

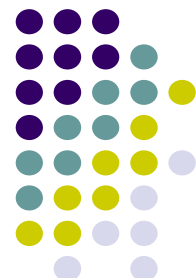


Transcending Cultural Paradigms: Events in the nth Dimension

Yvonne A. Owuor. Kenya

**Dark Roast Occasional
Paper Series**

No. 25



For this reflection, *n* is any number you feel like bestowing on your experience and reading of the twenty first century and its expectations of how you, its human being shall construct meaning. This dimension's main occupant is the imagination, it is amorphous and always evolving, its roots are in the reality of the global life experience, even as it seeks innovation, it is practical about the bottom line. It is a frontier of unstated conflict; that for the imagination and attention of what used to be described as the other. It blurs geographical boundaries and constructs tribes through a dream, vision or idea shared. In this space events are born. And it is the cult of the present tense event that I shall locate this conversation with you.

A quick reminder of the age and time in which we are rooted and what it means where there is a habit to revise the past, or dwell in a nostalgia that alienates populations on this continent.

The confrontational context of the age and its tools include, technology, digital technology, information, networks, the cult of heroes and heroines, quantum physics, image-driven message sharing, connections, a constant interrogation of the changing reality in order to get at the essence of the thing--- and all these directed towards a bottom line. Niche cultural viewpoints, niche cultural products, the construction of tribe goes hi-tech, but this is what community building was about from the beginning. Fluid movement morphing into and occupying unusual spaces and developing a language of its own. Even the diseases are mobile. No one is excluded, not from bird flu or AIDS. And the old frontiers are broken down so quickly, new ones raised and they are directed towards a single question; what is the purpose of your existence in this day and age and what does it do for me? You know what I mean, fellow Africans—the visa desk interrogation in which you had to display your bottom line.

Cultures are metamorphosing rapidly. A reconstruction of the past is fine. But so is the recognition in the moment that even that has changed. Quantum physics confirms that nothing is permanent and even the gaze changes the thing observed. Recognition requires not only reflection but a humility to confront human ephemerality. And that, colleagues, is terrifying. But it is fact. Sure memory is magic, but I believe that magic when activated should transform the present and sustain the existence of the applicants in their reality. If it does not, then write about it if you must, but leave it alone. To try to contain the intangible and often quaint notion of what is culture in a specific place and time is like grabbing water from a spot in the ocean and declaring that it is holy and placing it in a museum to be worshipped. But what is the point?

To construct edifices or create materials to honour the culture of the time and to construct it so that it shall communicate to the *n*th generation to come—that is another thing. It is a message passed on from one set of humans to another. They speak to us--the Great

Zimbabwe, the Stone Town of Lamu, the Mona Lisa speak to us—but see what the cultural memory builders, the artist had to do to make them speak.

Listen colleagues; the frontiers of competition in this epoch of market capitalism are in the realm of attention and imagination. That is the bounty. And the target is the world, whether we like it or not. You are dealing with a local population whose cultural references are global. The real currencies are ideas that inspire change, capture the imagination and—add value, whether it is money or knowledge. The methods used to amplify cultural discovery or expression have been refined in the crucible of the art of business. Art for Art's sake is right. But where is it positioned as art—that for me is the question. This is where amplification becomes necessary. The artist of the twenty first century cannot wait to be found but must also seek and find a way of speaking. The reward is that when heard, the culture of the twenty first century quickly makes that thing heard or felt of its own. This is how the century is claimed or colonized by those who expect that it recognize their existence. This is our century. This is where we find ourselves today. This is what we deal with.

Dear colleagues context delineated.

Now, I shall now speak of two East African events in which I have been involved. One evolved in the back garden of a prominent, cantankerous newspaper editor and launched the literary careers of many, including my own, the other unfolds every year, for ten mad days, in an island of the coast of Tanzania, not unlike like Cape Town, in that it is a port of call with a very long history of people mingling and creating new cultures, and doing so with amused tolerance. The island is called Zanzibar.

