Traces of Ecstasy
by Rotimi Fani-Kayode, 1988

It has been my destiny to end up as an artist with a sexual taste for other young men. As a result of this, a certain distance has necessarily developed between myself and my origins. The distance is even greater as a result of my having left Africa as a refugee over 20 years ago.

On three counts I am an outsider: in matters of sexuality; in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation; and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for.

Such a position gives me a feeling of having very little to lose. It produces a sense of personal freedom from the hegemony of convention. For one who has managed to hang on to his own creativity through the crises of adolescence and in spite of pressures to conform, it has a liberating effect. It opens up areas of creative enquiry which might otherwise have remained forbidden. At the same time, traces of the former values remain, making it possible to take new readings on to them from an unusual vantage point. The results are bound to be disorientating. In African traditional art, the mask does not represent a material reality; rather, the artist strives to approach a spiritual reality in it through images suggested by human and animal forms. I think photography can aspire to the same imaginative interpretations of life. My reality is not the same as that which is often presented to us in Western photographs. As an African working in a western medium, I try to bring out the spiritual dimension in my pictures so that concepts of reality become ambiguous and are opened to reinterpretation. This requires what Yoruba priests and artists call a 'technique of ecstasy'.

Both aesthetically and ethically, I seek to translate my rage and my desire into new images which will undermine conventional perceptions and which may reveal hidden worlds. Many of the images are seen as sexually explicit – or more precisely, homosexually explicit. I make my pictures homosexual on purpose. Black men from the Third World have not previously revealed either to their own peoples or to the West a certain shocking fact: they can desire each other. Some Western photographers have shown that they can desire Black males (albeit rather neurotically). But the exploitative mythologising of Black virility on behalf of the homosexual bourgeoisie is ultimately no different from the vulgar objectification of Africa which we know at one extreme from the work of Leni Riefenstahl and, at the other from the 'victim' images which appear constantly in the media. It is now time for us to reappropriate such images and to transform them ritualistically into images of our own creation. For me, this involves an imaginative investigation of Blackness, maleness and sexuality, rather than more straightforward reportage.

However, this is more easily said than done. Working in a Western context, the African artist inevitably encounters racism. And since I have concentrated much of my work on male eroticism, I have also had homophobic reactions to it, both from the white and black communities. Although this is kind of disappointing on a purely human level, perhaps it also produces a kind of essential conflict through which to struggle to new visions. It is a conflict, however, between unequal partners and is, in that sense, one in which I remain at a disadvantage. For this reason, I have been active in various groups, which are organised around issues of race and sexuality. For the individual, such joint activity can provide confidence and insight. For artists, it can transform and extend one's Westernised ideas – for instance, that art is a product of individual inspiration or that it must conform to certain aesthetic principles of taste, style and content. It can also have the very concrete effect of providing the means for otherwise isolated and powerless artists to show their work and to insist on being taken seriously.

An awareness of history has been of fundamental importance in the development of my creativity. The history of Africa and of the Black race has been constantly distorted. Even in Africa, my

education was given in English in Christian schools, as though the language and culture of my own people, the Yoruba, were inadequate or in some way unsuitable for the healthy development of young minds. In exploring Yoruba history and civilization, I have rediscovered and revalidated areas of my experience and understanding of the world. I see parallels now between my own work and that of the Osogbo artists in Yorubaland who themselves have resisted the cultural subversions of neo colonialism and who celebrate the rich, secret world of our ancestors.

It remains true, however, that the great Yoruba civilizations of the past, like so many other non-European cultures, are still consigned by the West to the museums of "primitive" art and culture. The Yoruba cosmology, comparable in its complexities and subtleties to Greek and Oriental philosophical myth, is treated as no more than a bizarre superstition which, as if by miracle, happened to inspire the creation of some of the most sensitive and delicate artefacts in the history of art.

