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Dakar's Museum of Black Civilisations: Towards a New Imaginary of a Post-ethnographic Museum

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ABSTRACT

How are postcolonial identities curated in non-Western art institutions? How do the latter engage with the question of the restitution of colonial looted artefacts during this turning point where Western museums seem increasingly willing to address claims of repatriation? Focusing on the unfolding debates on restitution and heritage around the new Museum of Black Civilisations (MCN) in Senegal, the article investigates how curatorial approaches aimed at challenging Eurocentrism address questions of identity, authenticity and discourses on the Other. It finds that, contrary to decolonial museum exhibitions in the West, the MCN avoids engaging in claims of restitution as this would reproduce Europe's key role in defining "authentic" and "traditional" African art. At the same time, this paper shows that the underlying logic aimed to subvert exoticising representations and reconfigure Self-Other relations can uphold an internal dichotomy of cultures that risks lapsing into the same essentialism that is criticised. This is furthermore complicated by the tension between an imaginary of pan-African Black Civilisations and the criticism directed towards the management of artefacts in postcolonial states where nation-building is an ongoing process.

In teasing out the challenges of formulating a reconfigured postcolonial future without drawing on culturalist discourses and reinforcing a dichotomy between modernity and tradition, this article adds a radically different perspective to the literature on heritage and museums in relation to colonialism and is also of relevance to those looking at curatorial practices, identity politics and international relations.

KEYWORDS

Post-ethnography, decolonising museums, intangible heritage, curatorial practices, identity politics.



Introduction

How are decolonial exhibitions and postcolonial identities articulated and staged in museums located in non-Western countries? How do the latter approach the restitution of colonial looted artefacts during a turning point where Western museums seem increasingly willing to address previous claims of repatriation?¹ Indeed, adding to Nederveen Pieterse's "epochal shifts" (1997: 124), 2017 is already being remembered as the year that changed postcolonial relations

in the museum landscape. As the French president Emmanuel Macron claimed in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in November 2017:

African heritage can no longer be only held in private collections and European museums. It must be showcased in Paris, but also in Dakar, Lagos, Cotonou ... This will be one of my priorities. In the next five years, I want all the conditions to be met for a return of African heritage to Africa.²

It is in that context that the new Museum of Black Civilisations (*Musée des Civilisations Noires*, also MCN) in Dakar—

1) This article adopts Kowalski's definition of return and restitution which refers to "situations where cultural property lost during colonial domination is recovered" (2005: 96).

2) Emmanuel Macron qtd in Philippe Dagen, "Arts: Restituer son patrimoine à l'Afrique," *Le Monde Afrique*, 7 December 2017 [available online at: http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2017/12/07/restitution-du-patrimoine-africain-un-sujet-qui-fache_5225921_3246.html; accessed 14 December 2017].

3) "Le musée des civilisations noires ouvert le 6 décembre prochain," *Agence de Presse Sénégalaise*, 26 mars 2018 [available online at: <http://www.aps.sn/actualites/culture/article/abdoulatif-coulibaly-annonce-l-ouverture-du-musee-des-civilisations-noires-au-public-le-6-decembre-prochain>; accessed 28 March 2018].

4) "Patrimoine africain : la restitution des œuvres d'art est-elle un vœu pieu ?," *Deutsche Welle*, 9 March 2018 [available online at: <http://www.dw.com/fr/patrimoine-africain-la-restitution-des-oeuvres-d-art-est-elle-un-voeu-pieu/av-42876640>; accessed 10 May 2018].

5) Bénjamin Roger, "Sénégal: le Musée des civilisations noires de Dakar, un écrin en quête de contenu," *Jeune Afrique*, 19 December 2016 [available online at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/379401/culture/senegal-musee-civilisations-noires-de-dakar-ecrin-quete-de-contenu/>; accessed 2 December 2017].

6) For a general overview of the history of colonial looting, see Merryman (2006), Jasanoff (2005), Swenson and Mandler (2013), and for the link between colonialism and material culture, see Thomas (1991), Barringer and Flynn (1998), Gosden and Knowles (2001), and Shelton (2001).

7) On the relation between the museum and the architecture of the building, see Krauss (1996).

built with the purpose of displaying the cultural contribution of Black Civilisations to the universal heritage of humanity—has to grapple with this article's opening questions. While it will officially open its doors in December 2018, the building, constructed and funded as part of China's foreign aid programme, has been empty for a long time due to the absence of a permanent collection.³ Indeed, most African art and artefacts are not located on the continent, but in museums of former colonial powers. Yet, although the director of the new Museum welcomed President Macron's statement,⁴ the restitution of looted objects is not the main focus of the MCN. Instead, its director argues for a "post-ethnographic" approach which seeks to decentre the importance of material objects and re-evaluate intangible African heritage. As the Minister of Culture and the Museum's director both declared, the MCN will not be an anthropological, ethnographic or "chromatic" museum relating to perceptions of ethnicity and race, and its exhibitions will not frame Africa as stuck in the past.⁵

While much has been written on postcolonialism in relation to orientalising aesthetics (for example, Hackforth-Jones and Roberts 2005) and to discussions on the restitution of looted objects (Okwunodu Ogbechie 2010),⁶ there is little literature focusing on how these critical discourses are integrated in the curatorial practices of non-Western institutions. How do the MCN's theoretical preoccupations play out in its exhibitions? And how, in turn, does the Museum position itself within the larger political, historical and contemporary context?

Based on interviews and fieldwork conducted in 2017, this paper analyses the Museum's aim to formulate a reconfigured postcolonial future without reinscribing it in a dichotomous explanation that opposes modernity and tradition, as well as culturalist discourses. The first section of the paper examines the Museum's curatorial project and the director's rethinking of a

postcolonial world order via the notion of post-ethnography in relation to the building currently being empty. The article finds that the aim of the MCN is not only to counter ahistorical depictions of Africa but also to "provincialise" the colonial narrative (Chakrabarty 2008).

