

“We need more contact zones to create a space for critical discussion, and to propagate and exchange a continuous cultural benefit.”

A conversation between Professor Muyiwa Falaiye and Mudi Yahaya

Muyiwa Falaiye: I have been in Lagos all my life; I have experienced the expansion of the city from the time when I was young up ‘till this moment. This modernisation hinders expansion of spaces for arts, for meetings and culture. What is your impression?

Mudi Yahaya: Before one can critique the absence of national heritage, one has to understand the history of the existence of these spaces. There was a big rush after independence to create a western style of development, which came with some forms of elitist consumerism and ways of appropriating western values to the way we live. This also applied to culture. If you remember, the whole process of post-colonisation is a process: of decolonisation and trying to define who we were. In that process, during the 1970s, the commercial value of oil increased and subsequently spawned the construction of the infrastructure of the city.

MF: My worry is our attempt to change our culture in accordance with the western model seems to affect us in more ways than one: our attitude to work and our attitude to creating spaces where we can discuss our traditional culture. There is nothing wrong with accepting a western-model way of development, but when this affects our cultural spaces, what do we do? How do we recreate these spaces that have been lost in the last 40 or 50 years? This is a fundamental problem for me. I don’t know if you agree with me.

MY: I think it’s not about what we lost, but what we gained. The post-colonial identities of all Nigerians are hybrids of what we are and what we can get from the global community. There should be no such thing that a space belongs to one ethnic group. After independence in the 1960s, we were able to constantly redefine who we were, and this also redefines the spaces. The National Theatre, for example, is the symbolic representation of our national identity.

MF: There is this argument that the architecture of the National Theatre has nothing to do with our indigenous culture, that it is a foreign architect imposed on us. I am of the opinion that it is what is happening inside the building that really matters, the architecture is of less importance.

MY: So many things are foreign here. In fact, modern architecture is very foreign to us. Since we still don't live in mud huts, then the background of the architecture should not really matter at all. How the content and the context affect our culture is very relevant. Identity is a very fluid phenomenon; it is not static, so what worked out in the 1960s, might fail in the 1970s. We have to constantly expand so as to be able to catch up with it. We need to understand that technology brings out new art form, the creative industry is expanding, and as artists, we need to start seeing different things and needs. We are in the age, where a space is defined by the moment. Maybe the questions now should be, why do we have just only one National Theatre? Is the National Theatre in different places? Is Freedom Park one of the new National Theatres?

MF: There is an idea that we need to move the space for the theatre to the centre of the city. Do you think there is any point of departure between the location of the symbolism itself and the culture itself?

MY: I think it is very important that it is located at the centre of the city. The whole notion of the National Theatre is the representation of national identity and national culture. In that case, the theatre is not meant to be elitist, and that is what has become a problem, because the National Theatre was not delivering culture broadly across all sectors. The adaptation of the modern model, and not the location, made the National Theatre elitist. The programs at the National Theatre should not be segregated or exclusive; they should be for all the people, rich or poor.

MF: Who should take responsibility for moving the National Theatre from the periphery to the centre of the city?

MY: The culture belongs to the people, so I think the people should come to own culture. This should not be regulated by the government. Civil society should have a bigger say in who we are and how we define our space and our identity; how we regulate cultural policy; and there should be more participatory and plural voices carving out cultural policy.

MF: I heard that the architecture of National Theatre was very appealing to the military, because it symbolised the cap of the General, and as far as they were concerned, they were not looking at the deeper cultural implication of the architecture. They were more concerned about the grandiose nature of the building and the resemblance to the cap of the General. What has been going on inside seems to be short of expectation, in terms of propagating our culture. How do we now change this, or how do we move what is going on in the physical structure to another place, like Freedom Park?

MY: I think it was incidental that there was a resemblance to the cap. It was the civil servants in the Ministry of Works who issued permits for this kind of work in the 1970s, so I think it was just coincidence. Coming back to the question of how to apply the space, we should remember that such spaces are symbolic not only as repositories of culture, but they should be flexible spaces. They should be spaces that are opened to be re-used, reapplied or re-appropriated. If we say now that the culture is flexible, then the infrastructure and the structure should also be flexible.

