



TERRITORIES

## DYING QUAYE STYLE CONTEMPORARY FUNERAL ART IN GHANA

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On the 22nd July 1992 the Ghanaian carpenter Seth Kane Quaye, recognized as an innovator of his country's funerary art tradition died at the age of seventy. He introduced variations in the field of polychrome sculpture and the application of symbolist inspiration to the making of coffins that apparently has no precedent in the various ethnocultural manifestations of that region.

Ben Kane Quaye (1954) and Ernest Anang Quaye (1965) were entrusted with the task of making their father's coffin. The latter had expressed his wish to be buried in a more sober, less pagan coffin, in accord with his Christian beliefs. Yet his sons couldn't resist what already is a substantial characteristic of their style; they decorated the famous carpenter's coffin with motifs of

carpentry tools. Ken Quaye had created a new style in the construction of coffins, that is tantamount to a new style of dying, and he was the victim of his own creation, despite his final will.

It is revealing that western media, who promoted the presence of this artist in two of the most significant African exhibitions of recent years, *Magiciens de la Terre*, at the Georges Pompidou, and *Africa explores* at the Center for African Art of New York, and who changed the pronunciation of his name, (substituting Kwei for Quaye, as if they expected it to be a very fashionable name in the near future), now keep quiet and do nothing that resembles commemoration, an attitude rather more related to the emptiness that comes with the end of a show.

According to what his son Quaye Sowah has told me, Kane Quaye created in 1939 the first coffin-workshop, following the petition of his father-in-law, an old fisherman that wanted to take to the grave some allegorical element of his trade. The carpenter honoured him with a boat-shaped coffin, that no doubt referring to many trips made by his client, perhaps also made him reflect on that very long journey that he was just about to embark upon. Among the Gá tribe, the conventional Christian coffin had been up to then in vogue. That funerary vessel would be the first of a large repertory of symbolic forms that alluded to the functions of the deceased, and also to his main ambitions.

Certainly this pragmatism of the funerary symbol was nothing new. It is associated to a concept of death as the continuity of the life cycle. Yet the objects that accompanied death in the ancient Asiatic, Mediterranean or North African cultures, for example, was a useful object world, practical, not intended for interpretation by the living, (as it was located far from them), but for the personal use of the dead. The symbol, more than referring to the deceased's past, was of use for the future, that means that it wasn't as symbolical as it appears to us. In fact the symbolical character, that is partially festive, is the outcome of a process of purification and accumulation, what Jan Mukarovsky

termed a “factor of cultural economy”, that meant a freezing of the factual possibilities of the object, or a recycling of its aesthetic potential.

However, it is interesting that some cultures like the Egyptian, the Oriental and some of precolombine America, gave the tomb a scenic dimension with an aesthetic character. It was almost a museological organization of space, perhaps the justification or the origin of the tendency towards decontextualization, (that is evidently necrological and commemorative) and which present day museums happily express.

The Quaye coffins maintain the link with that tradition, semi-symbolic, semi-practical and utilitarian of funerary objectuality. Yet there is the difference in their material constitution that isn't destined for posterity; they are as corruptible and ephemeral as the bodies they contain. In this sense, they will never possess the transcendent quality of stone sarcophagi and the funerary architecture of other cultures.

To state that they aren't destined for posterity implies that they aren't intended for the museum, (unless we don't take into account, as suggests Nestor Garcia Canclini, the new reconciliation of the popular and the cultured, derived from the “efficient” alliances between the élitist-cultured institution, tourism and mass media. When it is decontextualized and it

incorporated into museological space, the object neutralizes its practical functions, those that are only indicated by form,(or by supplementary explanation), in as much as its content acquires an archeological character, while receiving a further aesthetic value, a renewal that makes it act as a new kind of text. The coffins made by Quaye are submitted to commemorative consumption,(that is,symbolic), before they service practical needs, thus they shouldn't be given an archaeological interpretation if they haven't been used either way. Nonetheless they overhaul western visual communication codes, a reorganization of the semantic priorities of the object. What before was a coffin with an aesthetic content can turn into an aesthetic object with a potential function, a necrological function.

