



Watch Africa Cymru Film Festival

## *Smooth Seas do not make Skilful Sailors;*

a response to Wales Arts International's focus group work on re-setting our international work by **Watch Africa Cymru**.

February 2021

 wales arts international  
celfyddydau rhyngwladol cymru

 Cymru  
Wales



[Watch Africa Cymru](#) (WAC) is Wales' only African film festival and cultural consultancy. We provide a platform for African, African Diaspora as well as Welsh and international art and culture. We were asked to respond and contribute to the conversation held by WAI. We will do so in our own decolonised way, informed by notes from the conversations, feedback received afterwards, information and resources shared with us by WAI and the wisdom of our ancestors.



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Salaam mabibi na mabwana<sup>1</sup>, thank you to all those who shared their thoughts. The words we share with you today are informed by our lived experience. As East Africans in Wales we are familiar with otherness. In the [video shared with us by WAI](#) Michael Sheen speaks of his experience of otherness, triggered by his Welsh accent;

*“It’s amazing the effect that not being understood in a London’s MacDonalds can have on a person’s life.”*

We invite you to reflect, for a moment, that this experience is not exclusive. People from minoritised communities in Wales have the same experiences in a MacDonald in Bangor or Swansea. It might be our accents, our ethnicity or our access needs that set us apart and ‘other’ us. We must always ask who is the other, and why. We speak of minoritised communities rather than of minorities because minorities are made. The social model of disability recognises that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. The same is true for communities who are minoritised for their race, gender, orientation and a myriad of other reasons; minorities are man-made through systemic, societal and cultural injustices. Minoritised communities do not carry inherent challenges and are not waiting to be ‘given’ a spot at the table or a voice. Minoritised communities are not powerless, the reality is that we all have the right to have power, but systemic oppression denies power to some individuals. It’s important to remember this – that we all have the right to hold power.

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<sup>1</sup> Peaceful greetings to you ladies and gentlemen, Swahili

## 1. Communities and bridges:

What is perceived as 'a community' breaks apart into smaller and more complex identities the closer you look; *'Just because you heard a roar, do not think you have spoken to the pride.'* Welsh speakers, disabled people, people of colour are not monolithic. Wales is multicultural, multilingual made up of many different communities that are made up of individuals. To showcase or represent Wales is a difficult thing, and needs to be thought about with more nuance. Who develops a 'Cymru Wales Brand'<sup>2</sup> and what actually is 'unmistakeably Wales'? Wales herself has many faces, who chooses which should be shown? There's a Welsh proverb that says *'Nerth gwlad, ei gwybodaeth'*<sup>3</sup> and so perhaps it is not a uniform 'face of Wales' we should seek to show to the world, but her wealth of knowledge, talent and diverse experiences.

When we talk about building bridges between Wales and the world, we must consider who these bridges are between. There are already bridges that connect Wales to the world; family connections of the Diaspora, heritage and cultural links, and communities that share experiences which bond them beyond borders, such as people living with disabilities across the world. Identifying these relationships and enabling them will help to grow connections that are longer lasting and more sustainable since relationships,



<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3 of the [Welsh International Action Plan](#)

<sup>3</sup> The strength of a nation is its knowledge

shared experiences and shared cultures already exist. The Welsh Government's Diaspora Engagement Plan<sup>4</sup> recognises the value of existing links, but fails to recognise the value of the international Diaspora living in Wales. How colonial is the assumption that there is value in the diaspora of Welsh people overseas, but we cannot recognise the cultural capital, contributions and potential of the international Diaspora within Wales? Truly, *those who look only at the top of trees will never discover the beauty of our roots.*

And our culture of engagement must also be looked at. 'Unconscious bias' is a term we've all heard a lot lately. It doesn't just exist in the way we treat minoritised communities here, but also in the way we engage with people abroad and with how we 'other' them and their culture, consciously and unconsciously. We need to be aware of the frameworks and terminology we use in order to avoid any false hierarchies, and of the myriad of structural and cultural ways we expect people to 'fit in'. *Do not expect to be offered a chair when you are visiting a place where the chief sits on the floor.* The Western curriculum of art history and contemporary art is not the yard stick that all culture and creativity should be measured against. To be white, able-bodied and cisgender is not 'normal' any more than it is normal to get around in a wheelchair, or to love someone of your own gender, to be Black, or all of the above. What is not 'normal' is that not everyone has the same access to resources and opportunities, that so few of us are seen to be representative of Wales. We need to acknowledge that diverse communities have different needs and lived experiences, only then can we explore areas of intersection that need to be actioned.

