



## **An Unattainable Consensus? National Museums and Great Narratives in French-speaking Africa**

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### **Introduction**

In the middle of November 2011, the French and Senegalese press relayed the polemics surrounding the president Wade's intentions for the future of the recently acquired house of Léopold Sedar Senghor. Conserved in its original state with books and art works dear to the late Senegalese statesman and French academic, comprising, we are told, a painting signed by Marc Chagall - the villa was initially destined to become a presidential museum, housing gifts offered to the Senegalese Heads of State. The project was however reconsidered and the villa set to become a 'Senghor museum', was instead dedicated to the "safeguard of objects of national interest for Senegal and for Africans". The Counsel of Ministers did however ratify the presidential wishes to include the works of an important Senegalese collector in the museum.<sup>1</sup>

This example serves to illustrate the general way in which the interactions between museums and cultural heritage on both national and continental levels are redefined, as well as certain transformations in museum politics, known to oscillate between continuity and radical renewal. As chance would have it, at the same time in Paris, Nobel literary prizewinner Jean-Marie Le Clezio, was the invited guest of the Louvre museum, with an exhibition entitled: 'The Museum World'. Mixing art and "craft", Europe, Africa and Oceania, it was offered as a " 'sidestep' (...) out of the confines of the cultural heritage represented in the Musée du Louvre's collections" (*un pas de côté (...) par rapport au périmètre patrimonial du Musée du Louvre*), expressing the experience of its organiser and inviting the visitor to experience this calm confrontation.<sup>2</sup> This dialogical attitude to world-objects is not novel,<sup>3</sup> and is abundantly expressed by the Quai Branly Museum (Loumpet-Galitzine 2011: 151-154). That being said, it provides works of art with the capacity to transform history, thus reinforcing the ideal of the universal museum embodied by the Louvre, that of a museum-world, joint invention of Nation and tradition, creating at once a prestigious display window, a didactic institution and *lieu de mémoire*.

In the last two centuries of Western history, the relationships between cultural heritage and the institutionalisation of memory, between politics and museums, and museums and great narrative have acquired such self-evidence as to seem natural (Poulot 2008: 197). The relevance of these pairings is as true in the case of the analysis carried out on the museums of African countries; even when no 'native past' has been recognised, once independence is achieved it is often considered as the "detonator of a sentiment of national pride" (Joubert 1999: 845- 846). Subsequently, it becomes difficult to distinguish the *a posteriori* discourse of heritage (see Gaugue 1997: 7-10, 1999b: 337), from the after affects of the colonial situation ("situation coloniale"),

that long survive the strict chronological limitations of political events such as independence (Balandier 2001 [1951] : 9-10).

On the one hand, whilst the processes of construction of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1996) are subject to the certain particularities that can be said to be common to young African States in the process of achieving independence – cultural heterogeneity, transnational cultures, tensions between State apparatus and “ethnics”, single party rule. However, they are also seen to vary according to the specific contexts of the countries concerned. Additionally, the great narratives of the sixties were created in opposition to the metropolitan models and in a larger pan-African context. The virulent denunciations of the “frustration of cultural heritage” (Anta Diop 1993 [1954]: 12), the desire to escape from a common “colonial parenthesis”, to re-appropriate a historical continuity, and an ontological unity (Diouf 2002), established regionally founded heroes and myths as continental ones. Entangled in the dialectical relationship between local references and a pre-colonial globalism, these rewritings also invested in a “retrospective imagination of the West” (Jewsiewicki & Moniot 1987: 235-236), reproducing equivalent theoretical schemes that establish the great historical narrative as the expression of dualistic and mutually exclusive forms of heritage.

