

Ernest Mancoba: A New African Artist

by
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One of the master narratives of South African intellectual and cultural history was the formation and consolidation of the New African Movement across the first half of the twentieth century. The point of its origination and the subsequent one of its termination are contentious zones as is invariably the case with the beginnings and endings of periodizations. The beginning moment was constituted by a group of intellectuals designated as the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s that included among others, Elijah Makiwane, John Tengo Jabavu, Isaac W. Wauchope, Walter Benson Rubusana, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, William Wellington Gqoba, John Knox Bokwe and Gwayi Tyamzashe. The inauspicious end of the Movement occurred in the late 1950s during historical moment of the Sophiatown Renaissance, a constellation that included among its adherents Ezekiel Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo, Bessie Head, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, Miriam Makeba and many others. Between these two constellations there were many other intellectual and artistic formations such as: The Gandhi School (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar, Joseph J. Doke, Albert H. West, Henry Saloman Leon Polak, Mandan jit Vyavahark): *Izwi Labantu* newspaper Group (S. E. K. Mqhayi, Allan Kirkland Soga, Walter Benson Rubusana, Nathaniel Umhalla): The Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s (H. I. E. Dhlomo, Walter M. B. Nhlapo, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, E. A. M. Made, C. L. S. Nyembezi, Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele, Albert Luthuli, Jordan K. Ngubane, R. R. R. Dhlomo). Whereas the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s came to an end as a living experience in the early 1890s through intellectual exhaustion and internal contradictions, the Sophiatown Renaissance was terminated by the apartheid state at the time of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The violent nature of this termination made the New African Movement to be haunted by a sense of incompleteness.

The historical imperative of the New African Movement was the making and construction of modernity in South Africa . This was the *raison d'etre* for its eventuation in South African intellectual and cultural history. In a fundamental way, this imperative was imposed by European history on African history. The violent entrance of European modernity into African history through imperialism, capitalism and colonialism made the question of modernity an unavoidable historical issue or problem. It was modernity that enabled Europeans in defeating African traditional societies and initiate their destruction. In defeating African societies, European modernity imposed a different sense of temporality and a different sense of history. Equally crucial, whereas the making of modernity in

European history was a violent process of secularization from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, in African history it was a violent process of proselytizing and conversion into Christianity: in one experience, modernity is a secular eventuation, in the other, it is inseparable from acculturation and religiosity. Since in European history modernity occurred as a process of destruction and creativity over centuries, transculturation was the informing logic of the relationship between the past and the present, the Then and the Now; in the African context it was the matter of enforced assimilation of the past into the present, the enforced Europeanization of the African which resulted in many tragic consequences. Modernity, specifically European modernity, in Africa was an instantaneous 'eventuation' through imposition that clashed with the social ethos of tradition societies. Arguably, the most intractable crisis imposed by European modernity on African history was the matter of language in all its multiple complexity: language as a pathway of entrance into modernity; language as an instrument of historical representation; and language as a form of artistic representation.

The Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s were the first African intellectuals in South Africa to experience the consequences of the violent entrance of European modernity into African history. It is possible to reconstruct the arc of the trajectory of the New African Movement from the moment of its emergence to its demise through the epistemic constructs of Religion, Philosophy, Politics, Literature, Music, Art and Film. This trajectory through the articulation and creation of these constructs was a monumental transformation of *European modernity* into *New African modernity*. The termination of the evolution of the Movement through force, rather than through its own internal contradictions or through exhaustion of its intellectual and artistic resources, has posed for the post-1994 era the historical question whether New African modernity was synonymous with South African modernity. Perhaps the valorization of the Sophiatown Renaissance moment of the 1950s today is due to the perception or actuality that it succeeded in transforming New African modernity into South African modernity, despite the fact that it was not on intellectual par with the preceding cultural formations of the Movement.