The relocation of communicative functions is possible, in this case, because the coffins built by the Quayes belong to an artisan tradition that has recorded such precedents,(this is one of the factors that has allowed one to “enjoy” a great part of African symbolic production, even stimulating its influence in western visual culture). That artisan production isn't solely related to the means of production, but also to the contents. That is the kind of relation that is established between these coffins and the polychrome sculpture destined to ceremony, where it will play the role of concealing identity and splitting personality . That's one of the

functions of the coffin sculpture as funerary symbol: the expression of symbiosis, of a transit between a material and a spiritual sphere, yet keeping the significance that this transit has for traditional African culture, the individual's spirit becoming an element of nature, without losing any influence in the world of the living.

The recontextualization (decontextualization) and consequent “up-dating” of the interpretative codes in the Quaye coffins, (a somewhat discriminating aesthetic consumption) can't ignore the level of preexisting reality, the way that these objects interact with their original environment, the codes that enable them to accumulate cultural references non-implicit in form.

The coffin, commissioned, should provide a biographical, symbolical account of the deceased person, acting like a receptacle and as a panegyric at the same time. Since it sets out to signify the personality, the rank or the profession that the “user” once had, it can adopt the shape of a plane , Pan Am fleet for instance, or a car, a Mercedes. Thus the symbols restricted to a group of limited cultural units,(the family, the tribe),are replaced by others that refer to transnational and mass scale cultural units. Such symbols are sensitive to serialization, (imposed anyhow by the market), losing their individual referential capacity that is diluted. This

explains, that although the catalogue of shapes could be infinite, there's a stock number of models, that are reproduced in answer to a demand more conventional than innovative in essence.

These models could be divided into iconographical categories: animal and vegetable shapes on one hand, consumer, practical ones on the other. They correspond almost exactly to consumer groups: fishermen, farmers, women head of family, (fish, boats, seeds, fruit, hens); rich merchant and property owners, businessmen, (cars, planes, houses), as well as traditional chiefs, (the golden chair and several totemic animals such as the tiger, the elephant, the crocodile and the eagle). To this we have to add a very recent clientele: tourists, (that constitute an observant public, though they don't consume the object), and art merchants who aspire to aggrandize that spectacular and utterly mimetic capacity these objects have. These groups don't show any kind of preference for given models, they follow their aesthetic likings, as well as obeying specific market, propaganda and educational interests.

Beyond the biographical character of its meanings, this iconography also takes one to a series of ambitions and social interests. Seen in its context it inevitably leads to the dialectic between culture and nature, and to dialectics between

different social agents. The representation of animals, (in this case the representation of individuals through animals, for instance the liking the Ashanti have for the eagle or the leopard), can be linked as Els and Leuzinger suggest in reference to traditional African sculpture, to a need for emphasizing the strength and defensive power that must be transferred from animals to man, an instinct connected to the interest of the species' survival.

The dialectic tension of this relationship between nature and culture lies in the fact that it is both attraction and rejection, transformation and mimesis. But we mustn't forget that we face a contemporary phenomenon, that as such leads to a new world of conflicts and interests, that congregate the traditional chief alongside the bourgeois nouveau riche, on whom the future of the nation depends.

With the change experienced by tribal societies and the hybrid situation that characterizes "modern" Africa, collective and individual aspirations are no longer limited to nature-culture relationship models, but extend to social class concerns, conferring a new social representativity to symbols that were already traditional.

Certain consumer society symbols, when they represent the client's condition, are also signifying his exceptional character,

(eventually it's a question of emphasizing what differentiates the individual from the whole), in the sense that he was, did, or possessed what many desire to be, do or possess. The object symbolizes both what the individual achieved and what the whole ambitions. Thus its prestige.

From such a perspective it is valid to see Quaye's coffins as images of African contemporary reality, through the interests and axiological patterns, and the social ambitions of colonialism.

Fundamental to that reality is the new sphere of influence that determines African cultural production; a much more sophisticated market, new media, propaganda and collective education, and a growing interest on behalf of the western world that promotes these cultural products in a system governed by commercial mechanisms of supply and demand.



Quaye Brothers, Ghana. Courtesy Centro Wilfredo Lam, La Havana, Cuba.