

Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts

Wednesday, April 9, 2014



Margo Harkin shows images from the Protestant Loyalist "Orange Marches" in Northern Ireland

Preventing Conflict and Building Peace

How mutual respect for culture builds bridges from past to future

Alex Jackson

“Monuments are buildings of the past; they are also markers that represent the future.” This Cypriot notion of the monument as a physical manifestation of the past is powerful in many ways.

Sites of cultural heritage come out of a specific moment and specific social situation, thus immortalising certain histories. In the slow destruction, and eventual reclamation, of these sites of historical interest, there is something telling about their importance in representing memory, conflict and, importantly, resolution across divides.

The representation of history and how we relate to these histories was something the session participants were invited to consider at length yesterday through a variety of projects, from monuments and film, to dance and social innovation. The different media all allowed for a greater expression of resolution and telling stories across the cracks of division.

For example, progress in Pakistan

can be measured through how British Muslims engage in foreign issues related to their heritage. This isn't just a post 7/7 perspective; the Pakistani diaspora has been a question of significance since the British drew borders dividing the region. There cannot be amnesia around these pivotal moments, particularly the aid the region gave to end the Cold War, which is largely ignored. In a conflux of interaction and rejection, support for cultural heritage in Pakistan allows many to question national and regional identity.

This identity crisis is not exclusive to such parts of the world. Ireland is still the site of a great number of tensions between religious divides. Loyalists and the British press largely controlled the state image of the conflicts in the 80s, which ensured that witnesses couldn't tell their story: the lies told the more powerful story. Readdressing this has taken generations of work to tackle social and cultural divisions; film documentation has gained ground in presenting the facts, but tensions continue to oscillate on a weekly basis.

Yet, in their ability to talk to the

audience, such art projects have considerably positive effects. One commentator noted that, “Despite all of our conflicts and division, it is surprising to find how friendly we feel when we meet one another.” This notion of an empathy and compassion that transcends conflict comes from a vision to introduce culture as a force for mutual respect and better knowledge. Through a process of learning and unlearning, history is continually reviewed. We might not agree on it, but we come closer to understanding it through collective work, and moving towards a dialogue by which we can address national trauma, internally and externally.

Culture is often a target in conflict; culture is therefore the remedy and a tool for peace-building too. Art represents all of the prospective materials for creating dialogue, putting the civic powers in the public space. Through social empowerment awakening in people their own passions and opinions, art provides a vector and a focusing lens by which to recover and reclaim the past, the present and the future.



Malagasy-Ghanaian spoken word artists Crystal Tettey during her working group in the McGowan Room

Interview: Crystal Tettey

“Can we eat art?”

Alex Jackson

For Crystal Tettey, art is not just a mode of expression, it is the means by which people can be liberated from both personal and social restrictions. A spoken word artist by trade, Tettey is an advocate of alternative means by which people can tackle huge issues, be that through art, dance, or, in her case, poems, words and singing. She believes that art provides a safe space which is incomparable in other disciplines.

“On stage, I burst open and all of these things and thoughts in my head come alive. I feel like arts is one of the few places you are safe being politically incorrect and broaching a lot of issues. And with spoken word, I don’t necessarily have to talk about one particular issue in one piece. I am talking about many things at once.”

The diversity and flexibility of the art form allows her to confront a great number of the inequalities. Issues such as gender insensitivity and youth unemployment ground much of her oeuvre, providing a framework in which to talk about wider questions pertaining to sustainable peace.

“We frequently raise the issue of involving younger people in our projects in Ghana.

“Even though they might not be considered to have enough experience to make informed input and decisions, it definitely helps to have a wide variety of age groups because, after all, we are leaving the world to them eventually and older generations have been contaminated by the negativity, so it helps to have their input, their reflections and their fresh, positive approach.”

Galvanizing youth motivation is a proactive way of dealing with culture and identity questions, where generation divides often increase miscommunication across age groups. Slam, a form of artistic expression that involves emotive poetry and rap, is seen as a new frontier for Tettey, with its no holds barred approach, allowing young people to experiment with (minority) languages, loaded terminology and colloquialisms.