In the 1880s the Xhosa intellectuals were faced with the historical problem that *only* the European languages (in effect English) were the viable cultural facilitators of entrance into European modernity. Their purpose of entering this modernity was to subvert it into a counter-narrative that would serve the imperatives of African people. The African languages could not have been facilitators of entrance and comprehension of this new historical experience. This was the beginning of the marginalization of the African languages in the context of modernity in South Africa, as well as in the whole continent. The first major debate in the history of the New African Movement was among these Xhosa

intellectuals about the *English language*, that is, about *representation*. Making a virtue out of necessity, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba argued, in the pages of *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper, their intellectual forum, that in the context of modernity, the African languages were dispensable. Disagreeing, Elijah Makiwane's riposte was that to dispense with the African languages was in effect to dispense in toto with African cultures. The famous debate among Zulu intellectuals in 1938-9, between H. I. E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, about the effectiveness of the historical representation of the African languages, was a replication of what had happened among Xhosa intellectuals in 1885-6. What needs to be remarked is that the founding of this newspaper by John Tengo Jabavu in 1884 did actually serve its purpose of facilitating discussion of intellectual matters, rather than on issues that invariably touched on religious concerns, as was usually the case in missionary newspapers.

The other debate between these two Xhosa intellectuals, which immediately ensued on that of the English language, was regarding *politics*. Again, in this instance, Mzimba urged Africans to dispense with politics and leave their fate in the political practice of Europeans. This posture too elicited a sharp response from Makiwane. In postulating the dispensability of African languages in modernity, Mzimba was following on the footsteps of the New Negro religious leader and intellectual Alexander Crummell. In presenting a similar argument concerning politics, Mzimba was influenced by another New Negro intellectual, the historian George Washington Williams. It is in the context of these debates and the search for pathway into modernity that the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s massively appropriated the English literary culture of William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and John Milton as an intellectual bridgehead into modernity. Their forerunner on this issue was indomitable Alexander Crummell. In all of these searching and investigations, the Xhosa intellectuals were following on the edict of their predecessor and teacher, Tiyo Soga, the first modern African intellectual and religious leader, whom they took as an example in attempting to use Christianity to salvage modernity from the rapacity of capitalism. In these intellectual peregrinations, the Xhosa intellectuals were attempting to establish a *philosophy of history* in modernity that would give a sense of direction to future generations: a philosophy of history at the intersection of Religion, Politics and Philosophy.

It was left to William Wellington Gqoba among these Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s, the first modern African poet, to engage the matter of temporality in modernity in contradistinction to that prevails in tradition. In a poem ostensibly about the four seasons Gqoba metaphorically speaks of changing historical times the Xhosa Nation has encountered. Each season, possessing its particular temporality, has a particular effect on the consciousness and sensibility of the nation. Without acquiescing to the defeat of African people by European

modernity, Gqoba was anxious to convey to them to make something positive for and of themselves in the circumstances not defined by their imperatives imperatives. It would seem that a poetic imagination was necessary to enlarge the plasticity of the sensibility of the nation to accommodate itself to new historical experiences. The poem was written in English rather than in isiXhosa. In an essay written nearly at the same time, Gqoba made clear his position that modernity had to be embrace at all costs because it represents rationality above and beyond the irrationalism he believed to be prevalent in traditional societies. Again, the English language was the linguistic instrument for conveying these ideological contestations.

S. E. K. Mqhayi, belonging to the next generation Xhosa intellectuals, specifically to the *Izwi Labantu* group, initiated a revolution in the historical consciousness and artistic sensibility of the African people in *South Africa* in the opening years of the twentieth regarding modernity: mainly he sought to change the conception and understanding of modernity as much as modernity had changed African people. He challenged and changed the regulative principles of historical and artistic representation that had been promulgated by the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s. While he agreed that the European languages may have been necessary cultural facilitators of entrance into modernity, he disagreed with them as to whether the African languages were not as capable as the European languages in representing and articulating the complex experience of modernity. His classic novella *Ityala Lamawele* (The Case of Twins, 1914) and his great poems were a testament to his conviction that only through African languages anchored in *African philosophies of life* can modernity be made meaningful to the life experiences of African people. Following on Mqhayi, there emerged superlative writers in the two major African languages: J. J. R. Jolobe, A. C. Jordan and Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo who wrote in isiXhosa; Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, C. L. S. Nyembezi and R. R. R. Dhlomo in isiZulu. On the artistic plane, this was the veritable revolution that began transforming European modernity in South Africa into New African modernity.