The second section analyses how the post-ethnographic concept informs the director's position on the restitution of looted objects, and how this concept is mapped onto the architecture of the Museum.⁷ By focusing on the preservation of intangible and non-colonial heritage, the director attempts to overcome modernist separations of spheres and mind-body dualities, and hence goes beyond the kind of heritage preservation that focuses predominantly on the colonial to the detriment of, for example, oral history. This also means that, contrary to decolonial museum exhibitions in the West, the Senegalese actors involved in the conception of the MCN avoid engaging in claims of restitution, as the emphasis on objects looted during the colonial period reproduces Europe's key role in defining what "authentic" and "traditional" African art is. Nonetheless, my analysis reveals that, despite the aim to subvert exoticising representations and reconfigure Self-Other relations away from assimilating tendencies—practices that both old and new exhibitions and museums share (see also Pieterse 1997)—the logic underlying the spatial and architectural divides within the building can perpetuate cultural dichotomies and hierarchies.

The last section of the article addresses the critique that in provincialising the colonial narrative there is a risk of hindering research into the histories of the objects collected throughout the former territories of French West Africa now held in storage by other museums in Dakar. Indeed, the Senegalese museum administrators do not engage with the historical circulation of objects throughout the former colonial federation, which some of my interlocutors interpret as a deliberate act. For them, this

would risk opening a discussion on the intra-African restitution of looted objects and reveal the tension between the MCN's aim to define a post-ethnographic imaginary of pan-African Black Civilisations and the management of objects in West African postcolonial states where nation-building is still an ongoing process. By examining how postcolonial preoccupations and identity making specifically unfold in this new art institution, the article also speaks to those interested in curatorial practices and studies in that it reveals the discursive power of art exhibitions within larger historical and contemporary political contexts (Cahan 2016; Greenberg *et al.* 1996; Krauss 1996; Sylvester 2009; Wallace 2015).



Time: “We are [living] in the time of the world”

That the ethnographic museum is in a crisis is not news. In 1997, Pieterse already claimed that ethnographic museums had to respond to an increasingly globalised world and its attendant tendencies of postcoloniality and multiculturalism. In his words, “[e]thnographic museums can no longer afford to be colonial museums, display windows of empire, indirect testimonies of national grandeur ... Postcoloniality unsettles ethnographic museums as it does ethnography and anthropology itself” (1997: 124).

The criticisms concern not only ethnographic but also art museums, which increasingly present ethnographic objects as purely aesthetic products (Clifford 1991: 225) or, if staging exhibitions on Black art, end up defining and analysing artists only in terms of race and pigmentation (Cahan 2016), amounting to what artist Frank Bowling called “a form of cultural myopia, malignant in its approach to Black art; for Black art, like any art, is art” (1969-1970: 20). At the same time, Bowling insisted

that the claims made by young black artists arguing that they were not “painting black” were in a sense an “escape from reality” (1969: 16). According to him, the very existence of Black art on a universal level had to be grounded “within the framework of the historical context” and the “black experience” (1969: 18).⁸

While several museums in the West and Global North have tried to attend to these tensions and tackle the issues that Pieterse defined as the two main tendencies of national and modern museums in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, namely either the exoticising or the assimilating of representations of the “Other” (1997:124-125), many attempts have been considered a failure as illustrated by recent analyses of Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, the museum of African, Asian and Oceanic cultures in Paris (Dias 2008; de l’Estoile 2008). Yet, lacking from these analyses are attempts at self-representation in museums located on the “Other” side of the hemispheres, which would turn the Western gaze upside down. In what follows, I aim to fill this gap by exploring what the endeavour of the new Museum of Black Civilisations, mainly through the figure of the director, but also through other interventions, can tell us about the tensions in defining and (self-) representing Black art and civilisations.

The director of the new Museum, also professor at the Cheikh Anta Diop University, is considered to be one of the main figures in charge of the Museum and of shaping its vision. A trained historian-archaeologist, Hamady Bocoum completed his secondary studies in Senegal and his higher education in Paris where he specialised in archaeology. Familiar with postcolonial theories, the director has extensively engaged with the politics of memory-making, as his articles on heritage-making evidence (see Bocoum and Toulhier 2013). Professionally, he has held numerous positions in international and Senegalese cultural institutions. He was director of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Culture, member of the UNESCO World

8) The question of Black art was also one of the guiding threads of the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* at the Tate Modern [available online at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/soul-nation-art-age-black-power>; accessed 28 March 2018].



Photo 1: University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar. Photo credit: Charline Kopf.

9) Bocoum, Hamady, interview with author, Dakar, 14 September 2017.

10) *Ibid.*

11) Report of the “International Conference of Prefiguration” of the Museum of Black Civilisations. The director of the MCN, Hamady Bocoum, sent me the report after our first meeting. I will hitherto refer to it as: Bocoum and Ndiaye (2016). All translations are my own.

12) Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy in “Le discours de Dakar de Nicolas Sarkozy,” *Le Monde*, 26 July 2007 [available online at: http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/11/09/le-discours-de-dakar_976786_3212.html; accessed 2 October 2017].

13) Bocoum, Hamady, interview with author, Dakar, 14 September 2017.

Heritage Committee, and former director of the *Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire* (IFAN).

In our first interview, knowing the topic beforehand, the director of the MCN opened with the following statement: “We are [living] in the time of the world [*On est dans le temps du monde*].”⁹ Influenced by the French Annales school of historical writing during his years in Paris, he drew on Braudelian language and its focus on long-term historical structures to explain his conception of the Museum and Black Civilisations. It would be, in his words, a “dynamic museum which presents Black Civilisations in the time of the world, in the *longue durée*.”¹⁰ According to the official report introducing the MCN, the uniqueness of the Museum lies in its function as a “space of commemoration that will forever mark the ... affirmation and recognition of the contribution of Black Civilisations to the universal heritage of humanity.”¹¹ While, the MCN’s programme includes topics such as decolonisation struggles, as well as questions relating to diaspora and hybridity, the Museum will focus mainly on the contributions of Black Civilisations to archaeology, science, popular arts, and traditions. The aim is to historicise “the black man” instead of essentialising him.

