

Musée, colonisation, et restitution

El Hadji Malick Ndiaye

Quand les bases modernes du musée sont jetées au XVIIIe siècle, le souci de classification méthodique des savoirs par le biais des objets est venu à travers les grands catalogues du XVIe siècle et les cabinets de curiosité, sorte de miroir du monde en réduction. La sécularisation opérée par le musée prive les objets d'autels de leur dimension sacrée. Tirés de leur contexte rituel, ils sont des objets d'art qui témoignent d'un génie national. Exposés au musée, ils conquièrent une épaisseur universelle. Le développement du musée est inscrit dans une histoire intellectuelle et culturelle de la modernité qui a subi de profondes transformations et dont la relecture est un défi posé aux dispositifs muséographiques. En Afrique de l'Ouest, plusieurs musées sont créés sur les ruines des collections coloniales au sein de structures dont la croissance fait appel à des protocoles de patrimonialisation à géométrie variable (cf. Malick Ndiaye 2007). On comprend donc que la question de la restitution advient par le biais d'une double échelle politique et scientifique. Depuis quelques mois, on ne compte plus le nombre de rencontres qui prennent cette thématique comme objet. Chaque institution se doit de mettre cette question sur la table. La restitution semble tomber dans le glamour des débats d'idées qui sont à la mode. Cette situation conduit à une réflexion scientifique dont le calendrier est dicté par le rythme de l'agenda politique. Compte tenu de cette réalité, il est important de considérer d'abord l'histoire à la suite de laquelle l'appel du président Macron doit être resitué. Ensuite il s'agira d'identifier les enjeux liés au contexte actuel de la restitution.

LES CHEMINS DE LA RESTITUTION

La restitution du patrimoine et la nouvelle muséologie ont pris une dimension institutionnelle presque dans la même période, en l'occurrence les années 1970. Le croisement de quelques faits structurants démontre la nécessité de cette lecture historique. En 1971, la section française du Conseil International des Musées (ICOM) organise une rencontre sur «Le musée au service de l'homme aujourd'hui et demain: le rôle éducatif et culturel du musée». Au cours de ce débat, Stanislas Adotévi appelait à une prise de conscience radicale ainsi qu'au rejet d'une culture colonialiste des musées africains (Mairesse 2000: 42). Un processus était amorcé dans lequel les deux directeurs successifs de l'ICOM (Georges Henri Rivière et Hugues de Varine) joueront un rôle capital. De nouvelles expériences sont tentées à travers le monde dans un cadre où se développe le concept d'ecomusée. Ce nouveau paradigme prend en compte l'étroite relation entre le musée et la société dont la Déclaration de Santiago du Chili (1972) servira de mémorandum. Il s'agit dorénavant d'être plus attentif à cette institution culturelle et au rôle qu'il doit jouer pour la communauté.

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This issue's First Word on the subject of restitution has three parts: the essay by El Hadji Malick Ndiaye appears in both the French original and in translation, which are printed here side by side, while the essay on the topic by John Warne Monroe (who is also the translator of Ndiaye's essay) follows. This presentation is part of an ongoing conversation among the African Arts editorial consortium about how to incorporate input in languages other than English in a polyglot academic discipline. We hope this will be an evolving project and welcome reader input on how to incorporate multilingual contributions within the constraints of modern publishing.

first word

The Museum, Colonization, and Restitution

El Hadji Malick Ndiaye  
translated by John Warne Monroe

When the modern museum took shape in the eighteenth century, its preoccupation with the systematic classification of knowledge by means of objects was derived from the great catalogues of the sixteenth century and from cabinets of curiosities, which aimed to be reflections of the world in miniature. The museum secularized the religious objects it contained, stripping them of their sacred dimension. Divorced from their ritual contexts, they became art objects seen as manifestations of a nation's creative spirit. Exhibited in the museum, these objects also came to acquire a universal dimension. The development of the museum is part and parcel of an intellectual and cultural history of modernity; reinterpreting that history in light of the profound changes it has entailed is therefore a challenge to the whole museological system. In West Africa, several museums have been established on the ruins of colonial collections, within structures that, as they have expanded, have required highly adjustable rules for the designation of heritage (see Malick Ndiaye 2007). It is therefore clear that the question of restitution must be considered in both political and scientific terms. Over the last several months, countless meetings have been devoted to this problem. Every institution has been obliged to put the question on the table. Restitution has become a fashionable topic for intellectual debate. Given this state of affairs, any scientific reflection must unfold according to the timetable established by political agendas. Bearing this reality in mind, it is important to begin with some attention to the historical background of President Macron's initiative. Then, the task will be to identify what is at stake in the current context in which restitution will occur.