When he came study at Fort Hare in 1930 for matriculation as well as for the baccalaureate, Ernest Mancoba encountered and inherited this intellectual and artistic legacy eminently articulated and represented by S. E. K. Mqhayi. To the generation of New African intellectuals such as Jolobe , Jordan , Vilakazi and Mancoba, Mqhayi imparted to them the conviction that Africa had a linguistic amplitude, historical sensibility, artistic vision and stylistic tradition to encounter Europe on terms defined by African imperatives. Although he was never to obtain his baccalaureate from this venerable institution, the second intellectual force he came across at Alice was the Marxism of I. B. Tabata, and that of Jane Gool and Dr. Goolam Gool when he subsequently moved to Distric Six in Cape Town . From these encounters, Mancoba did not so much subscribe to the theory

of society espoused by this philosophy of history as much as appropriate its tradition of radical interrogation of the present or of the given. It would seem he remained throughout his life a social democrat. Also in meeting for the first time at this moment with Jewish intellectuals and artists like Irma Stern, Lippy Lipschitz and Elza Daziomba, Mancoba was compelled to an awareness not only of the revolution modern European painting had achieved but also to an acknowledgement that Paris was the capital of modern artistic creativity across the nineteenth century and of several decades of the twentieth century. It is plausible that it was this combination of the historical knowledge of modernity, the conviction of the necessity of the radical interrogation of the present or the given, and the certainty of the African genius regarding plasticity, representation and artistic values, that inspired Mancoba to become the artist or painter he was to become. To become a modern painter and sculptor rather than a traditional maker of forms was experienced as a historical challenge by this South African modernist. The remarkable scholarly work of Elza Miles that brought Ernest Mancoba back to the *historical memory* of South Africa resonates with these conceptual complexities.

By 1937 when Mancoba moved from Cape Town to teach at Khaiso Secondary School in Pietersburg (now known as Polokwane) the task was to find a medium or form for representing and articulating this historical challenge. Besides the challenge of locating of the artistic medium through which to realize his Africanness, Mancoba overcame the challenge of completing his formal education by obtaining a baccalaureate degree from the University of South Africa (UNISA) in this critical year. In this same important year, he met perhaps for the first time other young African artists who had the same ambition as he had of leaving an imprint of the African imagination through artistic expression on the historical moment of modernity: Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele, the first African playwright to write a play in an African language; Gerard Sekoto, who was to become a brilliant painter like Ernest Mancoba in France through many decades of living there, and who, following on the example of Mancoba, a decade later in 1948 moved to this country that invented artistic modernity throughout the nineteenth century. The emergence of Mancoba, Ndebele and Sekoto in this decade was not a matter of merely happenstance or coincidence, for if this is viewed within the history of the evolution of the New African Movement, their coming into being was a confirmation of an inner logic or necessity, because in the 1930s artistic matters began seriously to vie with politics for dominance in the inner sanctums of the Movement.

Several important things occurred in the 1930s on the artistic and aesthetic plane that made this decade as vibrant and as interesting as the 1950s in New African cultural history. First, in publishing his first artistic achievement which was poetry modeled on the poetic form and aesthetics of Langston Hughes and

Countee Cullen in *The Bantu World* newspaper, Peter Abrahams brought into the inner precincts of the New African Movement the literary modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. Previous to Abrahams the relationship between New Negro modernity and New African modernity was largely regarding politics, religion and pedagogy, but hardly ever concerning artistic matters and aesthetic issues. This artistic gesture was to take on greater significance in later years when the Sophiatown Renaissance of 1950s modeled itself on the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Second, there was the emergence of literary criticism and literary appreciation when on the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper Jordan Ngubane wrote on H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Valley of a Thousand Hills* epic and Dhlomo himself initiated a critical appraisal of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's theory of poetics. Third, there began appearing in *The Bantu World* columns and articles on matters that had not previously appeared in New African newspapers: cultural criticism of jazz and *marabi* music by Walter M. B. Nhlapo; reports on happenings about painters and paintings, as well an intellectual portrait of the New Negro painter Beauford Delaney who was then living in Paris. Fourth, H. I. E. Dhlomo established literary theory within the Movement in his voluminous articles explaining why New Africans in the context of New African modernity should learn from the dramaturgy of the Elizabethan theatre, particularly from Shakespeare, in order to forge modern drama on the basis of traditional theatre. In these writings Dhlomo was in effect theorizing the relationship between modernity and tradition. The constellation of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s, which gestated in the 1930s, and of which H. I. E. Dhlomo, Walter M. B. Nhlapo, as well as Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele were members, attempted to shift the central preoccupation of the New African Movement from politics to aesthetics as a reaction to the outbreak of the political struggle between Marxism and African nationalism within this political and intellectual formation.

Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto were also in the 1930s, like other New African artists and intellectuals, searching and investigating for forms that would make representations of the dialectic between tradition and modernity possible or understandable, in their particular instance through painting and sculpture. Having been born in the urban environment, and having had a Christian upbringing in missionary schools, they could not assume that they had knowledge and understanding of the aesthetics of African traditional art just by virtue of being born Africans. A historical divide had occurred or had been imposed, and a way of bridging it had to be found and located. Like other young New African intellectuals and artists, Ernest Mancoba had to undertake a historical rediscovery of his cultural roots. One result of this was *Bantu Madonna* (also known as *African Madonna*, 1929) which exemplifies the synthesis or fusion of African aesthetics with Western artistic forms. Before meeting European artists such as Sonja Ferlov, Alberto Giacometti, Constantin Brancusi or seeing the work of Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Henri Matisse in the galleries of

Paris, the poetic imagination of Ernest Mancoba had already been shaped by the monumental effort of New African intellectuals and artists from The Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s to the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s to transform the principles and aesthetics of European modernity into those of New African modernity: through language (in its complex De Saussurrean form of *parole* and *langue*) as an instrument of historical representation, language as a form of artistic representation or form as a medium for the expressive articulation of African philosophies of life.

Among the brilliant essays that H. I. E. Dhlomo wrote in the 1930s, there is one about the theory of the poetics of African art form that seems particularly relevant to the instance of Ernest Mancoba who was then seeking a point of synthesis between Africanism and Europeanism as a way of forging and establishing his modernistic sensibility. Although the essay, "Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?" was about the creating of dramatic theatre in the modern context, not surprising since Dhlomo at this time was a dramatist, nonetheless its grappling with the relationship between the past and the present was pertinent to all New African artists seeking to realize a new form of art on the basis of, or in close proximity with, the social ethos and aesthetic values of the traditional. The new can only be new in relation to the old. Dhlomo made the following observations: one cannot build anew by forsaking origins; the 'primitive' is the embodiment of the fundamental; traditional forms of expression are a sacred inheritance that embody the new and the old; these traditional forms reveal the essential oneness of the African people; traditional forms enables one to engage European forms of expression not through vacillation but with a sense of determination; the past should be preserved in a living and dynamic form of creating and/or recreating the new; the past should be the basis of the new form; the development of the modern cannot purely be from traditional or African roots, but must be grafted onto modern Western forms; the past cannot be delved into unless the present is grasped; a form of artistic expression is the reconstruction, reproduction and recreation of the great experiences of the people; in the narrative of African travail, birth and progress lies the inexhaustible source of African expressive forms; and lastly, African expressive forms expound and dramatize the philosophy of African history.

Without claiming that Ernest Mancoba followed the 'prescriptions' of these formulations, nonetheless the principle of creativity within the context of the New African Movement dictated their logic. Not only were they essential for his own creative process, they seem to have been central to his appreciating and reading of West African traditional art, particularly the mask, as well as his moving away from sculpturing to painting in the late 1930s in France, as evidenced in the extraordinary *Painting* (1940). Modernism advents in a dramatic way with this work in painting within the history of the Movement, as it probably