Indeed, the Museum’s director refused any ahistorical conceptions of Africa, such as articulated by former President Nicolas Sarkozy in his 2007 speech in Dakar, deemed offensive by many people (Ba Konaré 2009). Sarkozy claimed that “the tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not sufficiently become part of history...” arguing that in Africa, there was “place for neither human adventure nor the idea of progress.”¹²

Therefore, the expression “to be [living] in the time of the world,” which the director repeatedly used, emphasises the present and the coequality of Black Civilisations with “Western” forms of civilisation and modernity. In the curatorial discourse which he intends to create, the questions of temporality and modernity take centre stage. Simultaneously, the link to an ancient past is highlighted: By referring to Cheikh Anta Diop, the man after which the university was named and author of *Negro Nations and Culture* (1955), the director pointed to the fact that all humans are “African and black in a certain way.”¹³ Following his line of thought, part of the future exhibition would revolve around the fact that the oldest form of civilisation originated in Africa. Historicising and contextualising Black Civilisations in the MCN becomes essential to counter Sarkozy’s claim that “the African man has not fully become part of history”: In such a narrative of “human-African evolution and migration throughout the globe” where Africa is the birthplace of humanity, the African continent also becomes the precondition of every civilisation (Apter 2005: 81–82).

Despite the director’s emphasis that the Museum was neither an anthropological nor an ethnographic museum, hence avoiding an “identitarian closure” [*fermeture identitaire*] by arguing in favour of the diversity of cultures, the title sparked controversy. Other gallery curators in Dakar deemed the title to be an “anachronism; politically and ideologically loaded.”¹⁴ Who belongs to the Black Civilisations, and who is excluded? Explaining the rationale behind the choice of

name for the Museum, the director claimed that one had to trace it back to its founding moment in history, namely the First Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) in 1966 which was organised against the backdrop of African decolonisation.¹⁵ The MCN's link to the FESMAN and to its founder Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president, was also made clear at the preparatory conference held prior to the opening of the Museum, from 28 to 31 July 2016, in Dakar. There, the Senegalese historian Ibrahima Thioub and politician Iba Der Thiam declared that the MCN provided the "missing note to the unfinished symphony of the First Festival of Negro Arts," describing it as the culmination of all anti-imperial and anti-colonial movements such as *Négritude* (Bocoum and Ndiaye 2016: 12-20). Indeed, similarly to the MCN's aim, the purpose of the FESMAN, with participants from around forty countries from Africa, Europe and from the Atlantic diaspora (Murphy 2016), was to highlight the contribution of African art to universal art transforming Black art "into a political project and ontological affirmation" (Galitzine-Loumpet 2011: 620). Rather than a narrowly defining name, "Black Civilisations" has then to be understood as part of the larger political project of making African voices and history heard.

Having started with the opening of the MCN and Senegal's history of cultural policies, my conversation with the director quickly turned highly theoretical, probing the limits of postcolonial theory with references to Chakravorty Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern (1988) and "post-ethnographic" museum approaches. As Bocoum put it, we were both sitting under "the palaver tree"—in Senegal, usually a baobab—where people come to discuss in a constructive and open manner.¹⁶ At the same time, the image of a palaver tree also exemplifies the director's understanding of post-ethnography. According to his account, the term post-ethnography, which is still "under construction," is based on

the understanding of ethnography as the one-sided study of the "Other." In a post-ethnographic turn, by contrast, the "Other"—the "subaltern," often described as a "Third World" subject, who has been traditionally studied by anthropologists—joins the debate, sometimes uninvited, and questions the "Self." While anthropologist Benoît de l'Estoile described the shift from the colonial to the postcolonial in ethnographic museums as a shift from being a museum of the "Others" to becoming a museum of the relationship between "Us" and the "Others" (2007), Bocoum goes even further. Spivak's subaltern, who has "no history and cannot speak" (1988: 287), becomes here the "Other" who lays claim to his right to speak. It is from the confrontation between the Self and the Other, Bocoum claims, that a third form of knowledge production arises, which can be called "post-ethnographic." Parallel to his theoretical explanation, my own encounter with the director works as an illustration of the concept that he laid out for me. I am not just a student but also a representative of the old "Self," an anthropologist studying the "Other," i.e. him and his Museum who become active participants in the process.

A specific example of a post-ethnographic reflection is encapsulated in Bocoum's questioning of the categorisation of "authentic" pieces of African art, whether contemporary or colonial: Who decides what counts as "traditional" African art? In challenging Western categories of meaning and assumptions about objective relations with forms of artistic and cultural production, the director deliberately used the concepts of art and artefacts, culture and civilisations interchangeably. As he claimed, the MCN would not limit itself to an understanding of "authentic" Black art as referring only to what had been "collected" during the colonial period and could now be found in European collections.¹⁷ The vision of the Museum contests representations of the "African subject" frozen in time, focusing instead on the perpetual mutations

► 14) Anonymous gallerist, interview with the author, Dakar, 8 September 2017.

15) Bocoum, Hamady, interview with author, Dakar, 14 September 2017.

16) *Ibid.*

17) *Ibid.*



and historical changes of the “dynamic” world in which the human is situated. In his view, the term post-ethnographic then also implied a “post-presentist” notion, refusing to interpret the aesthetic categorisation of art from the perspective of the present. For the director, the focus on the objects collected during the colonial time would reiterate the centrality of Europe’s role in African history, thus reproducing the Senegalese subject’s “subaltern attitude.” Instead, his curatorial vision aims to challenge prevalent forms of knowledge production resulting from the logics that govern “Western” categorisations of art which, in Susan E. Cahán’s words, have been defined as “the creation of white European and European American artists,” thus also providing a way to counter what she calls “the exclusion of black subjectivity from modernity” (2016: 171).

