

Making sense of international cultural discourse for Africa: the role of the Arterial Network

Mike van Graan

Colin Powell is appointed Joint Chief of Staff, the highest US army post held by a person of colour. Hundreds of students are killed in the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Dalai Lama wins the Nobel Peace Prize. Ayatollah Khomeini issues a death fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses*. The Soviet Union completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Berlin Wall collapses. The last whites-only election is held in South Africa. It is 1989. It is a momentous year. Culturelink is born. Congratulations on your twentieth anniversary!

I would like to begin my paper with a parable. There was Francine, sitting in Rwanda, minding her own (micro)business and creating her traditional cow dung paintings, when along came a Belgian development agency worker and suggested to her that she could get some funding to support her work if she could just frame her application in the language of culture and development. She was still working through the various definitions of development and wondering whether it was a good thing to be 'developed' or not, when another Belgian consultant dropped by and asked if she knew about the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions since cultural diversity was the new language through which to access funding. Francine had just learned the full title of the convention when a German expert was parachuted

in to explain to her that what she was doing was a cultural industry, and that cultural industries were now the next big thing in development-speak. No sooner had she learned how to spell 'entrepreneur' when she was approached by an international NGO to participate in their intercultural dialogue project, which, they said, was on the cutting edge of contemporary cultural discourse. She was trying to tell them that this was something they had been doing in Rwanda ever since you could say Hutu and Tutsi, when a guy in a raincoat flashed in front of her, urging her to participate in a culture and climate change project which had just received a flood of funding! Just then, along came a European theatre troupe to train Francine, a painter, in cultural diplomacy.

What, you may be wondering, are the points implied in this little parable?

First, contemporary cultural discourse often has its origins in the so-called developed world, within circumstances relevant to those conditions, but which has less meaning for, or sensitivity to the conditions in African countries.

Second, such discourses often breed industries of consultants, conferences, think tanks, etc., so that cultural industries are not limited to the production of creative goods; in order to survive and grow, the cultural discourse industries require transnational markets.

Third, where a discourse – or a cultural discourse industry – has relevance beyond a government signatory, it has to be understood, interpreted and applied within, and to local conditions on the African continent, conditions which are not at all homogenous across countries or regions.

Fourth, global structural inequities and the lack of public sector support for the arts on the continent create dependency and, with it, the conditions for passive acceptance of, rather than rigorous engagement with cultural discourse industries, in order, perhaps, to access associated funding.

Fifth, these cultural discourse industries are seldom 'neutral' and often serve – in content, practice or tone – particular interests, or have embedded in them values, worldviews and assumptions biased in favour of certain paradigms.

Let us go back to Francine who was still mulling over her options when a government official arrives, with a delegation of Chinese companies. They inform her that her home that doubles as her studio has to be demolished as it is in the direct path of a railway line that the Chinese are about to build, that will run directly from the Rwandan forests, where a major logging industry was being hatched, to the Tanzanian harbour. But, the Chinese will also construct a five-storey building to house all the crafters and artists in the region, and will include a retail outlet for their products. And, if these sell well enough, the Chinese may

send in their own artists to learn how to create traditional Rwandan art and craft, and reproduce it cheaper in China.

The Belgian and German consultants, European development workers and NGOs who had been engaging with Francine in the ‘best developmental interests of her community and of Rwanda’, are completely gobsmacked by this ‘blatant Chinese neo-imperialism’ and assure Francine that they will help her to fight against this!

All Francine wants to do is create her paintings to sell to the tourists returning from their ‘spot-the-gorillas’ expeditions.

But of course, she can’t. Her creative practice is directly impacted upon by global economic and hegemonic forces far beyond what she could imagine. The German consultants and the Belgian NGOs are there because of their countries’ historical, colonial links with Rwanda that went back to the early 1900s, when 90% of Africa was under European control after the 1884/5 Berlin Conference that carved up Africa between France, Britain, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Portugal.

After the Second World War, a range of factors led to the beginning of decolonization starting with Ghana in the late 1950s, with Rwanda gaining its independence in 1962. But while countries assumed political independence, their economies were still largely tied to those of their former colonial masters. The primary pattern of trade relations between Africa and the European Union from the 1950s to 2000 was one of Africa exporting its raw materials and importing more expensive goods from Europe, often made from the very resources that it exported. The African Growth and Opportunity Act has helped to increase trade between the US and Africa. Since 2000, China has entered the continent as a major player and, in a short time, it has become the continent’s third most important trade partner behind the US and France, and ahead of the United Kingdom.

These trading trends, the rising economies of the global south in the form of India and Brazil, and the increasing need for raw materials and for energy, along with Africa’s growing gas and oil industries on the one hand and the need for new markets on the other, have led to what many are calling a new ‘scramble for Africa’ with external powers with their respective agendas seeking an increasing presence on the continent, with huge – and often contradictory – implications for the people who live there.

It is in this context that the Arterial Network emerged in 2007 a broad collection of NGOs, individuals, companies, educational institutions, funding partners,

etc. Its vision is of a vibrant, dynamic and sustainable African creative civil society sector engaged in qualitative practice in the arts in their own right, as well as in a manner that contributes to development, the eradication of poverty, to human rights and to democracy.

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to concentrate on the Arterial Network's role with regard to cultural policy. At one level, Arterial is about the African cultural civil society making sense of the international policy instruments signed by African governments but that rarely filter down. What does 'intellectual property' mean in markets where 46% of the continent lives on less than 1\$ per day, and still wants access to music and film but cannot pay international market prices? What does access to global northern markets mean when artists are refused visas? How do we relate to governments like Denmark engaged in cultural development in Africa, but that offer 100 000 krone to foreigners to leave Denmark? What benefits does the cultural diversity convention actually hold when its fund to promote diversity has attracted a mere \$1.8 million in the four years since the adoption of the convention?

How do we apply international policy instruments on our continent and in our respective countries with competing global forces that pay scant respect to these instruments and oblige our governments to do the same? For policy declarations, conventions and instruments are not validated in themselves, but in the *real politik* of a world with terribly skewed economic, military and power relations, where resources and cheap labour from poor countries sustain the lives of the rich, where cultural collaboration and exchange are often initiated and paid for by the resourced, where culture and development, intercultural dialogue, cultural diplomacy and the like, far from changing the lives of the poor, can be instruments to perpetuate the status quo of structural inequity.

But there is little value in playing the victim, in bemoaning our lot; Arterial Network is about civil society taking responsibility for itself. Cultural policies, like networks, are not ends in themselves, but vehicles to achieve a greater good. For this reason, we are aware that it is not sufficient to concentrate on cultural policy alone; we must also build advocacy, organizational and monitoring capacity, develop human capital, and implement a range of strategies to pursue our vision, with or without a conducive policy environment.

In conclusion, like artists who would simply like to get on and create and distribute their art without the bother of broader, macro concerns, so countries and regions would like to concentrate on what is good for them primarily. But this is a luxury which a world threatened by real and potential conflict, rooted in grossly unjust economic and power relations and by development- and greed-

induced climate change, simply cannot afford. We are in this together. And the sustainability of our collective and respective futures lies not in creating a better Africa or a better Europe, but a different world. It is *that* vision, rooted in a rigorous analysis of our global challenges and its root causes, which should drive our policy and networking agendas. Anything else is merely cheerleading history from the sidelines.