PATHS TO RESTITUTION

Heritage restitution and the new museology both took on an institutional dimension over the course of the 1970s. Several intersecting historical factors structured this development. In 1971, the French section of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) organized a conference called The Museum in the Service of Man Today and Tomorrow: The Educational and Cultural Role of the Museum. During this event, Stanislas Adotévi called for a radical new consciousness and for the rejection of a colonialist culture of African museums (Mairesse 2000: 42). This began a process in which two successive directors of ICOM, Georges Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine, would play key roles. Across the world, various experiments led to the emergence of the concept of the ecomuseum, a new paradigm built on the principle, outlined in the Declaration of Santiago de Chile (1972), that a museum

En 1976, l'Unesco organise une rencontre à Venise où la question de la restitution est étudiée par des experts qui suggèrent la création d'un Comité chargé de faciliter le retour ou la restitution du patrimoine. Le 7 juin 1978, le Directeur de l'Unesco, le sénégalais Amadou Makhtar Mbow, prononçait son discours mémorable «pour le retour à ceux qui l'ont créé d'un patrimoine culturel irremplaçable». Quelques mois plus tard, (Paris, 24 octobre–28 novembre), à l'occasion de la 20e session de sa Conférence générale, l'Unesco crée par la résolution 20 C4/7.6/5 le «Comité intergouvernemental pour la promotion du retour de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine ou de leur restitution en cas d'appropriation illégale». Une étude sera confiée à l'ICOM sur les principales difficultés ainsi que les solutions qu'impliquent la restitution ou le retour de biens culturels perdus en raison du fait colonial ou de l'occupation étrangère.

Bien qu'étant pour la restitution du patrimoine, cette étude introduisait des réserves à trois niveaux. D'abord, elle mettait en garde sur l'obsession du chef-d'œuvre dont l'appréciation est incertaine et transitoire et la valeur trop souvent étroitement esthétique et parfois même plus marchande que culturelle (ICOM 1979: 2, point 12). Ensuite elle remettait en question l'appartenance de l'objet à telle ou telle culture en se basant sur le fait qu'il existe des chefs-d'œuvre réemployés par plusieurs cultures successives de sorte que leur attribution en devienne difficile. C'est l'exemple des «obélisques de Rome ou les vases chinois réutilisés par les artistes du XVIIIe ou encore la profonde influence de l'art africain sur les techniques picturales au XXe siècle» (ICOM 1979: 2, point 12). Enfin, cette dénationalisation de l'objet était assujettie à une déterritorialisation de celui-ci vis-à-vis de son pays d'origine suite aux modifications des frontières. Une question certes complexe quand on se souvient de la demande formulée par Alex Salmond, alors chef du Parti national écossais préconisant le retour des pièces d'échecs Lewis du British Museum qui auraient été fabriquées en Norvège, mais fouillées dans la baie de Uig, sur l'île de Lewis, dans les Hébrides extérieures d'Ecosse (Thomas 20016: 33).

should be closely connected to the society in which it exists. The goal was to be more attentive to the roles cultural institutions of this type should play for their communities.

In 1976, UNESCO organized a conference in Venice at which a group of experts suggested the creation of a committee charged with facilitating the return or restitution of heritage objects. On June 7, 1978, the Senegalese Amadou Makhtar Mbow, director of UNESCO, delivered a memorable speech calling “for the return of irreplaceable cultural heritage to its creators.” A few months later in Paris (October 24–November 28), during its Twentieth General Conference, UNESCO passed resolution 20 C4/7.6/5, creating an “Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to Its Countries of Origin or Its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation.” ICOM was also commissioned to prepare a study on the restitution or return of property lost in the course of colonization or foreign occupation, enumerating the primary obstacles and proposing solutions.