In claiming an equal place in the conversation, Bocoum hence refuses to adopt the position of a subaltern subject (Spivak 1988) and argues for a historical dynamism that would replace an ahistorical depiction. Particularly useful to understanding the different temporal and historical notions, as well as the tension between modernity and postcolonialism which arise from it, is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call to provincialise Europe (2000). In looking at non-Western forms of being and multiple political modernities, Chakrabarty attempts to dislodge the position of Europe “as a silent referent in historical knowledge” (2000: 28). Indeed, like Bocoum, he points to the ties that “bind together historicism as a mode of thought and the formation of political modernity” in the West, where “not yet civilised” Africans have been relegated to “an imaginary waiting room of history” (2000: 7-8). This helps us locate Bocoum’s vision of a post-ethnographic Museum in imaginaries of alternative futures which seek to differentiate themselves from Western modes of being through “historical difference” (Dzenovksa and De Genova 2018). The project behind the MCN is then to inscribe a historicist understanding of

African art and culture within the larger ideological and philosophical conditions of modernity—in the director’s words, “the time of the world”—while simultaneously proceeding to a radical decentring of the ways in which African history has been narrated by the West, and thereby inaugurating the Museum’s “own,” arguably non-Western, time. In that sense, the post-ethnographic aim of dethroning Europe as a central referent in the history of Black Civilisations is similar to decolonial approaches which address Eurocentric othering and colonial epistemic injustices, i.e., what Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo defines as the “coloniality of power” (2011: 2).

How does such a vision then sit with claims for the restitution of objects looted during the colonial period? The next section will look more closely at how the vision of the MCN fits in this debate, and how it compares to different postcolonial approaches such as those elaborated by the curators Clémentine Deliss and Françoise Vergès.



Space: Colonial history as pollution and emptiness as opportunity

The return of colonial artefacts is one of the major issues which Western museums have to grapple with in this century (Savoy 2015). As Bianca Gaudenzi and Astrid Swenson have recently argued, the debates on the restitution have materialised as a reaction to “challenges of reframing nations and the international order brought about by some of the central events of the second half of the twentieth century,” such as the Second World War, the Cold War and decolonisation (2017: 516). Ethnographic museums have particularly been confronted with their responsibility to engage with the colonial circumstances under which their collections were assembled (Basu 2011). The mounting denunciations of the “historical concentration of the world’s

heritage” in Western museums have called for a re-assessment of the legitimacy of these former “temples of empire” (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014: 1-2).

In that context, Felicity Bodenstein and Camilla Pagani claim that the twenty-first century has seen a great variety of museum strategies to critically address “colonial roots” (2014: 39). Scholars have increasingly engaged with the diversified ways in which museums decolonise their collections, such as the collaboration with source communities (Ames 1992; Dixon 2016; Peers and Brown 2003). Quoting Tony Bennett, Bodenstein and Pagani argue that the aim of these approaches is to form “new relations and perceptions of difference that break free from the hierarchically organized form of stigmatic othering” (Bennett 2006: 59). Examining the different strategies of the Museum of World Culture in Sweden and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, the authors define the concept of “decolonialising collections” as a discourse that aims to “singularise the ethnographic object and extract it from former systems of museum classification that de facto maintained the object in its ‘colonised’ status” (Bodenstein and Pagani 2014: 47-48). An example of such an approach are the post-ethnographic curatorial projects of Clémentine Deliss, former director of the German *Weltkulturen Museum* in Frankfurt. Her understanding of the term post-ethnographic implies a reworking of the colonial roots of objects in an ethnographic museum as exemplified by her residency programme *Weltkulturen Laboratory*,¹⁸ where she invited artists, curators, lawyers, writers and designers to engage with the history of objects looted during the colonial period.¹⁹

This reflects a growing postcolonial awareness in the museum landscape in Europe, which acknowledges “the changing relationship between public museums and the sources from which their collections are drawn” and the changes in international power relations (La Follette 2017: 671). In

that context, Delphine Calmettes, curator of the gallery *Le Manège* in Dakar, who participated in discussions concerning collaborative projects between the MCN and the *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac* in Paris, saw the new museum as a major opportunity to change the unequal relationship between museums in Africa and those in Europe. For her, the new infrastructure of the MCN enabled the Senegalese to ultimately claim that they too were capable of keeping and storing objects like museums in the West: “The new Museum could finally open its doors to the restitution of looted objects. History just has to go through this.”²⁰ Similar to Inês Fialho Brandão, who analyses the restitution debate between Portugal and its previous colonial territories, such as Angola and Mozambique, the gallery curator predicted that former colonies, which now had the financial means to develop cultural infrastructure “to affirm their national identity and legitimacy” (Fialho Brandão 2017: 575), would also come forward with demands for the transfer of objects found in the former empire’s collections.

Yet, contrary to Calmettes’s expectation, the MCN’s vision proposes not to engage with the discussion on the restitution of objects; instead, as evident in Bocoum’s discourse and plans for the new museum, it tries to formulate a different understanding of art not focused on looted material objects. Bocoum’s understanding of post-ethnography differs from Deliss’s in that he referred to the colonial past as a “closed sequence”: “It is important to point to its continuing legacies, but it must not pollute our perspective on the production of contemporary art.”²¹ Indeed, the MCN director argued that he stood above the claim for restitution: “The times where we had to ask for something are over. They can keep their objects.”²² When I asked him how he saw the restitution of objects, he argued that, for him, this topic was not the most significant one. The MCN should look ahead without constantly “glancing back,

18) “Weltkulturenlabor,” *Weltkulturen Museum* [available online at: <https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/en/labor>; accessed 30 May 2018].

19) “Postcolonial Museum Laboratory - Clémentine Deliss in conversation with Joanna Skolowska,” *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* [available online at: <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/228/407>; accessed 20 May 2018].

20) Calmettes, Delphine, interview with author, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

21) Bocoum, Hamady, interview with author, Dakar, 14 September 2017.