We have to rethink not just how the arts are assessed, but also how we assess artists. Who gets to 'represent Wales on the international stage'? And is International Art something that creatives have to progress to, or can it be open to younger creatives, who can profit so much from opportunities to extend their horizons? Can we recognise the value of enabling minoritised communities in Wales to reconnect and explore their heritage, as much as have traditionally seen the value of white artists exploring cultures that are new to them? And what does the historical involvement of Wales in colonialization, both as colonised and as part of a colonising empire, mean for our international involvement today?

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<sup>4</sup> [The Welsh Government's Diaspora Engagement Plan](#)

### Steps arising from conversations:

- Fund activities that grow lasting relationships. Ask; what will outcomes be 1 year down the line, 10 years from now? Are we building lasting relationships or diving in and out in an extractive manner?
- Avoid colonial practice and false hierarchies
- Recognise and enable bridges that already exist. In applications ask the questions; 'What connects you to this place?'
- Do not seek to 'represent Wales' seek to connect her to the world, to learn and to share
- Ask how projects are mutually beneficial and equal
- Real bridges are not built as one-way systems; people and movement must flow in both directions
- Enable connections that fall outside the traditional canon of high art, recognise the value of traditional practice, but also of new cultures and new media
- Enable young and emerging voices and creatives who may not have a strong traditional track record in Wales of all ages
- Recognise and value existing intercultural competence and insights among diaspora and minoritised communities<sup>5</sup>
- Consider how communities in Wales (and in the destination country) can be involved in decision making and evaluation processes
- Ensure a joint approach to internationalism across Wales by joining and working with other institutions and government departments working internationally e.g. Wales and Africa, British Council. This will allow collaboration and exploration of jointed approaches e.g. arts and health internationally, arts, climate change and environmentalism etc etc.
- Develop separate but intersected conversations with diverse communities in regards to arts, culture and internationalism.

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<sup>5</sup> Including refugees and asylum seekers



Wales has a long history of internationalism, yes as part of the British empire and its colonial enterprise, but also as the home of diverse communities, and as an ally for suppressed cultures, communities and countries across the world. Historical links can and will play a part in how we engage in the world today, *the tree remembers what the axe forgets* and so we must be accepting and transparent of Wales' global role in the past.



## 2. The Local, Languages and Intersectionality:

Do you have to speak Welsh to represent Wales? Intersectional Welsh speakers exist, but the majority of Welsh speaking communities are white. Schools are doing their part to spread Welsh more widely among the younger generation, but we cannot rely on this alone. The Welsh experience of linguistic and cultural suppression resonates with the experience of minoritised communities. But does the experience of minoritised communities in Wales resonate with Welsh speakers? Can you understand the loss of a mother whose children refuse to speak Lingala for the experience of being mocked, losing the ability to speak in the language of her ancestors? This too is happening in Wales, does that make you feel something?

All languages in colonised countries have been subjected to cultural erasure, and the forced superiority of English<sup>6</sup>. And yet language can also cause barriers, can be used to create new hierarchies and power structures. What can we learn from the Welsh experience of colonialization and suppression in order to not suppress others? And what can be learned from other countries that have experience of colonialization in order to move towards a multiplicity of language? In Nigeria, Pidgin exists alongside broken English, formal English, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and a myriad of other languages. Are we afraid to embrace a similar multilingualism in Wales? There is a strength and a power in being a foreigner and when we learn your tongue, and use it in ways that aren't perfect, a new poetry of language can emerge<sup>7</sup>. Learning Welsh can give us a gift of identity, of belonging and belonging together<sup>8</sup>. Open up your culture and language, but don't forget to take an interest in our languages, cultures, ways of feeling and experiencing in turn.