MF: We do have a world culture. What do you think can be achieved by creating isolation; by trying to prevent our culture from being diluted or influenced by the foreign culture? I remember that foreign films were at a time premiered at the National Theatre. Foreign musicians were brought in, while local artists were having problems securing space at the theatre. And they think the only way we can prevent this is to create a cocoon around our indigenous culture and prevent foreign culture from having access to our national artistic spaces. Do you think this will not be counterproductive to our cultural development?

MY: If we try to censor foreign influence, do you censor MTV? Do you censor music, do you censor all forms of culture that seeks to propagate change? How do we censor fashion, for example?

MF: Don't you think that the reaction of our indigenous cultural practitioners stems from the fact that they don't have enough outlets and spaces? They think they are denied the available space to practice. Now that we think we have enough spaces to exhibit our culture, do you think this idea of wanting to restrict will fall away?

MY: I think the influence of the foreign culture is not the problem, but rather the prevailing influence of the Pentecostal Christianity dominating our spaces. The churches have purchasing power and they dominate all the available spaces, like halls. If a musician wants to perform on a Sunday, he is not competing with a foreign band, but with the church. They try to force a certain form of thinking into a certain space that is counterproductive to the nature of art itself. We need to understand that religion itself is a culture.

MF: I agree with you, that one of the greater challenges to the development of our culture is the role of the church. Sometimes we try to distinguish between the church and our culture. Are there other ways we can separate politics from culture?

MY: I think the first thing is to appreciate the symbiotic nature of the relationship. Marx once said that the super structures, which are ideas, cultural beliefs and world views, affect the sub-culture, which is economics and politics. So there is that fusion, and when we appreciate that they work together, then we realise that every move we make culturally has economic or political consequences. National development has everything to do with cultural production and identity. It helps to understand that the West is not the enemy. It is hypocritical to say our culture is not diluted. After a colonial experience, there is a hybrid identity. Maybe we have done some post-colonial deconstruction in terms of literature. But the difference between post-colonial deconstruction and decolonisation has to be understood.

MF: Which is more fundamental – the physical symbolism of culture or the attitude of the mind? Sometimes we try to make distinctions and we run into all sort of problems. Some people consider culture to be physical, in terms of how you dress, how you behave and so on, but if your attitude is at variance to all this... symbol is a galvanising force to sweep public opinion and people rally around it a lot. It is easy for certain people, who don't want to get engaged with critical discourse, to identify with symbol. Things like fashion quickly explain identity and aspiration. There is a unity about how cultural production defines a space, an individual and a nation. If our nation is not in a vacuum, then it should understand that we cannot negate others by saying they are foreign. We need more contact zones to create a space for critical discussion, and to propagate and exchange a continuous cultural benefit. This will reduce phobia and suspicion, and it will permit better understanding of other culture and the people. Maybe if other people from the far north of Nigeria had the opportunity to come to the National Theatre to showcase their culture and art work, we might not have the problem we have with the Boko Haram today. If these spaces exist, will they remove the ignorance that makes one culture feels superior to the other? This feeling has brought a whole lot of problems, like discrimination, racism and political issues. Slavery and colonialism are all products of superior-inferior culture relationship. How can this be changed by creating more spaces and the idea that all culture can benefit from one another?

MY: It's all a problem of vertical class structure. We need to democratise the way the production of culture is dispersed. The creation of elitist spaces that promote censorship in tariff without political subsidy, will create geographical division. The first solution is to see how we can flatten the structure in terms of cultural consumption. The culture should be available to the people; it should not be too special and too elitist, and it should also not be exclusive to only one part. Cultural production should be democratised and be made available to everybody.

MF: There is this call of return to Ibadan as the home of traditional culture. There is a need for these spaces to be returned to Ibadan and Ife, and Oshogbo, so what do we do about Lagos? Why are we insisting that the National Theatre be in Lagos, or that it should be moved from one point of Lagos to the other, when there is this idea that Lagos has never been the best place to host Nigerian culture?

MY: Lagos is the best representation of Nigeria. It is very easy to hear people speaking Igbo and Hausa on the street, and this is not common in places like Ife or Ibadan. In terms of cultural availability and dimension, Lagos has been evolving over the years; it has come to stay.