22) *Ibid.*

23) *Ibid.*

looking into the rear-view mirror.”²³ Echoing the notions of temporal or chronological pollution put forth by Stephan Palmié and Charles Stewart (2016) and Byron Hamann (2008), the colonial past with its objects nowadays prized for being important art objects should not figure as the centrepiece of the exhibition, nor as the unifying theme of the Museum. Focusing too much on the question of restitution would hinder a comprehensive perspective on African artistic production in its entire dynamic and its futurity. Instead, the director wanted it to be both “pragmatic and forward-looking”:

Pragmatic because all that is called “Black” art according to the old view is essentially in exile today, in grand European museums. Why would we want to take the risk of being held hostage of these collections? Black art is not only the production of yesterday, but also the production of today and tomorrow.²⁴

24) *Ibid.*

While Bocoum argued that the claim for the restitution of looted objects was not “his fight,” but rather belonged to the “political sphere,” the colonial past as a historical articulation of the relationship between the French and the Senegalese has a haunting effect (O’Riley 2007). It re-emerges in the present and comes to be envisaged as something that can constrain future action. The feeling of being “held hostage” and the objects’ being “in exile” give particular agency to the assemblage of artefacts in that specific emotions are attached to them, thereby potentially affecting the future audience of the museum. This was highlighted by Bocoum when he described how, traditionally, museums in Africa had been perceived as incarnations of colonial exhibitions, turning them into places of nostalgia and recrimination whose emptiness radiated an aura of melancholy. Instead, his aim was to build a museum from which people would come out feeling optimistic. This points to the affective potentialities and embodied experience on which the imaginary of the exhibition is built and raises the question of how this might

25) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

26) While this is based on interviews, his argument can also be found in Herle *et al.* (2017).

27) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

translate architecturally. If in his claims to modernity—“we are [living] in the time of the world”—the director puts himself above the necessity to ask for the restitution of colonial objects, how does he then navigate this emptiness which is portrayed as the painful legacy of the colonial past? And how does this emptiness interact with the aim of decentering the Western understanding of museum and African art?



Navigating “European” and “African” museum cultures

For one of our meetings, Bocoum suggested giving me a tour of the Museum’s main spaces where future exhibitions will be hosted. Leading me through different rooms, he outlined the building’s structure. According to him, the “European model” of a museum consisting of spaces where one must be silent did not fit the importance of oral traditions in African cultures.²⁵ Instead he proposed to combine a “European structure” with an “African model.” This arrangement of “duality” translates architecturally, on the one hand, into “classical galleries,” and, on the other hand, into “open spaces of cultural mediation” where performers can intermingle with the audience to “revisit the cultures of orality.”²⁶ Leading me into the great hall, Bocoum said: “This is the more open African space where we can organise meetings between artists and the public to value our intangible heritage: a space of encounter.”²⁷

The museum infrastructure thus becomes a framework that helps decipher culturally and historically specific behavioural cues, prompted by the spaces through which one walks. Following the theoretical model of an “indigenous museology,” which renders the idea of a museum more “meaningful to local communities” (Kreps 2015: 6), the new infrastructure includes an open space with removable curtains to separate it from,



Photo 2: The gallery space, Museum of Black Civilisations.
Photo credit: Charline Kopf.



Photo 3: The open space, Museum of Black Civilisations.
Photo credit: Charline Kopf.

in Bocoum's words, the more "civilised European-style" galleries. This embodied experience that the director described, i.e., how people silently move through European museums, is moreover associated with an affective mood that he termed "austere." His vision, by contrast, transforms the Museum's "emptiness," due to the lack of a permanent collection of objects, into an "openness," best exemplified by the grand entrance hall and the agora space on the first floor providing room for the "African" oral tradition.²⁸ In a conversation on museums that I had later with the Senegalese artist Madeleine Devès Senghor, she highlighted that, in designing the spatial division inside the new Museum, the museum audience in Africa should be considered as well.²⁹ She developed the argument of different museology spaces and cultures further by emphasising that the very notion of a museum has "not yet been fully appropriated by African people." According to her, such closed spaces are rarely to be found in the history of African populations, as most forms of political and public engagement happened in the outdoor village squares, the hot climate being one of the reasons. Complementary to her line of thought, the director explained that in hosting performances by an elder who recounts traditional tales while seated in the MCN's open space, the MCN aimed to protect vernacular traditions which continue

to take place in Senegalese villages³⁰ (see also Djigo 2015). Thus, whereas European museums are centred on objects, the MCN's focus would be on "the living."³¹

While such an *in situ* exhibition, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991) calls it, could indeed be problematic due to its exoticising tendencies and the fact that it follows "the tradition of colonial exhibitions with native villages rebuilt on the fairground" (Pieterse 1997: 126), it bears resemblance to political scientist and curator Françoise Vergès's idea of a museum without objects on the Reunion Island (2014). In what she defined as a "museum of the living present," a "Theatre of the Spoken Word" would be located in an exhibition space, thus "interrupting its linear trajectory and producing a space for debate ... for speaking and laughing," along with "spaces for mediation, silence and dreaming" (2014: 69). African orality becomes here, to use the words of Nigerian art critic and curator Okwui Enwezor, "a vessel of memory and a vehicle for transmitting important codes and wisdoms" (2017: 135). The MCN thus challenges the way historical knowledge is documented in the West, as opposed to an African oral archive, and breaks with Western-focused conceptions of time and history which abide by a clear structure of linear chronology. At the same time, the act of positing this enactment of oral tradition as a form of art is

28) *Ibid.*

29) Senghor, Devès Madeleine, interview with author, Dakar, 12 September 2017.

30) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

31) *Ibid.*

a reflection on the “relationship between the author and the artwork, between a form and its function” (Enwezor 2017: 135), and thus questions the traditionally “object-based museum” (Modest 2012: 86). The MCN’s spatial organisation is then integral to the attempt to overcome modernist separations of spheres and mind-body dualities: art is not a discrete entity that can be looked at, instead it becomes all-encompassing and embodied. In such a vision, material objects seem to lose importance.

The embodied approach of oral traditions takes on a further dimension when looking at the concept of heritage in the international context. According to the director of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Culture, Abdoul Aziz Guissé, the physical space in the MCN crafted for the valorisation of intangible heritage allows one to decentre the primacy of the materiality of heritage which is conveyed in international standards. For him, the understanding of heritage is “hard to pin down if we simply limit ourselves to international instruments like UNESCO conventions.”³² And further: “When we talk about classified sites, everyone immediately thinks of the UNESCO list of heritage sites. No distinction is made between national and international points of reference.”