Black Lives Matter aligns itself with minoritised communities across the world. At the same time, it asks us all to assess our own relative positions of privilege and power. It is important that Welsh language and culture are discussed within the context of intersectionality and within the context of whiteness.

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<sup>6</sup> Or French, Spanish, Dutch and other colonial tongues

<sup>7</sup> Such as the international multi-linguistic poems by Mike Jenkins, Eric Ngalle Charles and Ifor ap Glyn;  
[The 3 Molas builds a Bendigeidfran-sized bridge between Wales and Cameroon](#)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/06/welsh-woman-of-colour-census-identity-whiteness>



### Steps arising from conversations:

- More investment into Welsh language learning among diverse communities, embrace the journey towards learning, and the partial knowledge on the way; do not just invest in those who are already 'part of the club'
- Co-productively work with minoritised communities in exploring ways to increase engagement with Welsh language. This will cover delivery as well as promotion of Welsh language in the communities.
- Embrace different languages that exist in Wales, explore common experiences
- Embrace critical and intersectional voices and discussions; history does not exempt the present from critique
- Develop policies that embrace the growing multiculturalism and multilingualism of Wales
- Embrace the language skills of minoritised communities in Wales as international bridges that are already in place
- Use the same tools that support and promote the Welsh language to promote other languages, we have the tools to undo colonial hierarchies of language not only for Welsh but for other languages and the duty to share them locally and globally
- Fight false hierarchies and the rhetoric of competition between communities
- Find new words for new topics; what is the Welsh word for Intersectionality? For White Privilege? For Cisgender? Languages need to grow and move as the world changes
- Embrace multiple, even contradictory identities, nothing is lost in this process



At WAC we are not Welsh speakers, and there is an African saying that goes *'Don't set out on a journey using someone else's donkey.'* Gymraeg is not our donkey, and so we suggest that this journey is perhaps one that must be driven forward by the Welsh speaking community<sup>9</sup>. Our suggestion to WAI is that policies for encouraging Welsh language work which engages with intersectionality and multilingualism and encourages diverse language learners are developed and that funding policies look into valuing diverse languages and lived experiences alongside the Welsh language. Mabibi na mabwana it is not our intention to question the importance of the Welsh language, but to work towards an ecosystem of languages. A language is made up of more than words, more needs to be done to build a culture of trust, openness and mutual respect.

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<sup>9</sup> The work of Y Stamp and Where I'm Coming From serves as a positive example here <https://www.ystamp.cymru/post/fideo-digwyddiad-hunan-iaith>

### 3. From 'Welsh values' towards human values

What values inform international engagement? How do we consider the environment and future generations in this work? Art continues to have to 'proof its worth' in the current political climate. WAI are publicly funded and so there is a level of state interference and expectation. *You don't find honey without bees*. At the same time, Wales has a global responsibility, which it recognises<sup>10</sup> so the opportunity exists to embrace the political as part of the cultural and to take 'account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global well-being' when considering international art engagement. Welsh Government uses the term 'cymell tawel' to explain its vision of soft power; to quietly persuade, motivate, influence and attract. The 'investment' of the arts can have impacts which go beyond the immediate. On the ground, art provides opportunities for joy, wellbeing, livelihoods. International art engagement which is diverse, honest and attractive will 'amplify Wales as a place to invest, study and visit'<sup>11</sup>. If human values are applied globally and locally what we do and are will speak for itself.

Wales is not facing the challenges of climate change, inequality or the current pandemic alone. We exist and must understand ourselves and act as part of a global humanity. But if we are not already equal here in Wales, how can we treat others outside Wales as equal, let alone see unborn 'future generations' as having rights? And so the global does bring us back to the local; we must do the work at home as on the international stage, the two are not separate.

