

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

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

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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

“barbarism” to be eradicated. As Gary Wilder has argued, this ideology exerted a strong influence on colonial governance in interwar AOF, where it took the form of an administrative policy that sought to extend aspects of the emergent European welfare state to the federation with the intention of promoting economic development while simultaneously maintaining social stability. Although assertions of potential—if always deferred—equality played an important ideological role in this context, the goal was not to make colonized Africans full-fledged citizens, but instead to manage them with a paternalistic regime based on “an ethnological understanding of indigenous society as a distinct, organic, and dynamic totality” (Wilder 2005: 76). This approach, Wilder shows, was most influentially formulated by Albert Sarraut during his first stint as Minister of Colonies, from 1920 to 1924, when he urged a new focus on what he called *la mise en valeur*—the development—of French overseas possessions. The proposed museum in Dakar made perfect sense as part of this program: The institution would provide both a clearinghouse for “local knowledge” about the various populations under French control, and galleries of objects that could serve to construct and reify the cultural differences among them.

It is an expensive business, however, to build institutions, and the informal discussions of 1921 foundered on the shoals of economic reality. The first official report outlining the proposed structure of the Dakar museum did not appear until 1933. That document, written by Albert Charton, inspector general of education for the federation, is a revealing testament to the continuing power of colonial humanism among AOF’s administrators. Charton’s case for the museum emphasized its value to the local population, especially to the elites on whose collaboration the colonial government depended:

We have taken charge of the future and the interests of the native populations of West Africa. We must not overlook anything that concerns them: reviving their past, showing the products of their industry, studying their customs, bearing witness to their level of civilization are not only scientific tasks, but political necessities, occasions for understanding, demonstrations of sympathy. Knowledge of native life in its variety and originality is part of our colonial culture.

The museum, Charton continued, would be particularly important to “educated natives,” who would see its displays as a demonstration of “the extent of France’s interest in the people she protects.” He also stressed the importance of including a special section devoted to “works of native art with an indisputable artistic value and character. (Wood sculptures, bronzes and ivories, rugs and embroideries, etc.)” This attention to preserving and displaying “precious” objects, Charton argued,

served an essential function in the protection of heritage:

Colonization has provoked a rapid evolution of native society; it is unacceptable to allow native works that embody a whole era of humanity to perish without making an effort to collect and conserve them.¹

Despite this grand rhetoric, from 1933 to 1936, there was no progress at all toward the creation of a museum in Dakar. Then, on July 21, 1936, Governor-General Brévié wrote to the Ministry of Colonies in Paris expressing his desire to establish a museum and archive service “as soon as possible,” despite the project’s having been “delayed by financial circumstances that you know all too well.”² On August 19, Brévié advanced the project further by ordering the creation of the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Dakar (Adedze 2002: 50).³ It was an organization with a sweeping mandate: to coordinate scientific and ethnographic research across the federation, publish an academic journal, and manage a combined museum, library, and historical archive to be housed in the Hôtel de la Circonscription, a large building that had formerly served as the residence of the head of the city’s administrative district. Brévié also ordered that funds be made available to each of the federation’s colonial governors for the purchase of objects for the museum.

Of course, this seemingly altruistic endeavor had dark undercurrents of paternalism and coercion. Most obviously, it was French colonial administrators, not Africans themselves, who would determine what heritage merited conservation. More subtly, there was the issue of acquiring objects by purchase. When Charton wrote his June 1933 report, the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris had already begun sending out a pamphlet encouraging colonial administrators to “gather” [*recueillir*] and document objects for its collections (Anon. [Leiris] 1931). The first of what would eventually be forty collection-building expeditions in Africa funded by that museum, the famous 1931 Mission Dakar-Djibouti, had also already sent numerous objects back to France. The mode of collection Charton proposed, in turn, was modeled after the one the Dakar-Djibouti expedition had used: cash payment. Charton suggested that when it came to building the collection of his projected museum, “it would doubtless be impolitic to pursue a strategy of requisitioning; if they receive money, the natives who yield these pieces to the museum could be considered to have no further claim to them [*seraient ainsi désintéressés*].”⁴ *LAfrique fantôme*, Michel Leiris’s classic first-person account of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, gives a clear sense of how little consent could be involved in these transactions when the item “up for sale” was of fundamental spiritual importance to the

African community in which it resided. At the climax of Leiris’s famous, searing account of the taking of a *boli* figure from the village of Dyabougou, for instance, he and his colleague Eric Lutten gave the local chief 20 francs in exchange for the object. The chief handed back the money, but the two Frenchmen refused to accept it (Leiris 1996: 195).