In Senegal, a broader conception of heritage is advocated, which, according to Guissé, is no longer restricted to the “almost stereotyped definition where heritage is limited to colonial buildings” and urban spaces.³³ It also encompasses the preservation of customs that have developed over time. Similar to Bocoum, Guissé argued that although colonisation represented an important sequence in their history that should not be forgotten, it should not figure as the exclusive focus of cultural restoration programmes. This is however the case with most UNESCO projects, such as the one at the Island of Gorée which is primarily committed to restoring colonial sites marked by the transatlantic slave trade (see also Bocoum and Toulhier 2013). The various rehabilitation projects transforming the site

into a highly mediated tourist destination and symbol of postcolonial identity have been criticised for ignoring the locals and their daily use of the place (see also Quashie 2009). Indeed, for the inhabitants of the island, UNESCO’s World Heritage status makes the renovation of the buildings particularly expensive as the buildings must be restored with original materials, such as tiles, wood frames and specific colours to retain their colonial architecture. In case of non-compliance, UNESCO could downgrade the island, thereby significantly affecting tourism here. As many of the locals cannot afford this method of renovation, they are forced to sell their houses to private owners, mostly European or bi-national (Quashi 2009: 68), leading to what Pieterse has called the “conversion of living spaces into ‘historical’ sites and museums...” (1997: 126).

In Guissé’s words, it is then in Africa’s interest to create another typology of heritage that moves away from the postcolonial focus. With that objective in mind, the Ministry of Culture is working towards an understanding of heritage as embodied practice, which is aimed at changing the geographical, urban bias of the current preservation efforts. While he argued that UNESCO already works towards a broader definition with its concept of “cultural landscapes” that looks at the interaction between humans and space,³⁴ its potential has not yet been fully explored. A new typology would allow African countries to rank higher on the World Heritage list, which has focused so far mainly on monuments alone (see also Lagae 2008).

So, questioning the interpretation of colonial sites as heritage, Guissé finds the focus on colonial architecture, as illustrated by the looted objects approach, to be neo-colonial. Forcing my interlocutors to focus, once again, on the colonial period, it neglects not only precolonial and intangible forms of heritage, but also the lived experience of those inhabiting the sites. In that sense, the postcolonial positionality, which wishes for

32) Guissé, Abdoul Aziz, interview with author, Dakar, 27 September 2017. For a study which looks at the management of cultural heritage from a local-global perspective in Zimbabwe and Australia, see Lee Long (2000).

33) *Ibid.*

34) “Cultural Landscapes,” UNESCO Website, 2016 [available online at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>; accessed 5 May 2018].

a continuous reflection upon the violence of colonialism, reproduces the centrality of the trope of Europe, leading to what Dzenovska calls a “compartmentalization of colonial legacy in Europe” (2013: 407). Indeed, the focus on the violence of colonialism is experienced as a way of cleansing the Western present from its colonial sins (Böröcz 2006; Povinelli 2002), which in turn becomes an obstacle rather than an advantage for my Senegalese interlocutors.

Furthermore, inside the museum, the emphasis on oral traditions and intangible heritage transcending the focus on the colonial is not irrevocably devoted to the past, but complementary to an understanding of fast-paced modernity and a fluid culture in constant flux. The logistic organisation of the gallery spaces was described by the director in terms of its adaptability to developments in culture. The ceiling is particularly high offering the possibility to split the rooms vertically and horizontally into mezzanines and smaller spaces according to the content and performances of the different exhibitions. This flexibility reflects their commitment to adapting to a fast-changing culture and thus providing a different museum model dedicated to African cultures than the *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac*. As opposed to the latter, the MCN should architecturally and metaphorically be able to take all shapes and not become, as Bocoum argued, a “prisoner of the discourse” upon which it was built.³⁵ Indeed, the *Musée du Quai Branly* has been criticised by anthropologists for re-enforcing the message it was supposed to break away from, namely that of exoticising the cultures which are presented in its display cases. Although the Parisian museum is supposed to be “a post-colonial tribute to ‘cultural diversity’” and attempts to “palliate government policies and social exclusion” through enhancing the aesthetical value of such objects, it does not provide historical details on how the collections themselves came into being (Dias 2008: 300; see also Boursiquot 2014; Clifford 2007; de l’Etoile

2008). The resulting ahistorical display of objects ignores “the relations of power that they embody” (Dias 2008: 307) and maintains the cultural hierarchies intact.

The MCN attempts to counter this essentialisation, as Bocoum claimed, by turning its lack of ownership of art collections into an asset: “We are not prisoners of anything.”³⁶ This is reflected in their aim to circumvent the model of permanent exhibitions. Here again the temporal logic and conception of modernity are the rationales underlying Bocoum’s conception: “Wanting to fix Black Civilisations in an itinerary considered permanent is reductive. We will not organise permanent exhibitions; the longest exhibition will only last up to two years [...] it is in the renewal, in the movement that we will try to be representative.”³⁷ In refusing any static representations of culture and in recreating this through the MCN’s architecture, time and space become mutually constitutive components of the post-ethnographic imaginary that the Museum tries to create. As Bocoum claimed: “Permanent exhibitions belong to the past.”³⁸ Instead, the programme anticipates joint itinerant exhibitions with both the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren to address matters of global concern.³⁹ Those joint exhibitions will make use of dialogical strategies in an attempt to counter the concept of cultures as discrete entities, further reconfiguring Self-Other relationship. Indeed, while the inaugural exhibition will open with a sculpture by the Senegalese artist Ousmane Sow, it will end with a sequence called the Dialogue of Masks involving Viking, African, as well as Chinese masks.⁴⁰ The aim is to attend to cultural diversity and traits by putting them in dialogue with each other without exoticising them. The concepts underlying this dialogical and relational approach can be traced back not only to the notion of alterity (Levinas 1995) but above all, according to the director, to the three values promoted by Léopold Senghor: rootedness in one’s own

35) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

36) *Ibid.*

37) *Ibid.*

38) *Ibid.*

39) “Le musée du Quai Branly et le musée des Civilisations noires signe une convention,” *Ministère de la Culture du Sénégal*, 20 December 2016 [available online at: <http://www.culture.gouv.sn/?q=le-musee-du-quai-branly-et-le-musee-des-civilisations-noires-signe-une-convention>; accessed 30 May 2018].

40) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.



Photo 4: Construction Site of the MCN. Photo credit: Charline Kopf.



Photo 5: Museum of Black Civilisations, Dakar. Photo credit: Charline Kopf.

culture (*enracinement*), openness to others (*ouverture*) (Senghor 1964: 22-38), and the idea of a universal world civilisation (*civilisation universelle*) (Senghor 1977).⁴¹

Thus, my interlocutors' historical explanations, as well as comments concerning the cultural separateness of the Western-style and African-style museum spaces within the new construction, are significant for the way in which the political and cultural are read and built into public buildings in postcolonial Senegalese architecture. The conversations on space lay bare the tension which is inherent in the very concept of a Museum of Black Civilisations: Despite the aim to subvert exoticising representations and reconfigure Self-Other relations that old and new art exhibitions and museums have perpetuated (Pieterse 1997), the logic according to which the physical museum spaces are separated can uphold an internal dichotomy of cultures. The director is, for example, forced to mobilise the difference between "Western" and "African" models of cultures and by doing so, risks lapsing into the same essentialism he criticises. It also reveals the challenge that the director faces to distinguish between formulating a reconfigured postcolonial future without reinscribing such a trajectory in a dichotomous explanation between modernity and tradition, and culturalist discourses drawing on terms like "civilised." Underlying is the fact that the MCN has to grapple with the seemingly incommensurable aim to pay tribute to African systems of knowledge through a museum, an institution which is paradoxically considered to be a symbol of Western modernity, not to be found in African history and culture. In the words of Enwezor, the museum in its ethnographic form is "inextricably tied with discourses that have historically sought to undermine, or render mute, the possibility of any kind of African subjectivity in matters dealing with archival or musicological knowledge" (2017: 134).

Nevertheless, while for the MCN the Western museum remains a reference,

its very design and conceptualisation is presented as a political gesture. Using open spaces becomes an attempt at translating more historically resonant embodiments of African state-society relations into architecture. Emptiness, portrayed as painful legacy of the colonial past, becomes in the context of the MCN, a unique opportunity to shape the inner space according to an African history and mode of storytelling. From a theoretical perspective, thinking about the future of the Museum, and the spatial and physical perception of the people inside it, the visitors and director become integral parts of a museum assemblage constituted "of objects, the bodies of staff and visitors, narratives, materials and more, that together shape the visitor experience" (Waterton and Dittmer 2014: 123). Space is here perceived as an active participant in this dialogue, by shaping the perception of the visitor, and becomes a way to enable the shift towards a post-ethnographic approach.

Constitutive of this post-ethnographic imaginary inside the Museum is the perception that Chinese investments and infrastructure now provide an alternative to existing Africa-Europe relations. Indeed, the fact that the MCN was funded as part of China's foreign aid programme, constructed by a Chinese, partly state-owned company and designed by the Beijing Institute of Architecture complements Bocoum's perception of a change not only in the ways of knowledge production and of representation but also in the economic power dynamics imbricated in the museum landscape. As Bocoum claimed: "Europe has imposed its thinking as the only one, but this is challenged by emerging forces today. We are militants of diversity and we are interested in promoting this diversity. With the Chinese, there are now more players in the field."⁴² His colleague, art historian and critic Malick Ndiaye, who also participated in the preparatory conference held prior to the opening of the MCN, agreed with Bocoum, arguing that "a lot of things are changing in geopolitics."⁴³ Having studied

41) *Ibid.*

42) Bocoum, Hamady, personal communication, Dakar, 20 September 2017.

43) Ndiaye, Malick, interview with author, Dakar, 5 September 2017.

in France and Dakar, he is a specialist in contemporary art, African heritage and postcolonial studies (2011), and is the current curator of the Museum of African Art Théodore Monod. For him, the MCN is the embodiment of this changing world order:

It is no longer a dialogue only between Europe and Africa, but a conversation between several entities. Many new perspectives have opened up. The fact that the Museum of Black Civilisations was built by China undoubtedly demonstrates that we can now choose between multiple possibilities.⁴⁴

44) *Ibid.*

My Senegalese interlocutors then perceive the “Chinese” as enablers of a new museum cartography, which challenges the thus far conventional centre-periphery configuration of museums mostly located in the West (see also Vergès 2008).



Cracks in the emptiness: Existing collections in dusty boxes

Yet, there are also limits to the post-ethnographic approach in the museum. The emptiness of the MCN, which, in the director’s imaginary, stands for an opportunity to conceive of a more fluid world history and a place solely dedicated to temporary exhibitions, obscures the uncomfortable relationship with objects collected during colonial raids in former French West Africa, now held in storage by various Senegalese institutions. As some of my interlocutors claimed, this points to issues in the postcolonial management of art collections and the silencing of an intra-African restitution debate. A closer examination of the objects through the lens of the repatriation debate, reveals how in circumventing a focus on the colonial, the new post-ethnographic imaginary eschews criticism directed towards the postcolonial Senegalese state.

45) Anonymous employee, interview with author, Dakar, 29 September 2017.

46) *Ibid.*

The employee of an international institute of culture located in Dakar looked perplexed as I told him that in my discussions with the head of the MCN and its administration, the debate surrounding the objects in the collections of the *Musée Théodore Monod*, also known as the IFAN (*Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire*) museum, was omitted from conversations.⁴⁵ While the existence of those objects was briefly mentioned by the director, no authorities involved in designing the future exhibitions expanded on which objects might be selected for the new Museum. According to the employee, the omission could be accounted by the lack of an inventory of the objects collected and stored by the IFAN—a former colonial research institute in charge of the study of the language, history and culture of the peoples living in French West Africa—and the difficulty of assigning them a national origin, as at the time of their collection, they were not located in the delimited territory of a nation-state.⁴⁶ He argued that the boxes contain many items from across, which had not been returned to the regions from where they came after decolonisation.