Imagine a balmy Saturday afternoon in 2002 where a city's strange denizens, much like the Star wars bar scene where aliens drop in and out and an editor's back garden surrounded by sculptures which his wife evokes from the ground and trees. 40 people most of whom have never met each other before gather to stare at the young man who has won the Caine Prize for African Writing—the most prestigious literary prize for the African continent offered by the people who do the Booker Prize. The man's name is Binyivanga Wainaina. (He used to live in Cape Town).

After we have finished staring at him and discover that he is possibly a human being who has done the impossible, transcended the Kenyan publishing Goliath-Gorgon-Medusa- take your pick of monsters—well after we have finished staring at him, we descend into self pity; complaints about what is not happening in publishing sector in Kenya and who is not supporting whom and damn the Government too. This goes on until the moment between night and dusk, someone says—the net.

The net, we reply as if struck by a flash of light.

Less than six months later, the parts that became the whole were designed and a journal called Kwani? was born. (Kwani? Is a Nairobi colloquial phrase implying in essence- *wassup?*—

somebody steals your pen, you say, Kwani?. Your husband buys white shoes and wears a yellow and red shirt to match, you say Kwani?)

The journal received its first outing on the internet and immediately pushed buttons and boundaries. The most bizarre comments were delivered by those who were perplexed by the preoccupation of the journal with the Kenyan self, works that questioned the assumed identity of Kenyaness rather than dwell on old colonial mis-doings. The literar National navel gazing that interrogated inner demons was a hit with a new generation of Kenyan and managed to speak with the restless, questioning generations in other places of the world. The next year Kenya won the Caine Prize for the second time for a story published in Kwani's transcending spaces. (the winner that year had once dwelt in Cape Town---is there a pattern evolving here?) After that Kwani received sufficient cash to become a tangible journal and make additional forays into conquering imaginations--moving to occupy Nairobi's café spaces, producing audio books, ensuring that its writers market the journal as they went on to make connections worldwide.

Kwani's writers, including me, have been drawn into a global literary universe with its own fascinating codes of existence. A universe that also says; show me the value of the art-thing you bring that addresses my present humanity.

Can't escape this.

Kwani people are e-exiles, or perhaps, in-ziles. Less about the impatience of occupying the skin one wears and more about impatience with a context that pretends that the century's contexts do not affect it. This is a generation that have grown up in post-independent Kenya, and who are mobile, transcending geographical space with no second thoughts. The angst and questions offered are inner-directed and are connected to the 'who are we' question. But more in the sense of 'who are we and where are we situated in the cosmos' in the universe? The voices you hear are almost cacophonous in their variety --and that is OK--yet the Kwani adventure has adherents from all over the world, like that bar in Star wars. A community of shared angst or new hopes evolving a language, that speaks into their twenty first century experience. A mirror of that which evolved out of the tension of cultures meeting and meshing along the East African coast in places like Lamu, Mombasa, Malindi and....Zanzibar.

Zanzibar and the ZIFF festival of the dhow countries: Or how we extended the geographical boundary of the African historical imagination....The Festival of the dhow countries is a multi-arts celebration of the arts of the vast Indian ocean cultures and it is so deeply rooted into the Zanzibar landscape so that the place is also a part of the artistic feast.

Here is the beginning.

I am the outgoing Executive Director of ZIFF. I have lived three ZIFF festivals. But to stop myself from becoming exotically insane, this is my last public action as ED of ZIFF.

ZIFF's festival takes place in Zanzibar every year and has done so for the past eight years. Zanzibar is an archipelago made up of two key islands, Ungunja and Pemba. Population, about a million people.