Though it came out in favor of restitution, the ICOM study expressed three reservations. First, it warned against a possibly excessive focus on objects currently acknowledged to be masterworks; this appreciation could be ill-defined and transitory, based all too often on market value rather than cultural significance (ICOM 1979: 2, point 12). Then it called the practice of attributing particular objects to particular cultures into question, noting the existence of certain important works reused by successive cultures in ways that made it difficult to identify them with only one. This was the case, for example, with “Roman obelisks, or Chinese vases reused by artists in the eighteenth century, or even the profound influence of African art on the pictorial techniques of the twentieth century” (ICOM 1979: 2, point 12). Finally, the report asserted that denationalizations of this sort could be compounded by deterritorialization if the borders of an object's country of origin had changed over time. Such was the complication that Alex Salmond, then chief of the Scottish

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Le contexte historique des années 1970 traduit une configuration psychique et institutionnelle peu réceptive aux restitutions. Néanmoins, ce premier processus a servi de cadre global à plusieurs demandes de restitution du patrimoine. Au cours de ces dernières années, les réclamations épisodiques des états africains se sont intensifiées. Elles ont cristallisé un débat parfois passionné qui mettait en scène le patrimoine dans la construction de l'unité des pays. C'est à la suite de cette chronologie que s'inscrit le discours du 28 novembre 2017 (Université de Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso) du président français Emmanuel Macron. Le rapport commandé par ce dernier, et rédigé par l'intellectuel et économiste sénégalais Felwine Sarr avec l'historienne de l'art Bénédicte Savoy, prend en considération les transformations intervenues ces dernières années entre l'Afrique et le reste du monde. En réclamant le droit d'accès à ces productions qui forgent la mémoire collective, il reflète une prise de conscience réelle devant l'histoire pour que cette dernière ne reste pas une colonie.

Si la restitution est soulevée, une deuxième fois, à une échelle internationale, elle a changé sous trois aspects. D'abord, ce n'est plus une institution qui est sollicitée pour faire un rapport sur le sujet. Confier ce projet à une institution n'aurait certainement pas permis d'accéder à ce type de résultat. Il s'agit d'abord de la libération d'une parole dépourvue de tout calcul institutionnel ou politique et sans aucune aliénation psychologique par rapport à une quelconque hiérarchie. Ensuite, il s'agit de non professionnels des musées, ce qui a l'avantage de sortir de la routine des termes convenus et des schémas de références déjà connus. Enfin l'analyse des problèmes conserve une épaisseur scientifique nourrie par les archives de l'histoire et par la manière de représenter les défis majeurs auxquels les musées sont confrontés de nos jours.

### LES ENJEUX DE LA RESTITUTION

Il faut regretter que les questions soulevées par le public n'aient guère évolué. Nous sommes revenus sur les mêmes thèmes relatifs à la capacité des musées africains à accueillir les objets ou sur leur sécurité et leur sûreté. Or, si les musées africains ne sont pas sans doute les seuls endroits où des objets disparaissent, la nouvelle configuration globale mérite d'être étudiée à l'aune des changements entre l'Afrique et l'Europe. Contrairement au contexte des années 1970, cette controverse est articulée dans un nouveau cadre africain où plusieurs institutions ont été construites ou sont en projet de construction. Au Sénégal le récent musée des Civilisations noires offre toutes les opportunités d'un musée moderne et professionnel, tandis que le Bénin porte le projet de construction de nouveaux musées pour booster son tourisme culturel. A côté de ces initiatives, d'anciennes institutions se repensent, à l'instar du Musée Théodore Monod d'art africain de l'IFAN Ch. A. Diop. Celui-ci opère une relecture de ses collections en privilégiant un dialogue avec l'art contemporain. Il s'agit d'une redéfinition du savoir et de l'héritage d'une collection d'art africain dans le contexte d'une Afrique du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle.