Indeed, looking at the history of the IFAN reveals that the objects in its collections, amassed during scientific missions in the inter-war period and after the Second World War, did not come only from French West Africa but also from neighbouring countries and French Equatorial Africa, i.e., Gabon, the Middle Congo, Chad and Ubangi-Shari (now the Central African Republic), as well as from foreign colonies through donations or exchanges (Adedze 1997: 97; de Suremain 2007: 158). Despite setting up various IFAN branches in other French colonial territories in Africa, the centralised management of the colonial research institute led to the storing of most artefacts in the capital of the federation, Dakar (Jézéquel 2011: 36-37). The problem was that even if an inventory of the collections were carried out, e.g., the one by Denise Paulme and the musicologist Schaeffner, the resulting catalogue would

lack information and background, making it difficult to identify the objects' places of origin after decolonisation (de Suremain 2007: 164). According to my interlocutor, after independence, when the French colonial territory was divided into national polities, the transnational links to the other territories, where the items held in storage by the IFAN had come from, were for the most part erased.

Recent studies analysing looted art and restitution in the twentieth century substantiate these suspicions by demonstrating that research into the histories of those objects and their very existence encounters many obstacles, such as the "substantial gaps in the archival record linked to inaccessibility, wilful destruction, as well as the secrecy" surrounding them (Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017: 510; see also Coeuré 2017; Fialho Brandão 2017). The studies not only show how debates on restitution play an important role in renegotiating post-colonial relationships and in shaping new national imaginaries, but also defy "a narrative that moves seamlessly from the national to the international sphere" in terms of determining the role of different actors in the looting and restitution of objects (Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017: 513).⁴⁷ This fact adds a layer of complexity and ambiguity to the discussion on repatriation, pointing to the objects' entanglement in transnational flows of power located in the historical formation of the French West African Federation. As the employee of the international cultural institute asked: "What would Senegal's neighbouring countries say if they saw items belonging to them displayed in Dakar's new Museum of Black Civilisations? What if they wanted those objects back?"⁴⁸ Exhibiting the objects in the MCN without engaging in discussions about their origin with neighbouring countries would raise the controversial question of intra-African claims of restitution, a topic which until now has remained uncharted. This reveals the tension between the MCN's intention to define a post-ethnographic

imaginary of pan-African Black Civilisations where borders do not play a role, on the one hand, and the management of objects in West African postcolonial states where nation-building is an ongoing process, on the other.

Therefore, the issues surrounding the IFAN's existing collections reveal the fractures in the discourse around the restitution of looted objects that the post-ethnographic take seems to obscure. It can be said then that the post-ethnographic provincialising of the colonial narrative comes with the danger of hindering research into the more intricate history of these objects in the West African context. According to some of my interlocutors, this has even led the Senegalese authorities to conceal ownership of these collections for fear that they would be seen as proof of the mismanagement of objects after decolonisation, thereby raising tensions between different countries and questioning the Senegalese conservation practices. Conversely, taking into account the different possible trajectories and movements of the art objects—through former colonial and contemporary transnational spaces over time—would allow for a more complex history, which is often obfuscated in the dominant discourse on the European repatriation of looted objects.



Conclusion

The discussions surrounding the Museum of Black Civilisations and the post-ethnographic imaginary have revealed different attitudes towards postcolonial museum approaches and the return of looted objects. In paying particular attention to the post-ethnographic position of the director of MCN and Senegal's director of Cultural Heritage, the article demonstrated how the MCN's aim is to distance itself not only from ahistorical representations of Black

47) Brandão's article on Portugal reveals national-level opposition to research into the origin of looted objects for fear of having to attend to the circulation of objects between the territories of the former Portuguese empire (2017).

48) Anonymous employee, interview with author, Dakar, 29 September 2017.



Photo 6: Musée Théodore Monod, Dakar. Photo credit: Charline Kopf.

Civilisations but also from an exclusive engagement with colonial legacies. While being one of the outcomes of a postcolonial moment, the MCN also tries to move beyond it, insofar as Europe's postcoloniality is still Eurocentric. My interlocutors' attempt to provincialise the position of those arguing for a constant engagement with colonial legacies and their aspiration towards an alternative, decolonial world order is further complemented by how they perceive the Chinese involvement in the construction of the MCN.

Hence, by showing how the postcolonial positionality reproduces the centrality of Europe, which stubbornly retains its influence as gravitational locus, and has exclusionary effects for the locals, as illustrated by the UNESCO heritage programmes on the island of Gorée, this paper makes theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on heritage and postcolonial museum studies (Chambers et al. 2014; Peers and Brown 2003; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). While the post-ethnographic framework

which the director proposes contests common-held assumptions about claims of restitution and thus offers an alternative to art displays in museums located in the "West," it does not reveal all the power structures, constructions of difference and colonial legacies inherent in the assemblage of artefacts. Indeed, notwithstanding the objective of fostering intercultural understanding by attending to cultural diversity without exoticising representations of cultures, the ensuing discourse, in some cases, maintains binary, essentialised identities. The interest in analysing the curatorial approach of the MCN goes then beyond the walls of the museum, becoming relevant for postcolonial discourses dealing with difference, otherness and diversity in general.

Moreover, the paper adds to the recent literature on the history of looted objects (Coeuré 2017; Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017) by demonstrating how non-engagement with their restitution hides intricacies surrounding existing collections. In



highlighting this, the aim is not to undermine the director's position nor do to dismiss his vision of the future exhibition. Nonetheless, the de-emphasising of the significance of objects renders invisible the complex history of artefacts located on Senegalese land. This then calls for a renewed study of how local historical particularities inform approaches to the restitution of objects, which seem counter-intuitive to, and deviate from, the postcolonial theory that requires a constant engagement with colonial legacies.

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