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<sup>10</sup> Through the [Future Generations Act](#)

<sup>11</sup> Conclusion, [Wales International Relations Action Plan](#)



## Steps arising from conversations:

- Cultural democracy should influence decision making on all levels<sup>12</sup>
- Develop a clear understanding of Welsh international 'cultural diplomacy' and how it fits in with Welsh Government's '*cymell tawell*' agenda.
- Transparency must exist between the organisation and the individual
- Art and art funding needs to be accessible for disabled communities<sup>13</sup>
- Organisations themselves must do more to become representative, this includes WAI<sup>14</sup>
- Communities need space and opportunities to connect on an artistic level over creative processes, not just over issues and problems
- More opportunities for co-creation and collaboration - taking risks to challenge the status quo
- Enable artists, opportunities and knowledge to travel in both directions
- Funding options that enable all artists to engage internationally, including those who do not have regular income, or who might have had to take on day jobs, who might have disabilities or be single parents
- Support artists to understand the carbon footprints of projects, include this in applications and consideration of all international work you fund
- Enable the next generation of leaders to grow
- Read the Future Generations Act, put it into practice<sup>15</sup>
- Art can contribute to the livelihoods, health and wellbeing of communities in Wales and in the world; let us apply the same aims here as abroad
- Move from rehashing conversations that have already happened to creating change

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<sup>12</sup> This is supported by the [Future Generations Act action #76](#)

<sup>13</sup> [The Seven Inclusive Principles for Arts & Cultural Organisations](#) were mentioned here

<sup>14</sup> Where new job roles cannot be created immediately consider opportunities to second staff within and between organisations [Future Generations Act action #10](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Future Generations Act action Simple changes](#)

Back home we say that you have to *ask for a camel when you expect to get a goat* and so we ask for a decolonised international art practice, transparent and culturally democratic decision making processes, fair and equal opportunities and straightforward, accessible funding processes, representation of minoritised communities at all levels of the organisation, multilingualism, multiculturalism, fair and equal opportunities for creatives in Wales and in the world, cohesion in and among communities and a recognition and respect for our similarities and differences without false hierarchies. Now.

But we also understand that *those who want rain must also accept the mud*, so how do we create space for necessary conversations, while also moving towards overdue change?



## 4. If a tree does not know how to dance, the wind will teach it

This text was written as a thought piece and creative response to conversations had with WAI, a way of reflecting that moves away from the structures and restraints of governance, of models of thinking and communicating that themselves follow rules which are in place to empower some while excluding others. And so we propose that WAI could nurture more creative explorations, embracing the language of artists, from poetry to dance, to explore what Welsh International Arts could look like. Two demands we heard very clearly at the conversation were:

*We need more opportunities to reflect and talk.*

And so we propose more conversations, bringing together local and global voices, to speak in more detail about things that matter. But see this as work which is being done, recognise the emotional labour of it, and the impact it has on communities. Be aware of what it is you ask, when you invite us to talk. Do not dilute diverse issues by throwing everything into one space. Enable more focused conversations led by voices of lived experience. Enable safe spaces where disabled voices are in the majority, or where voices of colour dominate the room. While international travel is disrupted, let us explore the global local, the multitude of cultural bubbles and ecosystems that exist within Wales. Why are we so interested in a Welsh presence abroad, but not in the international within Wales?





And we propose to move from talking to making; offering local and global art commissions as part of these conversations; using dance/poetry/song and more to reflect and respond to the challenges we discuss. Thinking not *about* but *through* the arts and creating a body of work in the process, perhaps finding a new vision of Wales in this work. This may seem fanciful, but the unity and conversations between communities in Wales is necessary if we are to hold a meaningful space internationally. In art, we have the tools to share experiences on a deeper level, to foster empathy towards each other's causes and concerns.

Thank you for reading our thoughts, as we hope to read, hear, see and dance yours in the near future. For things that we missed or did not get across the right way we want to apologise. *The hands that make mistakes belong to those who work* and so we hope you have found food for thought in these pages.

Asanteni mabibi na mabwana.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>16</sup>With thanks.

 wales arts international  
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[www.wai.org.uk](http://www.wai.org.uk)



 Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru  
Arts Council of Wales

