

(MFI) Africa's image abroad is usually perceived as a bad one. Wars, poverty and AIDS hit the headlines in the Western media, conveying a negative vision of the continent. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, African culture is more and more exported elsewhere, producing an image of dynamic creativity. However, not without some ambiguity, and it has not yet become an economic asset.

Africa's image in France and in the West is more varied than it might seem. The media still give prominence to news about conflicts and dramatic events, but have in recent years opened up to other aspects of Africa. Television documentaries have enriched and diversified the viewpoints; in France, the Arte TV network is among those which offer reports on African society and culture. The France-Culture radio station in February 2005 broadcast a week-long series of reports on Mali – not to mention the daily news and other programmes on Africa broadcast by Radio France Internationale (RFI), which can be picked up in Paris. The French press also finds room for background stories on the continent, as seen from outside.

However, the growing presence of African cultural creation in Europe is more significant. This is notably evident in plastic arts. The Africa Remix exhibition, featuring the works of 87 contemporary artists from across the continent, was shown in Düsseldorf, London and Paris in 2005, before travelling to Tokyo. The interest for African art emerged in the 1990s and rounded a symbolic cape in 2003 with shows such as the Venice Biennale and the Kassel Dokumenta, with Okui Enwesor of Nigeria as Arts Director. But few African artists achieve the same recognition as Western artists. The big hits are victims of considerable ambiguity: among the painters, the success of Cheri Samba, a typical representative of "naïve" Congolese arts, owes much to the creativity of local folklore, as does Ivorian painter Frederic Bruly-Bouabré or Malian photographers like Malick Sidibé. This cannot be said of the sculptors Ousman Sow of Senegal and Michael Bethe-Selassie of Ethiopia, or Malian painter Seydou Keita and South Africans William Kentridge and Kay Hassan...

A new generation of African writers

African literature can also boast a newly-won recognition: more than a decade after the award of the Nobel prize to Wole Soyinka in 1986, the "phenomenon" Ahmadou Kourouma, Renaudot prizewinner in 2000, coincided with the emergence of a generation of young writers, such as the Guinean Tierno Monenembo, the Togolese Kossi Efoui and the Djiboutian Abdourahmane Waberi, whose works are now published by well-known Paris publishing houses. A popular festival such as the *Etonnants Voyageurs* at Saint Malo (which offers an annual edition at Bamako) was devoted to Africa in 2000.

The situation is more mixed as regards cinema and theatre. But the opportunities of watching African movies or plays are becoming more and more frequent, notably in Paris. With the support of the *Association française d'action artistique* (AFAA) in particular, or the Francophonie, African theatre is well represented in France: from the Limoges festival to the Paris theatres (Rond-Point, Tarmac at La Villette) authors like Koffi Kwahule, Jean Pliya and Kossi Efoui are held in high esteem, as often reflected in press reviews. The admission in 2002 of Malian comedian Bakary Sangaré to the Comédie française was a highly symbolical event. African music is meanwhile a big hit: the stars, including Youssou Ndour, Rokia Traoré, Salif Keita and, among the elder ones still Manu Dibango and Alpha Blondy, draw full houses, and they sell records. African music is the only form of art that has become an economic asset... but mainly for European companies and producers.

The stakes of the cultural industries

This is the reverse side of the medal. The growing interest in the North for Africa's contemporary culture may well stimulate creativity, but at the same time brings a temptation for artists to go into exile, temporarily or permanently. There are structural causes for this, including poverty, poor education and narrow consumer markets. But experts also find that African governments show little understanding for the economic dimension of culture and the interest of investing in this sector. African countries in 2000 spent less than one percent of their budgets on culture. The legislative framework remains weak, as does the efforts put into the training of artists. Few African countries are capable of hosting events of a certain magnitude. Exceptions include the Ouagadougou Pan-African Cinema Festival and Burkina Faso's International Arts and Crafts Exhibition, the Biennales of Arts and Letters in Senegal, the Bamako Photography meetings, or the Abidjan African market of Arts and Shows (MASA). In English-speaking Africa a noteworthy event is the multidisciplinary festival organised by the private African Heritage Foundation in Kenya for the past three decades. However, South Africa has not repeated its Contemporary Arts Biennale organised in 1995 and 1997.

In most cases, foreign donors are called upon to help fund the events, if they are not themselves the main organisers: external donors thus finance over 60 percent of the budget of the Dakar Arts Biennale, and more than 70 percent of the MASA's budget. This support, often directed to private initiatives, has over the past decade or more resulted in an abundance of festivals of all kinds – and of highly unequal quality – across the continent, in music, theatre and literature. But the massive presence of foreign partners has dubious consequences: the artists, living in part off subsidies, do not bother to present productions adapted to the tastes of the African public. And, absent a local arts market, they have become used to adjusting their works to foreign norms – a really vicious circle.

Thierry Perret

Europe conquered by African musicians

(MFI) Salif Keita, Youssou N'dour, Manu Dibango, Alpha Blondy and Cesaria Evora are the godparents of a new generation that travels from scene to scene in Europe bringing their art to a public longing for exoticism. Major European festivals regularly feature African artists. Rokia Traore who has herself produced her album *Bowmboï*, has secured a golden record in France thanks to her performances and has conquered Britain, Germany and Scandinavia. Jose da Silva, Cesaria Evora's producer, has signed a series of distribution licences for his star in Poland, Russia, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. The number of contracts signed at the annual MIDEM fair shows that African music is playing in the top league. Even Europe's rock stars feel they need to work with African artists. English pop star Damon Albarn, singer of the group Blur, made a superb album entitled *Mali Music* with Toumani Diabate and Afel Bocoum two years ago. Manu Chao has worked with the Malian couple Amadou and Mariam on the album *Dimanche à Bamako*, number 2 on the list of sales in France in August 2005.

The trend in fact is for African artists to stage "multicultural meetings" with well-known Europeans. Youssou N'dour understood this first. He entered the French market by cooperating in the mid-1980s with Jacques Higelin, and then the English market by working with Peter Gabriel. The duos help make African artists known in Europe. Later, they perform alone, pursuing a separate career parallel to the one they pursue in their country, sub-region or throughout the continent. But between the festivals in Africa, where they present the younger generation, and their contracts in Europe, which generate substantial income, they find it hard to respond to all requests, and the fees are bigger in Europe. From Budapest to Glasgow, via Brussels, Carhaix in Brittany and Montreux, African artists are on the posters of all European festivals. At Budapest's Sziget, the Malian Tuaregs of Tinariwen shared the top spot with the Senegalese Baba Maal and Youssou N'dour. Tiken Jah Fakoly meanwhile continued the tour he started in 2004. As for the stars of 2005, Amadou and Mariam, they have performed at many of the leading European events, and their joyful and straightforward songs convey a sympathetic image of Africa.

Pierre René-Worms