En Europe, c'est une nouvelle remise en question du statut, du rôle et de la nature des musées ethnographiques hérités d'un lourd passé colonial. Si la déclaration pour les musées universels<sup>1</sup> a été rédigée en partie pour servir de protection contre les relents de restitution, elle s'est accompagné de vastes rénovations des musées à fort potentiel ethnologique. En Allemagne, le Humboldt Forum dont la rénovation est supervisée par le Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, compte ouvrir dans le courant de l'année 2019 avec une nouvelle visibilité proposée par l'architecte italien Franco Stella (cf. Parzinger 2016). Tirant son nom de Wilhelm et Alexander Von Humboldt, ce lieu mythique avec sa façade baroque, souhaite être un lieu d'expérimentation, d'apprentissage, de réflexion et de regard vers le futur.<sup>2</sup>

En Belgique, le musée royal d'Afrique centrale de Tervuren qui s'appelle désormais Africa Museum a rouvert ses portes le 8 décembre 2018 en exposant une vision décoloniale de ses collections. En France, le Musée du Quai Branly a servi de catalyseur en s'affichant comme le lieu «où dialoguent les cultures». Dans un article que James Clifford consacre au musée dans la revue *October* du printemps 2007, l'anthropologue revient sur cette devise. Il prévient que les modalités de ce dialogue relèvent

National Party, confronted when he considered asking for the return of the Lewis chess pieces from the British Museum: they were made in Norway, but found in a dig at Uig Bay, on the Isle of Lewis in the Scottish Outer Hebrides (Thomas 2016: 33).

The historical context of the 1970s thus revealed a psychological and institutional configuration resistant to the idea of restitution. Nevertheless, these first steps provided a global framework in which multiple claims have been made. During the last several years, calls for restitution by African nations have intensified, crystallizing a sometimes passionate debate that emphasizes the role of heritage in constructing national unity. President Emmanuel Macron's speech of November 28, 2017 at the Université de Ouagadougou fits into this chronology. The report he commissioned, written by Senegalese intellectual and economist Felwine Sarr with art historian Bénédicte Savoy, addresses the transformations in Africa's relations with the rest of the world that have occurred in recent years. By claiming the right of access to these creations that shape collective memory, it marks the advent of a new consciousness of the past, a decolonization of history.

The question of restitution has thus emerged for a second time as a topic of international discussion, but has changed in three ways. First, it is no longer a matter of institutions being commissioned to prepare reports on the subject. It is instead a liberation of speech stripped of all institutional or political calculation, free of psychological alienation deriving from any kind of hierarchical relation. Second, it involves people who are not museum professionals and have the advantage of being able to escape the routine of conventional terms and familiar frames of reference. Finally, the analysis of the problems involved has a new intellectual richness conferred by attention to archival evidence and a methodologically sophisticated approach to the major challenges that confront museums today.

### THE STAKES OF RESTITUTION

Unfortunately, the public continues to raise the same old questions. We have returned to a familiar theme: doubts about the capacity of African museums to care for objects or guarantee their security. Since African museums are certainly not the only places where objects disappear, the new global situation is worth considering in light of changes in both Africa and Europe. The current controversy over restitution, unlike the one that occurred in the 1970s, is taking place in a new African context in which multiple institutions have been built or are under construction. In Senegal, the recently opened Musée des civilisations noires provides all the benefits of a modern and professional museum, while the Republic of Benin is undertaking the construction of new museums to boost cultural tourism. Alongside these initiatives, old institutions are rethinking their approaches. The Musée Théodore Monod d'art africain de l'IFAN Ch. A. Diop, for example, has endeavored to reinterpret its collections by privileging a dialogue with contemporary art. The goal is to redefine the legacy of a collection of African art in the context of a twenty-first century Africa.

In Europe, there is a new questioning of the status, role, and nature of ethnographic museums burdened with their colonial pasts. Though the "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums"<sup>1</sup> was written in part to serve as protection against restitution claims, it has nevertheless helped inspire vast museum renovations with considerable ethnological potential. In Germany, the Humboldt Forum, constructed under the supervision of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, is projected to open in 2019 in a visually striking building designed by the Italian architect Franco Stella (see Parzinger 2016). Taking its name from Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, this historically significant site, with its baroque façade, has been conceived as a place of experimentation, learning, reflection, and contemplation of the future.<sup>2</sup>

In Belgium, the Royal Museum of Central Africa at Tervuren, now known as the Africa Museum, reopened its doors on December 8, 2018, to present a decolonized vision of its collections. In France, the Musée du Quai Branly has served as a catalyst by proclaiming itself "the place

d'un autre ordre. Quelles langues parler? En supposant quelle épistémologie? D'après quel agenda politique? Avec quel degré d'autorité? Au nom de qui? (Clifford 2007: 4).