MF: We all know that Lagos has benefited from its cosmopolitan nature, but that does not mean we have to uproot the indigenous cultures from their original background and bring them to Lagos?

MY: I didn't say they should be uprooted and brought to Lagos. Opa Oranmiyan and Osun Oshogbo cannot be uprooted and brought to Lagos simply because we want them to benefit from Lagos. There are some places that are supposed to be encouraged to develop. The whole idea is to encourage them to propagate and be more fluid. What do you think would be a utopian cultural space?

MF: I don't think culture can exist in the utopian mind, there has to be a physical representation of the culture. That is why the location of Freedom Park is very important. It accommodates the physical aspect of art, you can go in there and view the art works and cultural performances. What is your own opinion about it?

MY: My question to you was if money was not the problem, how would you see this space in terms of the architectural design? Would you see it as one space or multi-layered spaces?

MF: It is going to be difficult to get a multiple-layered place because of the nature of Lagos in terms of shortage of land. People consider adobe architecture as traditional and it represents many cultures in Nigeria. You should also consider how you can harmonise foreign architecture. This, however, can be possible only on the outskirts of Lagos, and support from the government for certain infrastructure would also be needed.

MY: I think we should have such spaces that tell stories about who we are, where we come from and also show our aspiration. There should be space for performance art, photography and documentary films.

MF: I also think there should be spaces for visual arts which can tell the history of Nigeria. Stories of plural voices can also be told in one medium, in order to save time and money. No space can accommodate all art media at the same time.

MY: From what I have heard from you, you also agree that there should be more than one space. We started the conversation by experimenting with the idea of one space; if that is not enough, we create more spaces. If people participate in cultural production, there will always be expansion because the people own the space.

MF: Economic needs are always in competition with cultural needs. Sometimes the so called free spaces may not be as free as we think.

MY: If you offer one group the opportunity to speak about the economic, political and cultural benefits of the space, it will sway the opinion in favour of that group over the one that speaks only about the economic benefit.

MF: What role do you think the government can play in all these?

MY: I think the government should deregulate culture and embrace policies that are carved out by practitioners rather than the civil servants. Government should realise that culture belongs to the people and they should give it full support.

MF: As a practitioner in the field, what kind of support do you think government should give?

MY: The government should make available places like this for cultural purposes. So many houses that belong to the federal government are available and unoccupied after the move from Lagos to Abuja. This is a great opportunity.

MF: I think there are some spaces in our universities that could be used for cultural propaganda. Many universities are not responding to this, perhaps because the practitioners are not doing enough to partner with these universities.

MY: I think the challenge is that the superior academia in the university would terrorise this idea, and they would not like to see it as evolving philosophy. Not all artists receive formal education, so the universities seem to be a barrier for them to showcase their talents, and this is a type of an elitist structure, which offers no room for free thinking and ideas. We might not find it easy until we evolve to the stage where a professor believes that he can learn from a mechanic who has no formal educational background. We should move towards creating an open space where both the educated and the non-educated can have free access to it and express themselves openly.

MF: If there is an urgent need for research in line of art in terms of intellectual basis, what would you suggest?

MY: Understanding the role of language is very important in all visual art, I mean in terms of symbolism, and identifiers. It also includes the role we play in African art production and how it affects our relationship with other culture. Africa is a symbolic-based cultural landscape, so there should be more research on symbols and metaphors.

MF: I think our basic assumptions about reality affect our culture. What do we take reality to be? What is our world view about the nature of life, civilisation and man? Our understanding of these things is the art of our basic development. If someone comes to Africa for the first time and looks at us with the western binocular, then he is likely to see a city that is devastated in terms of representation and understanding. We can explain why we do what we do, from the days of slavery to the days of colonialism to the present time, by the symbolism of our artistic works. That is why I said we can have one cultural space that explains the whole gamut of our culture in whatever medium the artists prefer.

MY: But that will make us guilty of what we accuse other people of, putting one culture above the others. There is arrogance in saying other people must speak your language. As long as we want to say there is nothing that exists in our cultural space called art, our art is not in vacuum. It is necessary to accept the fact that there is a universal and global act at stake.