about memory, when we think of about memory, when we think of the kind that is shared by the whole community, is that traditions remain stubborn.”³

My argument is that artists are crucial to the cultural and economic development of their communities. However, currently, most of the actors trying to culturally ‘develop’ poor, black communities come from outside those communities, culturally and racially. Strategies are informed only by academic records rather than by local traditions so that the cultural infrastructures in townships and rural areas are not developed to suit the thinking and educational needs of the people. Many cultural ‘development’ programmes fail because they are based on foreign policies and experiences, without being transformed by the truthful history of the people. Most of the agents of supposed cultural change, whether from academic institutions, NGOs, development consultants or government, are either of European heritage themselves, or are caught in funding relationships with culturally white institutions, which results in practice in a continuation of white supremacy and cultural imperialism.

In order for us to move on from these external influences, South Afrikan cultural producers need to find a way to interact progressively with the socio-economic and political issues of their own communities, by making the link between their personal transformatory processes and the broader transformation of our society. I believe culturally and artistically that we need to find our voice without being nostalgic over the fact that we have been brutally robbed of our ways and time to practice our traditions. We need to faithfully remember that “to wait and constantly react to what is done to us is eventually demeaning. We have to apply our collective intelligence to programs that promote our sense of becoming. For that is where I locate the center of any educational effort, a process of becoming.”⁴

NOTES

1 David Koloane (Artist’s statement, City of Johannesburg website, 2010)

2 The writer chooses to spell Africa, Afrika

3 Eskia Mphahlele (2006)

4 Eskia Mphahlele