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BIOGRAPHY

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OWNING THE CONVERSATION ON AFROPOLITANISM

AMANDLA OOKO-OMBAKA

Kikoi's and Kijabe Street

The first time I came across the exemplification of Afropolitanism, the melange of African and cosmopolitan, was in Taiye Selasi's 2005 article "Bye-Bye Barbar". The tongue-in-cheek article described the newest generation of African emigrants "coming soon, or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you". I immediately saw some of myself in the Afropolitans Selasi claimed were easily spotted abroad - kikoi scarf paired with a summer dress, an American accent, British manners, 'African' outlook on life. But it wasn't until I participated an open discussion at the "World's Largest Library" on Kijabe street (Nairobi, Kenya) in August 2013 - an eclectic gathering of scholars, writers, artists and professionals who gather to have rich and complex conversations at 9pm on a Saturday night- that Afropolitanism took a firm grip of my consciousness.

I am proudly Kenyan, I am proudly African, I am proudly a citizen of the world. I am all of these. My first name is South African. I completed my high-school studies in London after a grounding in the local Kenyan 8-4-4 system. I have worked in over 20 cities across the globe, and my first apartment lease was in Lagos, Nigeria. Through this all, home is Nairobi, I never have to think twice when asked. The Globe Cinema roundabout is the place I see almost everyday when I'm home; that is where I often alight from the 106 matatu (public taxi). Kenya is where I see my future and where I want to continue dedicating the most productive years of my working life - being part of building the country I am proud to call home. But I often find myself on the defensive when I meet new people - especially the young professional crowd - defending my "Kenya-ness". I would gladly tattoo to my forehead the facts that the only passport I have says Kenya; that I have voted or been an election monitor in each election I've been old enough to participate in; that I pay city council rates, and converse with my grannies in an (albeit patchwork) mixture of Luo on my dad's side, Kikamba on my mom's side and Swahili.

Owning the conversation

Afropolitanism as I see it is broadly a state of mind engendered by young & contemporary Africans who are (re-)creating their national identities, owning the narrative of their successes and failures, while embracing an open mindedness about the world outside of themselves. We control the narrative, and to date the majority of conversations around Afropolitanism is driven by Africans; spanning the spectrum from popular media (ARISE Magazine - Nigeria; Afropolitan Magazine - South Africa), to academia as exemplified by the work of Professor Achille Mbembe. Mbembe is a Sorbonne educated Cameroonian philosopher and political scientist who argues that mobilization and immersion have long been how Africa has interacted with the world. He has variously cited examples like Pan-Africanism that called for unity in the political context of post-colonial Africa, often linking to the African diaspora.

It is easy to dismiss Afropolitanism as just another buzzword, fashionable now, but shallow in what it represents. Physical markers of Afropolitans aside, the term evokes for me a desire of our generation to articulate and make concrete the impact of our smorgasbord of lived experience across Africa and the rest of the world. Above giving voice to this experience, it demands a commitment to using this diversity of experience to make a difference on the continent (however defined – see below), working together with like minded compatriots in our home countries. I am not placing a value judgement or setting up a dichotomy of the contributions of Afropolitans vs. non-Afropolitans to progressing the continent. Rather, I am highlighting the Afropolitan perspective because it is often conceived as less direct, geographically distant, and too idealistic for the reality of the context in Africa. This is a complex and thorny concept. Taiye Selasi said it well when she postulated that what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is “the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy; and to sustain our parents’ cultures”.

Making a difference means different things for different people. I am passionate about building strong public sector institutions anchored in accountable governance and performance management. I believe in bringing together the best and most relevant global models I’ve seen and helped develop to Kenya e.g., leveraging the performance processes I designed with a large national oil company in West Africa to build a performance management incubator at a partially state owned bank I served in Kenya. For others, it is about incorporating the cultural voice of Africa with global and regional trends. One of my Ghanaian colleagues, spent his summer interviewing individuals across the continent to publish a book on the new generation of African entrepreneurs, including the likes of Sara Kaba Jones (Liberia, 31, CEO of FACE Africa), Ory Okolloh (Kenya, 35, Co-Founder Mzalendo) and Andrew Mupuya (Uganda, 21, Founder – YELI investments). This epic journey started because he was the only African nominated for a “Top 100” entrepreneurship award. The picture greatly disappointed him, and he believed that the continent had to offer far more than himself.

Elitist and Exclusive?

That Afropolitans have spent a significant amount of time outside of their home countries is not a new phenomenon. Let us take the specific example of the 1960’s Kenya Airlift that saw such prolific people as the late Wangari Maathai, the late Barack Obama Sr., Perez Olindo and Prof Mahmood Mamdani attend college and graduate school in the US, often staying a bit longer to gain work experience. Unlike our parents and grandparents however – we, the current generation are not choosing to come back as early, or at all. In part because of this, the dissenting opinion on the value of contemporary Afropolitanism is resounding. The primary critiques generally fall in two categories – it commodifies culture, and is an elitist debate.

To the first notion that it commodifies culture – Stephanie Santana (Africa in Words), suggests that what once held promise as a new theoretical lens & important counterweight to Afro-pessimism, has “increasingly come to stand for empty style and

culture commodification”. Binyavanga Wainaina takes a similar perspective based on his literary background, distinguishing between African literature that truly transports the African narrative versus ‘digital pulp’ fiction. Outside academia, Kenyan blogger Biko Zulu in a recent blog post (“A letter to Kenyans Abroad”) was chock full of vitriol along the same lines, though without Binyavanga’s nuance. Bottom line, the term allows individuals to associate with Africa from afar in words and articles of clothing, as an alternative to up-close, deep engagement on the continent.

For many, culture isn't exclusively a state of mind; ideologies like Afropolitanism degrade the understanding of culture as a whole. One’s identity as African is not enhanced or illuminated by non-African experience or education, furthermore choosing to return home is a testament to the value of our cultural identity rather than a form of cultural expression. “I really struggle with the term (Afropolitanism) – it almost elevates my experience and as such contribution over someone who was born/bred/raised/studied in Africa. In many ways, one could argue that the term proliferates imperialist thinking”.

As for the second critique on elitism– does one “afford” to be Afropolitan to participate in somewhat esoteric debates about consciousness somewhere in the diaspora, over sangria at Art Caffe or with Afro-Jazz fusion playing in the background at Blankets and Wine? Richard Turere who was 13 years old when his home-made “lion lights” solution (LEDs connected to old solar powered car batteries) hit global headlines. He contributed enormously to the wellbeing of his community, and was most definitely too busy trying to defend the livelihood of his family from lions; he could not afford the time to navel gaze over a “state of mind / consciousness”.

A further rebuttal of these critiques will be the topic of future articles – decomposing Afropolitan identities into national, socio-economic, racial, religious...cultural realities. It is a complex concept with its shortcomings. But I want us – young Africans, Afropolitans, Pan-Africans to own this conversation and steer the debate on the strong and weak points of this state of mind.

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