Ces musées européens sont dans la sphère de ce qu'Anthony Smith nomme «l'ethno-symbolisme».<sup>3</sup> L'impression est ainsi donnée que ce patrimoine venu d'ailleurs a du mal à s'intégrer au sein des institutions qui les accueillent. Les questions mémorielles qu'il cristallise entre histoire et politique se situent dans les multiples difficultés à penser une diversité culturelle des états européens en proie avec une mémoire coloniale. Les interrogations que soulèvent ces musées se posent sous différents angles : comment le patrimoine historique national doit nouer des liens avec l'histoire coloniale? Sous quel mode le passé de l'état-nation se connecte-t-il à l'histoire du temps présent? Que doit être le discours d'une politique culturelle dans un état multiethnique? Toutes ces discussions tournent autour de la manière dont le patrimoine est partagé et comment construire ce que le rapport Felwine/Savoy (2018) nomme «une nouvelle éthique relationnelle».

La restitution favorise une reconsidération des rapports entre états africains et européens à travers les biens culturels. D'une part, les états africains vont mieux attacher une importance aux politiques muséales en dotant leurs institutions de moyens adéquats. En outre, ce débat encourage une réelle prise de conscience du patrimoine et son impact sur la société. D'autre part, cela permet aux états donateurs et aux états receveurs de mieux redéfinir les termes de leur diplomatie culturelle. Toutefois, pour que ces nouvelles relations fonctionnent, il faut préciser qu'il n'a jamais été question pour les conservateurs africains de militer pour un retour total des biens culturels se trouvant dans les musées européens. C'est une situation qui n'est pas intéressante en soit, car les objets sont aussi des ambassadeurs.

Cependant, on doit concevoir le retour d'un patrimoine jugé majeur par les concernés. Ces objets, légués par les anciens, aident à construire une mémoire collective, témoignent de la personnalité profonde des peuples et forgent une identité nationale. Ils permettent aux sociétés de s'identifier, de se recréer, facilitent la compréhension des racines et de la culture, éclairent l'histoire de l'art et enrichissent la diversité créatrice des artisans. Les biens culturels sont des objets est plus que prégnantes dans notre vie de sorte qu'il est légitime de se poser la question «du droit des objets à disposer d'eux-mêmes.»<sup>4</sup> Cette personnification des objets qui passe par plusieurs attributs garde toute sa légitimité dans le contexte d'une époque où le patrimoine est perçu à travers une nouvelle lecture. Il s'agit d'une adoration moderne du patrimoine différente certes de celle issue des rituels et des cultes, ou de la dévotion des reliques et des objets sacrés que l'idolâtrie des fidèles avait instituée de sorte que «la vénération fonde ainsi le patrimoine» (Babelon et Chastel 1994: 17).

Au cours du débat sur la restitution, ces biens culturels ont été souvent évoqués à travers la mention œuvre d'art. Ce qui a pour conséquence de fausser les termes du débat, dans la mesure où il conduit certains acteurs à rejeter ce patrimoine pour la simple raison qu'il est issu de l'histoire d'un goût esthétique occidental et par conséquent ne mérite plus d'être considéré comme un patrimoine africain. Or, «L'œuvre d'art est en premier lieu le résultat de l'action de l'homme et si, en tant que telle, sa reconnaissance ne doit pas dépendre des alternances du goût et de la mode, les considérations historiques doivent toutefois précéder les considérations esthétiques» (Brandt 2001: 52). Aujourd'hui, ces objets sont instrumentalisés dans les processus de revendications sur le terreau duquel s'est construit un lobby anti-restitution signalé par Felwine Sarr.<sup>5</sup> Même l'UNESCO contourne la question de la restitution à l'occasion de la rencontre qu'il organise le 1er juin 2018 en insistant davantage sur une «Circulation des biens culturels et Patrimoine en partage» que sur la restitution du patrimoine. Si la volonté politique est sincère, la restitution est possible car le droit est plastique. Mais est-ce que cette question survivra au mandat du président d'Emmanuel Macron?

where cultures dialogue." In an article published in the journal *October* in the spring of 2007, anthropologist James Clifford critiqued this motto. He noted that the concept of dialogue raised a range of unsettling questions. Dialogue in what language? Based on what epistemology? According to what political agenda? With what degree of authority? In whose name? (Clifford 2007: 4).