Tettey is actively involved in one such slam project piloting this year in schools in Ghana. “We will be working with 13-18 year olds. Considering we often think that adults have all the answers and solutions (which is unfair),

what we will do is open the floor to the children and ask them what do you guys think? I feel like as an artist, we will have to adapt, get into the post conflict environment and realize that conventional ways won’t work and probably offend. And slam can combat that, as a new space and we can then work on new music and see how that develops.”

Seemingly opposing sections of society often find their links and cultural heritage through such innovative approaches. Whilst participants in the African Women Peacemakers Program work across many obvious barriers, most of all languages, there is unification through the scale of conflict.

“We’re joined together by poverty, the severity of African conflict, the fact that there are child soldiers all over, In Liberia and Sierra Leone, even in Ghana, because a large refugee community settled in Ghana. We find there is always a mark, for example you find them with one arm. It is that horrific.

“Sometimes you would hear stories and just tear up because it was too brutal. There was a story of a lady, Abigail from Sierra Leone. One day,

when she was 12-years-old, her house, a compound home of about 20 people, was surrounded by rebels. On loudspeaker, they announced, ‘Apparently there is a virgin in the house. We don’t intend to kill everybody but we want the virgin.’ And her mum said, ‘Over my dead body!’ But Abigail thought, “this makes no sense! There are 20 people here; if I offer myself that saves 19 lives.’ The rebels kept terrorizing the compound for about two hours, and Abigail was on the verge of leaving, when the UN Peace Keeping Mission drove by and dispersed the rebels. And if you were to meet Abigail, she is timid. But it probably isn’t a unique case.”

Dynamics of such diverse groups constantly shift as they are affected by such a wealth of different histories across the continent. Yet one thing that Tettey is impressed by is the resilience of many of the female contributors in their approach, their vivacity.

“I remember the trainings for the African Women Peacemakers, the women were always finding time to dance after sessions and tell stories and have a good time because, especially for Liberians and Sierra Leoneans, they never knew whether tomorrow would come so they are always in a festive mood so as to appreciate the here and now.”

Such groups tend to be the most appreciative of the development of art work, no matter where in Africa there is progress. The scale of atrocities, genocide, and cultural repression over a series of decades is telling of both tribal conflicts on a local level and the enduring legacy of imperialism.

“We talk about colonialism and new colonialism. For me it is different manifestations of the same thing. In Madagascar for example, I noticed that the French had a lot of say in terms of who became president. Apparently they will have a lot of say in how the country is run for decades. These countries will be dependent and inside of French countries forever and so in that sense colonialism never left.”

Nonetheless, the determination to tackle these issues on their own terms, has been on the rise, no matter the difficulty of coordinating this effort, which somewhat astounds the Malagasy-Ghanaian artist.

“Communication is a huge issue. When we were putting together the training of trainers, we would send out emails to participants all across the continent to come to a central place and sometimes we would get responses two weeks later because access is not a given. And a lot of these women are grassroots women so they walk miles to

cyber cafes, I don’t know how they type sometimes.”

However, this drive for artist endeavors is not a universal guarantee. For Tettey, there has to be consideration of the best areas and fields in which to negotiate art, so as people are not offended by its provocative nature. In conflict torn regions, fragility is a concern and instead of healing people through the trauma process, there are significant groups that are offended.

“Last year, there was a festival in Ghana on a coastal community, and the people asked questions like ‘Can we eat art?’ because for them, earning a livelihood is much more important than entertaining yourself. So there is a disconnection between art and development work.”

Such groups do not take stock of nuanced work that regenerates and rejuvenates societies through tackling specific causes on individual levels. Art might not be something edible, but its nourishment for communities cannot be doubted. Whether Tettey is tackling women’s rights, youth education or imperial influence, all of these mission statements fall under a single strand for her: “Although the dynamics are different, we all know there is one place that we need to get to and that is peace; sustainable peace.”



Fellows take the time to enjoy the good Salzburg weather on the Schloss terrace

So long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen, goodbye!

