

Culture and development at a crossroads

The two articles featured in this issue of Tafter Journal by Mazuba Kapambwe and Johannis Tsoumas may inspire some further reflections on the difficult, 'liquid' relation between place, ideology and politics, which is so present in almost any debate on the role and use of culture in development.

On one hand, we have an upheaving example from our forgotten continent, Africa, slowly but unrelentlessly getting to the frontline of cultural festivals. According to the author, an embryonic tradition of celebrating local artists, spirituality and national identities is being revved up by a new generation of festival producers which has learned all the tricks of their western counterparts. First, the 2.0 marketing model, which allows to get directly to audiences in sophisticated and inclusive ways, sidestepping the 'intermediation' of the traditional media (hardly, and presumably even less in the African situation, a 'neutral' subject, but rather an agency of legitimisation and control). Second, the strong grassroots flavour, substantiated in successful crowdfunding initiatives. Thirdly, an attention for the ties with tourism, which, especially in Africa, is the synonym of packaged tourism – which the emerging cultural festival formula again manages to eschew, presenting itself as a fresh recipe for the expert postmodern nomads who aim for a direct exposure to the essence of the 'local-ness' and do not fall trap of preposterous trivialisations. And finally, the 'sustainable' label which some festivals strive to put forward, guaranteeing that benefits generated by festivals trickle down to the community and are not at the expenses of the environment.

Mazuba Kapambwe's article resonates with the idea that being the new place on the global stage, Africa has in some sense a better way to reinvent itself as a place for genuine cultural celebration, whereby large festival productions in both the old Western World and the new global destination markets of Latin America and Asia are victims of the mass-tourist clichés and the risk-minimization tactics of the global business involved, yielding what Richards and Wilson in their breakthrough article of 2006(1) called 'serial reproduction' of culture through, among other things, festival staging.

A 'post-ideologic' Africa seems in this sense a great place for festival hopping, but we can't forget how the comings and goings of Africa are largely tied to the economic interests of the world superpowers, and how the urban condition – and consequently, the awkward situation of cultural production in the disastrously rapid urbanisation process described among others by Mike Davis in his 'Planet of Slums' – is under increasing pressure. In these terms, the new generation of African festivals reminds me of the struggle of a very small and joyful David against an angry giant Goliath. However, as we have increasingly evidence of from throughout the world, not least the current community resistance against the corporate-driven World Cups and Olympics of Brazil, sometimes these battles are won, or at least break through the indifference of the local and global middle classes.

The other paper regarding the discursive, political approach to the decoration of Athens metro does not make the same 'optimistic' impression, maybe because of the unwritten knowledge about the current situation of Greek citizens. Africa could not but improve, we tend to think, but Greece, for what concerns us – spectators of the latest turns (or rather continuities) in EU policy – can still go several steps downhill. The screeching contrast between the quality of Athens' infrastructure – some of which are the direct by-product of another global festival, the 2004 Olympics, which opened the way to the greatest economic downturn of the history of the country and probably of all contemporary Europe – and the allegedly opaque, undecided and discursively ambiguous development of the Greek capital's U-system décor represents a cacophony which Tsoumas manage to convey.

Both papers tell us something of the ways in which culture can serve local development. However, the later is basically about what can go wrong – unimaginative planning abiding hidden interests and business tactics, though the ‘missed opportunity’ from the Athens case is only an arguably minor example of a wider system failure which screams for change and inclusion in decision-making. The former discloses the emergence of a new paradigm, a ray of hope from the plentiful sorrow that plagues the developing world: in the breach of the global cultural economy, social innovation and protagonism has flourished from technology and has reached even the more backwards – but still connected – places.

Notes

(1) Richards, G., and J. Wilson (2006), Developing Creativity in Tourist Experiences: A Solution to the Serial Reproduction of Culture?. *Tourism Management* 27(6):1209–1223.



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