The approaches of these European museums are examples of what Anthony Smith calls "ethno-symbolism."<sup>3</sup> They convey an impression that all this heritage from elsewhere has trouble fitting into the institutional frameworks that currently contain it. This situation crystallizes various historical and political questions of memory and implicates the multiple difficulties faced by European states contending with colonial legacies as they try to envision cultural diversity. In consequence, these museums raise a variety of questions: how should national heritage be linked to colonial history? In what manner should the development of the nation-state over time be connected to the history of the present? What is the appropriate discourse of cultural politics in a multi-ethnic state? All these discussions derive from the problem of heritage, how it is to be shared, and how one might construct what the Sarr-Savoy report (2018) calls "a new relational ethics."

Restitution provides an opportunity to reconsider the relation between African and European states through cultural goods. On one hand, African states will ascribe more significance to museum policy by endowing their institutions with adequate funds. This debate also dramatically increases awareness of heritage and its impact on society. On the other, restitution will allow both donor and receiver states to better define the terms of their cultural diplomacy. For these new relations to function, it is important to specify that this has never been a matter of African curators agitating for a total return of all cultural goods held in European museums. This is a situation that is fundamentally undesirable, because objects also serve as ambassadors.

Nevertheless, we must envisage the return of heritage objects judged to be of major importance by those concerned. These objects, left by the elders, help form collective memory, bear witness to the deep character of peoples, and forge a national identity. They allow societies to identify themselves, to enjoy themselves, to foster understanding of their roots and culture, to shed light on the history of art and enrich the creative diversity of artisans. Cultural goods are objects so profoundly imbued with meaning that it is legitimate to suggest that there might be "a right of objects to self-determination."<sup>4</sup> This personification of objects is especially justified in the context of a historical moment in which heritage is being seen through a new lens. It is a modern reverence for heritage—one markedly different from the reverence associated with the old beliefs and rituals or with the devotion to relics and sacred objects that the idolatry of religious believers has instituted in such a way as to create a situation in which "worship also establishes heritage" (Babelon and Chastel 1994: 17).

In the debate on restitution, these cultural goods are often described as works of art. This tendency distorts the terms of the debate, insofar as it leads certain actors to reject this legacy for the simple reason that it is a product of the history of Western taste and therefore should no longer be considered a properly African heritage. And yet, "the work of art is first and foremost the result of the actions of man, and if as such, its recognition should not depend on the vicissitudes of taste and fashion, then historical considerations must always take precedence over aesthetic ones" (Brandt 2001: 52). Today, these objects have been instrumentalized in ways that have provoked the emergence of what Felwine Sarr has identified as an anti-restitution lobby.<sup>5</sup> Even UNESCO dodged the question in the conference it held on June 1, 2018, by emphasizing the "circulation of cultural goods and shared heritage" over direct restitution. If the political will is there, restitution is possible because the law is flexible. But will this possibility survive President Emmanuel Macron's term in office?

## Notes

1 La "Déclaration sur l'importance et la valeur des musées universels," a été rédigée en décembre 2002,

et signée par 19 des plus grands musées d'Europe et d'Amérique du Nord / The "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" was drafted in

December 2002, and signed by nineteen of the most important museums in Europe and North America.

2 Humboldt Forum, August 2018, N°3, p. 3.

3 “[E]thno-symbolists consider the cultural elements of symbol, myth, memory, value, ritual and tradition to be crucial to an analysis of ethnicity, nations and nationalisms” (Smith (2009: 25).