Ironically, the growing tendency of European visitors to buy objects from Africans is what seems to have generated the political will necessary to make Charton’s plan a reality three years after he proposed it. Correspondence scattered across archives in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, and Dakar provides some evidence to explain this sudden overcoming of administrative inertia. The problem, it turns out, was that several important figures in the colonial administration had become distressed by the number of old and valuable heritage objects leaving AOF in private hands. The first sign of trouble was a report ethnologist and former colonial administrator Henri Labouret submitted to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro after a collecting mission to Côte d’Ivoire in 1936. Though he had managed to obtain “more than 2000 interesting objects” for the French national museums, he had found “worthwhile old pieces” to be surprisingly scarce. This situation, he said, was a consequence of “the shameless traffic” in African objects being conducted by Europeans eager to supply the burgeoning Western art market. “If this commercial action continues,” he warned, “soon the only objects on the Guinea Coast will be pieces specially made for Europeans with no value of their own.”⁵ By 1938, this concern had spread all the way to the Ministry of Colonies in Paris. In a strongly worded letter, the minister himself, Jacques Mandel, urged the governor general of AOF to protect “the local artistic heritage [*patrimoine*]” from the activities of private collectors.⁶

Despite these concerns, financial resources for the museum remained slow to materialize. Shortly after establishing IFAN, Brévié was swept from office by the triumph of the Popular Front government in France. His replacement as governor-general, Marcel de Coppet, did not share the same budgetary priorities. In his view, the Hôtel de la Circonscription was more valuable as a residence for high administrators than as a museum, so he only consented to give half the building to IFAN and made no provision for any public galleries. Coppet’s administration ended with the Popular Front in 1938, but the effort to create a museum remained stalled. Mandel’s desire to protect African heritage faded into the background in the face of impending war with Germany. The Hôtel de la Circonscription was converted to a hospital in the lead-up to the Battle of Dakar in 1940, and the IFAN museum did not begin officially registering objects until 1941.

The museum's first galleries did not open to the public until after World War II. Within a few years, IFAN had expanded its presence in the colonies and laid the groundwork for additional museums in Abidjan (1942) and Bamako (1953). At that point, as historian Frederick Cooper has argued, the French government's approach to its African colonies changed. The theoretical but always deferred promises of equality that had characterized interwar "colonial humanism" gave way to efforts that were more substantial—but still marked with a problematic degree of ambivalence. Under the constitution of the Fourth Republic in 1946, the old metropole and empire became the "French Union," a single political entity governed from Paris. While the former colonies could now elect representatives, structural differences in the degree of representation and glaring inequalities of development between center and periphery generated considerable tensions. The metropolitan French proved unwilling to finance the extensive development that would have created true material equality between former colonizers and the former colonized; the former colonized, in turn, quickly lost patience with relegation to second-class status (see Cooper 2005). Some engaged in violent revolts that were harshly repressed, as in Indochina, Algeria, and Madagascar. Eventually, anti-colonial movements that framed their struggles in nationalist terms won out, and France's former colonies became independent nation-states. This, in tandem with the collapse of the British Empire, has done much to contribute to the emergence of the global order now familiar to us, in which the nation-state, rather than the empire, has become the basic unit of political organization across the world.