ZIFF started in 1998 when a group of interested associates thought to have an East African film festival that would attract an arts community to Zanzibar, support its tourism and have fun while developing narratives to describe the historical Indian ocean experience. In 1999 the film festival acquired an Indian Ocean world music wing. By 2004, it featured literary works, fashion shows, visual arts, performance art, boat races among other activities. In order to benefit from funding geared at social development (which at that time did not consider culture or the arts necessary to development—go figure) it morphed a social developmental conscience, presented a women’s panorama, a village panorama and a children’s panorama...its tools of intervention---art and cultural memory as a method of solution seeking. In order to ensure its political neutrality, it established a festival branch on the opposition strong-holed Pemba island. To bring the religious elite on board, it invited the opinions of the most radical group.

In essence ZIFF became what Zanzibar is—a way of negotiating barriers in order to achieve what it imagined.

On any day of the festival, over 200,000 people access the festival. The festival core staff are 8 people but the numbers gradually rise until the day the festival begins when there are 125 people on the payroll and even more supporting them in unknown ways. The main events utilize the whole town—the town is also the stage. This year it cost USD 400,000 to put together the festival not counting in-kind support. But when we receive this money from various cultural development partners like Ford Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund, Africalia, the various embassies, we sought to treat it as a business investment; that every year 30% of the ZIFF showcases should be able to show value. This year there were 100 films , 40 music acts (including 27 from outside Tanzania), 25 writers, and 16,000, architectural tours, 7 arts exhibits,—and altogether 16,000 external visitors. The festival work team this year featured 11 different nationalities—all part of the ZIFF community.

Though the purpose of all this is to develop a language for the historical experience engendered by the symbolic dhow in and around the Indian ocean, what has emerged is a global community bound by a transcending cultural experience. In this way the history of Zanzibar and the Indian ocean inhabits the present.

Look, this is about creating transcending spaces, where art can meet life and inform culture and knowledge. This is about extending the reach and meaning of what Africa is. The idea of people restricted to a land mass is far from the life experience of the historical east African particularly those that dwell along the coast. Kiswahili the language that is a direct result of the Indian ocean experience, is spoken in most east and central African countries, and in Northern Mozambique.

Strange as it may seem, China is a dhow country, for example, and it traces its links to East Africa to over 600 years. There are Chinese descendants living off the island of Pate off the coast of Kenya. China, past and present has a stake in the wider African imagination. The festival of the dhow country generated a space in which the Chinese experience of Africa also had a voice and an opinion. The festival works with theme and asks that the occupant of the space should find a way of adding value to the theme and the idea of an Indian ocean civilization.

Even though history and landscape have a key role, the festival is first about people, and people searching for a story, a message, a meaning. There is something about seeing the various shades of the world laughing at the same thing on a film. A moment when something belonging to all of us is touched—and the Swahili coast is a good place for this to happen with its great discussions on *ubinadamu*—the spirit that honours a shared humanity first.

The artist is central in this space, this arena created. Homage to the artist was our justification for the investment in technology to showcase the art at its peak, to support the role the artist played in conjuring meaning for the environment and for the ZIFF vision. Artist meets artists without boundaries here; film makers, musicians, writers, painters, scientists gather and interact in the different Zanzibar spaces and DJ Ntone spins some deep music on the beach at night under the stars. Conversations, sharing art, people meeting people, connections and business.

There are numerous challenges of course; Not everyone seeks or likes transcendence, or if they do, they seek to control it. There is an ideological chasm that plays out in perceptions held and a tendency towards risk aversion by those who feel threatened. A festival event is an ephemeral space and to that end, its structures need to fit the character of the thing—there is the challenge of constant rethinking, re-strategising, re-envisioning in order to keep up with the thing as it changes.

The Indian ocean in world cultural discourse is increasingly regarded as an historical reference for our place and time, because with dhow technology it created a connectivity rooted in business where world cultures met and after initial clashes they descended to a tolerant peace that created the urban language of Kiswahili and a peoples called Swahili and all manner of artistic products evolved and are still evolving from this. Whether the festival has created that relevance or merely pointed to it is a moot point. The question that is always returned to is the same; of what value is this to life as we know it today?

Anything else in this twenty first century, becomes, to borrow from Macbeth, only sound and fury.

Thank you