4 [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/felwine-sarr-le-poids-de-l-impense-colonial\\_2058754.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/felwine-sarr-le-poids-de-l-impense-colonial_2058754.html)

2 Bénédicte Savoy organized a symposium with this title at the Collège de France on June 21, 2018. See “Du droit des objets (à disposer d’eux-mêmes?)” <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/benedicte-savoy/symposium-2017-2018.htm>.

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## first word

### Restitution and the Logic of the Postcolonial Nation-State

John Warne Monroe

It is no accident that so many accounts of the dramatic new turn restitution policy has taken in Europe begin with a mention of French president Emmanuel Macron’s now-famous November 28, 2017, remarks in Ouagadougou, where he called for “the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage to Africa.” Like the Tennis Court Oath of 1789, this was a rhetorical gesture self-consciously made for History with a capital H: in one single statement, Macron drew a sharp line between the Old Regime of cultural policy and the new. As recently as August 2016, the French state had steadfastly resisted calls from the Republic of Benin to return objects plundered during the Second Franco-Dahomean war (1892–1894); a bit more than a year later, the Elysée Palace Twitter feed reinforced Macron’s statements with the triumphant declaration that “African heritage can no longer

remain a prisoner of European Museums” (Saar and Savoy 2018: 1).

Macron’s grand gesture was not simply a matter of objects. In the official advisory report prepared at his request after this declaration, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy noted that the French president’s proclamation “was inscribed within a much more general approach toward the emancipation of memory”—by which they meant that it was part of a broader effort to come to terms with France’s past as an imperial power (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 1). Since decolonization, metropolitan French political life has been marked by a strong tendency to minimize the violence and grotesque inequity of nineteenth and twentieth century imperialism. As recently as 2005, the French National Assembly overwhelmingly supported a law mandating that school curricula “recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas” (Price 2007: 41). When it comes to the presentation of objects in French national museums, as Sally Price has incisively observed, this reluctance to face the colonial past in all its brutal specificity has promoted a mixture of universalizing aestheticism and cultural contextualization that censors the facts of colonial domination in order to evoke a “1950s-style ethnographic present” (Price 2007: 174.) Macron’s stance is very different. Rather than obscuring the realities of conquest in a haze of ahistorical primitivist fantasy, he has explicitly called colonization “a crime against humanity, a true example of barbarism.” Where his predecessors congratulated themselves for imagining France’s interactions with its former colonies as a “dialogue” among equals, Macron has instead proposed to take France down a peg by “earnestly apologizing to those toward whom we have committed these acts” (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 2).

Macron is clearly aiming for a self-conscious break with the past, an effort to establish French national identity on terms better suited to the present reality of a globalized world—though it is true that he has remained oddly silent about the heritage of far-flung territories still under French control, such as New Caledonia. Inconsistent as it may have been, Macron’s declaration seems to have triggered

something: in response, other former colonial powers have revived and intensified their own discussions about what to do with the African heritage objects in their national museums. The possibility of restitution, previously a subject more theoretical than practical, has begun to look like it might become a *fait accompli*. Increasingly the issue is not whether historically significant objects of African heritage should be returned, but rather when, how, and under what conditions.

At the same time, however, archival evidence reveals a telling mixture of continuity and discontinuity that is important to acknowledge if we are going to understand the full ramifications of this incipient new phase in the lives of certain historically significant African objects held for the time being in French and other national collections. When these objects return, they will function in a context dramatically changed by the postcolonial emergence of the nation-state as the primary unit of political organization in Africa. As such, they will afford scholars opportunities to pose new questions and reassess old paradigms of interpretation.

Surprisingly enough, this is not the first time the French government has taken measures to ensure that a number of African objects deemed culturally important remain on the continent. As early as 1921, administrators in Dakar, capital of the colonial federation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française, AOF), began discussing the possibility of creating a museum in the city that would house a mixture of ethnographic objects and natural-historical specimens. These early conversations took place in the context of a broader shift in French colonial governance. In the face of growing unrest, as it became clear among Africans that their military service in World War I would not be rewarded with new rights, a number of colonial administrators were drawn to what historian Raoul Girardet (2005: 268) describes as “colonial humanism,” an ideological conception of empire that, even as it privileged the epistemological position of the West, viewed the cultural difference of the colonized as a form of richness to be understood in ethnographic terms, rather than a

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