This new nation-state paradigm is the political context in which the latest calls for restitution of African cultural heritage are taking place. Museums, of course, play an important role in nation-building by codifying heritage, articulating visions of history, and modeling national identity for citizens and visitors alike. They also have an institutional logic that shapes both what is included in their collections—usually material objects deemed somehow significant or extraordinary—and how those collections are presented. While this institutional logic makes claims to universality, the museum also generally has some connection to a national context and some functions related to the conservation of items perceived as constituting "national heritage." Louis-Georges Tin, a black French academic and activist, made this point very strongly while advocating for the restitution of objects to the Republic of Benin in a 2016 interview. Having the treasures of King Behanzin's court

on display in a French museum, he observed, was "a little like having the fundamental works of French heritage on display in Berlin." The comparison is telling, because it reflects the extent to which, historically speaking, the nation-state and the museum are tightly imbricated institutions that both first took shape in Europe. European conquest, in turn, was one of the primary vectors by which they spread elsewhere.

In the case of the now-independent nations that once composed the federation of French West Africa, the rudimentary museum infrastructure that the French left behind has become a tool for adaptation to new purposes in a changed global reality. The same goes for the concept of the nation-state itself, which as Benedict Anderson (2006) observes, has proved to be surprisingly "modular"—capable of transplantation to a vast array of different cultures and regions. The construction of a coherent national identity depends on an ability to renarrate history in ways that foster a sense of unity while obscuring aspects of the past that challenge that cohesion. As a national institution, the museum plays an important role in this process, marshaling the past to serve the political and cultural requirements of the present.

In the recent debate over restitution, we see this aspect of the "museum-function" in the logic of the nation-state very clearly. First, as Z.S. Strother (2019) observes, the common framing of this question has placed a disproportionate emphasis on antique examples of portable sculpture in wood, ivory, or metal. While objects of that type have been the African cultural products most coveted by Western collectors and museums, they do not by any means constitute the sum total of African cultural heritage. They are, however, the elements of that heritage that are among the easiest to incorporate into museums, which is important to bear in mind here. They are also the material that formed the basis of the colonial museum collections that became "national" after decolonization. While the Sarr-Savoy report envisages restitution claims made by communities or families and warns against unthinking transposition of European categories to non-European settings, it is significant that the three major claims made so far—by the Republic of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal—have come from national governments on behalf of national museums.

In practice, given the political and institutional realities of the postcolonial world, restitution is not simply a "return" of "lost" heritage; it is an act that creates a new history and new identity in the governmental context of the nation-state. The past is always being reconstructed to serve the needs of the present.

Traditions are revived or invented; events that contradict cherished narratives of unity are either downplayed or acknowledged, condemned, and in that way recast. The future of "restituted" African objects will be a fascinating chapter in this ongoing process—and will provide an important new subject of study for historians of African art.

Notes

All translations from French are the author's unless otherwise noted.

- 1 Albert Charton, "Organisation du musée de l'A.O.F. à Dakar," report to Governor-General Jules Brévié, June 7, 1933, dossier "Organisation et création du musée," O 606 31, Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar (ANS), pp. 1–3, 5. This typescript also mentions the earlier discussion that took place in 1921, for which no other documentation survives.
- 2 Jules Brévié to G. Joseph, director of political affairs for the Ministry of Colonies, July 21, 1936, dossier "Organisation et création du musée," O 606 31, ANS.
- 3 For the August 19 date of issuance for Brévié's *arrêté* (Adedze gives the date as August 22), see Théodore Monod, "Remarques sur l'Institut français d'Afrique noire," typescript, April 30, 1938, dossier "IFAN, Création du musée, rapports, correspondances, arrêtés (1931–1939)," O 606 31, ANS.
- 4 Charton, "Organisation du musée de l'A.O.F. à Dakar," p. 8.
- 5 "Seconde note au sujet de la mission Labouret," undated typescript report, 2AM1 K56c, subfolder "Labouret," Archives du Musée de l'Homme, Paris (AMH). On the basis of the itinerary described, this report came from Labouret's mission of 1936.
- 6 Minister of Colonies Jacques Mandel to Léon Geismar, acting Governor-General of AOF, Oct. 4, 1938, dossier "Musées d'Afrique," O 606 31, ANS.
- 7 "Le Bénin demande la restitution des 5,000 oeuvres d'art volées par la France lors de la colonisation," interview with Louis-Georges Tin, Panafrican TV, Aug. 8, 2016. <https://www.panafrican.tv/benin-demande-restitution-5-000-oeuvres-dart-volees-france-lors-de-colonisation/>.

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