

A plea for an Angelo Soliman Visa for African Arti(vi)sts

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In October 2022, I participated in a conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Since such an event is made for exchanging with colleagues from different parts of the world and for networking, one is often asked two questions:

1. What is your field of expertise? 2. Where are you based?

“I teach and do research in Austria” was my answer to the second question, which caused interesting reactions, namely: “Australia, Waouh, that must have been a trip to Yaoundé!”; “Where in Australia, Melbourne, Sydney?” “So, these people also have African Studies in the farthest continent.” “Na war oh, African Studies i don reach Australia” [that is impressive, African Studies have made their way to Australia. This sentence was uttered in Pidgin English, a variation of English that was born in the context of slave trade when British merchants and missionaries came into contact with slave traders in the 17th and 18th centuries on the West African Coast (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana)].

“Austria, a little country in the heart of Europe. I teach at the University of Vienna,” I corrected. Only two senior researchers had been to Austria before. The obvious follow-up question from those who had no idea where Austria was: “when will you invite me to Austria?” This leads to the main point of this opinion paper: how can Austria open its door to arti(vi)sts, researchers, creative minds in general from the African continent?

My answer is twofold: 1. By making Austria interesting and visible in African countries, and 2. By launching an Angelo Soliman House in Austria, ideally in Vienna.

Regarding the first point, it is striking that Austria, a cultural centre in Europe, is not very well-known in many African countries. How many embassies and cultural centres does Austria have in Africa? For the sake of comparison, one can look at British Councils, Alliance Française, and particularly German cultural centres in African countries. German cultural centres bear the name of Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, which is culturally and artistically significant. Many young, creative minds in Africa are curious and hungry for knowledge and exchange. They belong to the mobile generation and have an interest in visiting other parts of the world to widen their spectrum, to be inspired by the world and African memories that have unduly been kept abroad (Austria is no exception!) and return to the places where their ART(IVISM) matters most. Contrary to widespread opinion, they are not very keen on staying in Europe.

Therefore, I think that Austria would gain from designing a STRONG CULTURAL DIPLOMACY STRATEGY which should be visible in regional hubs like Nairobi (East Africa, English, and Swahili-speaking); Ethiopia (Eastern Africa, where the headquarters of the African Union are located); Johannesburg (Southern Africa); Mozambique (Portuguese-speaking and close to the Comoros Archipelago and Madagascar); Accra and Lagos (English-speaking, West Africa); Dakar (French-speaking, West Africa); Cameroon (French, English-speaking with German in secondary schools, Central Africa); Cairo (Arabic-speaking North Africa). These hubs could be named after Angelo Soliman, which brings me to my second point.

In the 18th century, Angelo Soliman, who was born in Nigeria, was taken to Austria as a slave, an exotic present to a general. Having a cultural centre carrying his name in Austria would help to rehabilitate his memory and that of millions of Africans who were enslaved, objectified, and whose bodies were desacralised after their deaths . Obviously, an Angelo Soliman House would need a life. Arti(vi)sts and writers in residence,

workshops, performances, concerts, African film/theatre/documentary weeks, youth intercultural education programmes, empowering seminars, arts award ceremonies, Africa meets Europe weeks, etc., could take place in this house that would, without any idea of essentialisation, take the form of a Maison de l'Afrique à Vienne, in cooperation with African embassies in Austria and the Department of African Studies of the University of Vienna.

This can only happen if mobility is facilitated between African hubs and Austria, which requires the introduction of an Angelo Soliman Visa for ARTI(VI)STS who, following the decolonial and regional empowering practice, should circulate first in a South-South and 'green mobility' framework at Angelo Soliman Centres in Africa (co-sponsored by Austria), then in a South-North mobility scheme to Austria in the medium term.

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