had with the poetry of Nontsizi Mngqwetho in the 1920s. Here, language as an instrument of historical representation, language as a form of artistic representation, and form as a medium for the expressive articulation of African philosophies, concord and coalesce in an uncommon manner. With this achievement Mancoba became not only one of the principal constructors of New African modernity in South Africa but also one of the major African artists who forged the canon of African modernism in painting and sculpture. He was one of the painters who through his practice enabled many decades later the emergence of contemporary African art studies in the early 1990s, which for intents and purposes was initiated by two Nigerian art scholars and curators: Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe. In a major essay, "Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art," Oguibe examined the contribution of the early pioneers contemporary African art, Aina Onabulo, Jean Mohl, Gerard Bhengu, Gerard Sekoto, and Ernest Mancoba himself, in the construction of African modernity adjacent to or in simultaneity with the emergence of African nationalism. This breakthrough essay together with the scholarly work of Elza Miles posed an issue that became unavoidable in African cultural history regarding the achievement and significance of Ernest Mancoba. The extraordinary exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1944-1994" organized by Okwui Enwezor in Munich, Berlin, Chicago and New York City at the beginning of the new millennium, and the great book or catalogue of the same name, enabled one to view Ernest Mancoba in relation to other African artists from other parts of the continent. In his very perceptive review of this landmark achievement of Okwui Enwezor, Simon Gikandi rightly observed that it had posed a very complex question to which a serious response is unforeseeable for several decades of this century: What is African modernism? Optimistically, the questionable should be: What *was* African modernism? Part of the response will have to reckon with the achievement and legacy of Ernest Mancoba.

Perhaps it is a testimony to the enormity of the achievement of Ernest Mancoba that his legacy was at the center of an illuminating discussion this year in the London based journal *Third Text*. The editor of the journal, Rasheed Araeen, initiated the conversation with his essay, "Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's Place in the History of Art of Our Age" (it actually incorporates two essays given on two different occasions, "Postcolonialism and the Dependency Syndrome" and "An Open Letter to African Thinkers, Theorists and Art Historians"), in which he argues that despite colonial oppression, political domination and economic exploitation of the continent, Africa has entered or attained modernity and thus is expected to create, produce and innovate on the level of excellence comparable to other historical experiences of modernity. Despite this capability, African suffers from a dependency complex, whereby not only does it not recognize its own significant achievements, but also suffers from an inferiority

complex in wishing to judge its attainments by the standards of European modernity even when the latter has been contaminated or poisoned by Eurocentricity. Taking Ernest Mancoba as an example, Araeen argues that even though the South African modernist was a member of CoBrA, one of the last cultural movements of European modernism in the twentieth century, Africa must produce its own scholarship, critical analyses and systems of knowledge, whereby such an artist, or any African artist, or for that matter any Third World artist, will be understandable and appraisable, first and foremost, within his or her cultural and intellectual history, before being situated within a larger international context.

Concretizing his theoretical and historical reflections, Araeen briefly analyzes Mancoba's painting *Composition* (1940) with the intent of indicating that although the work was triggered imaginatively by the European situational context in which he lived in exile, nonetheless if its form is understood in its proper temporality and historicity, it would reveal its meaning and significance as well as its Africanness. Araeen concludes by calling for the production of “a body of new philosophical ideas” that would enable this historical emplacement thereby facilitating for its critical understanding. I believe the remarkable critical achievement of Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe has been the construction of such a knowledge system concerning contemporary African art that simultaneously reveals its nativism as well as its cosmopolitanism. Their work establishes complex dialectical unities against binarisms. Oguibe's recent book *The Culture Game* (2004) is revelatory in this instance. In his rejoinder, “The True Location of Ernest Mancoba's Modernism,” which is in full agreement with Araeen's reflections, Oguibe states that the real significance of Mancoba is not so much as his having been part of the (European) modernist movement as much as that he assisted in the construction and definition of African modernity. In other words, Mancoba, Sekoto, Onabulo and others sought and succeeded in establishing the syntax of contemporary African art. The real merit of Bridget Thompson's contribution to these reflections, “The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba,” is not only in providing the intellectual, political and cultural history from which Mancoba emerged, that included his proximity to, and friendship with, A. C. Jordan, Thomas Masekela (father of Hugh Masekela), Eddie Roux, Nimrod Ndebele and others, but also in emphasizing the form of his artistic modernism had deep affinities with *Ubuntu* philosophy, which in the post-apartheid South Africa is being re-discovered and elaborated. My own contribution in this essay is an extension and elaboration of Thompson's acute intuition. The contributions of Frank Ugiomoh and Denis Ekpo, respectively “African Art History” and “The Abortion of Africa's Modernity”, though critical are not directly connected to the issues regarding Ernest Mancoba.

To conclude, this marvelous dialogue in the *Third Text* , makes it clear the

imperativeness of situating Ernest Mancoba in the critical situation that defined and articulated his *historical moment* such as the New African Movement in the *African context* .

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