Modern Yoruba art (amongst which I situate my own contributions) may now sometimes fetch high prices in the galleries of New York and Paris. It is prized for its exotic appeal. Similarly, the modern versions of Yoruba beliefs carried by slaves to the New World have become, in their carnival form, tourist attractions. In Brazil, Haiti and other part of the Caribbean, the earth reverberates with old Yoruba rhythms, which are now much appreciated by those jaded Western ears and are still sensitive enough to catch the spirit of the old rites. In other words, the Europeans, faced with the dogged survival of alien cultures, and as mercantile as ever they were in the days of the Trade, are now trying to sell our culture as a consumer product. I am inevitably caught up in this.

Another aspect of history – that of sexuality – has also affected me deeply. Official history has always denied the validity of erotic relationships and experiences between members of the same sex. As in the fields of politics and economics, the historians of social and sexual relations have been readily assisted in their fabrications by the Church. But in spite of all attempts by Church and state to suppress homosexuality, it is clear that enriching sexual relationships between members of the same sex have always existed. They are part of the human condition, even if the concept of sexual identity is more of a recent notion.

There is a grim chapter of European history, which was not drummed into me at school. I only discovered much later that the Nazis had developed the most extreme form of homophobia to have existed in modern times, and attempted to exterminate homosexuals in the concentration camps. It came not so much as a surprise but as yet another example of the long-standing European tradition of the violent suppression of otherness. It touches me just as closely as the knowledge that millions of my ancestors were killed or enslaved in order to ensure European political, economic and cultural hegemony of the world.

I see in the current attitudes of the British Government towards Black people, women, homosexuals – in short, anyone who represents otherness – a move back in the direction of the fascistic values, which for a brief period in the 60s and 70s ceased to dominate our lives. For this reason I feel it is essential to resist all attempts that discourage the expression of one's identity. In my case, my identity has been constructed from my own sense of otherness, whether cultural, racial or sexual. The three aspects are not separate within me. Photography is the tool by which I feel most confident in expressing myself. It is photography, therefore – Black, African, homosexual photography – which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and, indeed, my existence on my own terms.

It is no surprise to find that one's work is shunned or actively discouraged by the Establishment. The homosexual bourgeoisie has been more supportive – not because it is especially noted

for its championing of Black artists, but because Black ass sells almost as well as Black dick. As a result of homosexual interest, I have had various portfolios printed in the gay press and in February a book of nudes will be published by GMP. Also, there has been some attention given to my erotic work by the sort of straight galleries which receive funding from more progressive local authorities.

But in the main, both galleries and press have felt safer with my 'ethnic' work. Occasionally they will take on board some of the less-overtly threatening and outrageous pictures – in the classic liberal tradition. But Black is still only beautiful as long as it keeps within white frames of reference.

I have been more disconcerted by the response to my work from certain sections of the self-proclaimed avant-garde, however. At the recent MiSFiTS exhibition at Oval House (which happened to coincide with the unveiling of a plaque to commemorate the birth there of Lord Montgomery of Alamein), I was asked, along with the other artists, to remove my work in case it attracted unfavourable publicity for Oval House. We refused, naturally. Unfortunately, the press were too busy paying homage to Monty so the national reputation of Oval House was saved, and we were denied some free publicity. It is perhaps gratifying that the inadequacies of Oval House's Equal Opportunities Policy have since been recognised by many of its erstwhile supporters. But given the new Government ruling against local authority funding for any form of 'promotion' of homosexuality, I assume that, in any case, community organisations will no longer be allowed to show my work.

As for Africa itself, if I ever managed to get an exhibition in say Lagos, I suspect riots would break out. I would certainly be charged with being a purveyor of corrupt and decadent western values.

However, sometimes I think that if I took my work into the rural areas, where life is still vigorously in touch with itself and its roots, the reception might be more constructive. Perhaps they would recognise my smallpox Gods, my transsexual priests, my images of desirable Black men in a state of sexual frenzy, or the tranquility of communion with the spirit world. Perhaps they have far less fear of encountering the darkest of Africa's dark secrets by which some of us seek to gain access to the soul.

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