



Plenary Session: Migration and Culture in the Euro-African Context

Culture and Migration: Contradictory attitudes of Europe to Africa

**Intervention by Christian Kravagna
Professor Post Colonial Studies
Akademie der
bildenden Künste, Vienna, Austria**

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Christian Kravagna

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When we talk about Migration and Culture in the Euro-African Context, we need to face a seemingly contradictory attitude of Europe to Africa, which in my opinion is quite significant and not without some relation to colonial times. On the one hand, recent European border politics have made it more and more difficult and dangerous for Africans to migrate to Europe. As all of you know, thousands of Africans have died during the last years when trying to reach European territory. On the other hand, there is a widespread European fascination with African Culture as documented in numerous African festivals on the European continent. So, Europeans seem to do whatever they can to keep Africans out of Europe, while they are at the same time increasingly consuming African cultures within Europe.

This year Europe is celebrating the fall of the Iron Curtain that had divided the continent until 1989. Europe is celebrating itself as a re-united continent. But this process of re-unification has been accompanied by the creation of a new border regime since the early 1990s. Already in the year 1990 the French philosopher Etienne Balibar had speculated about future developments of European border policies. "There is a danger," he wrote, "that the future Iron Curtain might be recovered somewhere in the Mediterranean."

Indeed, the process to create such a new wall started soon after these words were uttered. Member states of the EU reduced the possibilities of legal migration forcing African migrants into illegality when trying to cross the Mediterranean; as members of the Schengen agreement the states were obliged to control the EU borders restrictively which led to coordination of surveillance systems and joint forces to patrol the southern borders of Europe which became a highly militarized zone during the last 10 years and brought up the talk of "Fortress Europe." All these efforts to regulate or restrict migration from Africa to Europe – which were accompanied by agreements with north-African states to prevent emigration and to take back their citizens when caught at trying to cross EU-borders illegally – did not stop these migration movements.

They just caused them moving from one route to another, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Canary Islands or to the region between Libya and Italy. The efforts to "regulate" migration from Africa by police and military measures, organized by the European border control agency FRONTEX, did in fact not regulate migration in this part of the world but rather caused a proliferation of irregular border crossings and thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic.

The past years of European migration policy were marked by an increasing externalization of the border regime to North-African countries. One could rightly speak of a hysteric European approach to migration, which is perhaps best illustrated through the increasing number and geographical diffusion of refugee camps and detention centres financed by Europe in countries outside of its territory.

This is of course a very short and limited account of European migration policy with regard to Africa. But nevertheless, it doesn't make it easy to switch to the level of cultural discourse or practice. Given the fact that some of the most fundamental values of modern European self-understanding are violated when the administration of refugees seeking asylum in Europe is sourced out to totalitarian countries like Libya, we have to think about where culture begins.

To start with probably the most successful European cultural event related to Africa within the past 5 years, I show you some images from the show "Afrika Afrika," which was conceived by the Austrian artist André Heller and is touring throughout Europe since 2005. Marketed as "the magical circus adventure from the amazing continent," millions of Europeans have seen this cultural spectacle by now. This cultural event, which is full of stereotypes of the black body and soul as naturally gifted with rhythm and music and so forth, has been rightly described by one critic as a "celebration of primitivism," working in a historic relation to colonial spectacles of the Other. But the website of "Afrika Afrika" quotes the German president Horst Köhler, who was one of the first visitors to the show, with the words "this is the real Africa." This quote gives us an idea of the power that a staged fantasy like this can exert on the image of Africa in Europe.

From the hysteric European discourse on migration from Africa you get the image of a poor and somehow frightening black subject which is to be prevented from entering Europe by use of police and military forces. On the level of cultural events like the one mentioned you get the opposite, but no less stereotypic image of happy Africans presenting themselves dancing and grimacing... not unlike they were presented in the colonial spectacle of the Other a hundred years ago. It may surprise you to hear that this revue takes place under the patronage of Unesco. Recognizing the Unesco-Logo on the poster for "Afrika Afrika" you might think of a new attraction in the cultural heritage inventory of this organization. But here it comes to cultural cooperation, since 1 € of every sold ticket goes to Unesco and is spent on some cultural projects in Africa. These projects may be better or worse – the point is that Africa has to sell herself for the enjoyment and profit of some Europeans in order to get back a small percentage of that profit with a gesture of generous support.

This would be less a problem, if Africans had not to suffer from everyday and institutional racism in European countries. Since positive and negative stereotypes, fear and desire of the Other, are often inter-related, the African community in countries like Austria is quite sensitive with cultural spectacles like "Afrika Afrika." In this context, I would like to mention an example of cultural co-operation that also relates to the questions posed in the short introduction to our panel regarding the "potential contribution of artists and cultural organisations to mutual understanding in a context of migration." It is a cooperation of the Austrian artist Lisl Ponger who has done photographic and filmic work on the colonial gaze and its legacy since the 1990s and some members of the African community in Austria. This project can be seen in the context of questions of identity and history as once addressed by the writer Salman Rushdie who noted that "the British do not know their history – because it happened abroad." It needed the postcolonial critics, many of them migrants to Britain, to give a picture of that history. But what about a country like Austria that had not been a colonial power like Britain, France, Portugal or Spain? The problem with these countries is that they still try to imagine their identity and their history as exclusively white.

In 2006, when Austria celebrated the 250th birthday of its greatest son, the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, a symbol of national cultural identity, the artist Lisl Ponger and the "Research Group Black Austrian History" started an exhibition project called "Hidden Histories" which aimed at proposing a counter-history to the official narrative of cultural identity. The historical reference point was the fact that Mozart, whose operas are full of exoticist and orientalist figures, had a prominent African comrade in his freemasons lodge in the late 18th century.

Called Angelo Soliman, this man was one of the early African migrants, sold as a slave to the Austrian high aristocracy at the age of seven, working as a servant and a travel companion in his youth, later becoming an educator of the prince and a well respected person in Viennese high society. What sounds like a story of recognition and emancipation took a tragic shift after Soliman's death, when his corpse was dissected like an animal and exhibited as an exotic specimen at the court's Natural History cabinet. The key point of the "Hidden Histories" exhibition was to look at Black Austrian history from a contemporary perspective of African migrants, drawing on the story of Soliman and his daughter Josephine who had been fighting against the exhibition of her father's remains.

I show you just two images from this exhibition. One that is titled "Angelo X" pictures a Black Power version of Angelo respectively Josephine in front of the Austrian parliament fighting against racial discrimination. The other image shows a young black woman in front of a racist graffiti dressed in a T-Shirt remembering a prominent African victim of police violence in Vienna. What I consider relevant in this co-operation of a group of African migrants with an Austrian artist is the complementary perspectives on the postcolonial conditions of a nation without a colonial history in the strict sense of the word. While the "Research Group Black Austrian History" is opposing the exclusion of Africans on a symbolic and political level, Lisl Ponger is critically working on the historic and cultural construction of Whiteness in a local context. The latter practice is not so much contributing to the understanding of the Other, but more to a better understanding of oneself with regard to the contradictory, but also complementary forces that form a backdrop to today's Europe's encounter with Africa, which is on the one hand merciless in terms of economic exploitation and racist migration policies, and on the other hand seriously interested in cultural co-operation and development.