Fifty years onwards from the independence movement, it is possible to go beyond the frequently discussed issues of local expertise or looting, to question the role of the museum in the construction of great narratives and to consider some of their configurations from a political, rather than a diachronic perspective. This article postulates that the links between the museum and politics has been weak for a long time, because the museum, for many decades and for different reasons, did not play an important role in the display of the Nation, as this was displaced to other sites. Made *de facto* obsolete with the independence, the colonial museum was abandoned; what was however nationalised and appropriated with great symbolic force was the sovereign prerogative concerning the past. This displacement of the stage of the Nation does not however mean that the museum is insignificant to the country’s memory, on the contrary: forgotten, relinquished, and transformed presentations shed light upon, and even provide metaphors for the tensions inherent to dealing with the recent past and the relationship to history, so in a place so largely constructed by foreign paradigms. In this perspective the nationalised museums and the new national museums modelled after colonial examples, appear more as spaces of both internal and external conflict (in terms of identity, representation, the property of cultural goods), than as an institution seeking to provide a new beginning. This is not to say that this type of violence is not present in other museums, or in the selection process of their collections, but in a post-colonial context it is a particularly important pattern of practices against which we can better comprehend the most recent changes. This difficult situation allows us furthermore to understand the temporal distances that are necessary to set in motion a process of re-appropriation that give the museum a new role in francophone Africa.

In this article I would like to suggest therefore, that current “museographies”, that offer new opportunities to renegotiate national narratives and to question the limits of museums, cannot be examined without taking into consideration a paradigm recently introduced into the continent, that separates history from memory by passing materiality: intangible cultural heritage.

## The museum parenthesis (from the 1960s to the 1990s)

Aside from some rare exceptions, it would appear that during the 1960s, the nationalised colonial museum did not constitute a melting pot for the development or expression of national identity. In fact, the very terms ‘nationalised colonial’ express the singularity of a situation in which the representations of the museums, articulated by the ethnographic “*mise à distance*” in a colonial context, were to become, by means of a political transmutation, constitutive of a national ideal. “There is no need to tropicalize the museum as its tropicalization is the cause of its crisis”, continued to write Tshikala K. Biaya at the end of the 1990s (Biaya 1999). The model of the ethnographic colonial museum encounters its first epistemological limit in its semantic impossibility to incarnate the Nation-State: neither as an element of identity construction nor in the representation of universality can it claim to be anything other than a remnant of the former state of domination.

Outside of a few rare exceptions, the newly nationalized museums of French Equatorial and French West Africa were established according to the same matrix, that of the *Institut français d’Afrique noire* (IFAN). Founded in 1936 by Théodore Monod, the central office in Dakar draws on a network of local centres. The IFAN museum was created in 1941.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, following the wave of establishments of IFAN centres, the museums frequently termed “Art and popular tradition” (Arts et traditions populaires), often created out of the centres of craft production, were opened in most capitals and large African cities: in Abidjan (1945), in Lomé (1950), the “Soudan Museum” in Bamako (1953), in Douala and Maroua (1953), in Niamey (1959) etc. By default, the *Office de la recherche scientifique d’Outre-mer* (Orstom) accomplished the same mission à Libreville (Museum of Gabon, 1960) or Bangui (1959). The urgent need to document cultural facts and products, due to the rapid rate of “metamorphosis caused by the implementation of colonial projects” (Monod cited in Gaugue 1999), meant that these museums also performed the task of displaying colonial research politics. Their presentation both reflects and consolidates that of the metropolitan museums of ethnology, such as the *Musée de l’Homme*. This dual validating function established generic, typological categories (art, technique, ritual) for a long time to come. Generally provided with a rather vague ethnic denomination as part of a large category with imprecise boundaries, or, on the contrary, arbitrarily singularised on the basis of formal properties, to quote the expression of Ernest Renan, the objects put on display failed to create an entity unified by the “common possession of a rich heritage of memories”.

However, one might ask to which “above and beyond” of the colonial period should reference be made ? All ethnicities could claim, as does V.Y. Mudimbe, and before him Cheik Anta Diop in his famous *Nations Nègres et Culture* (2009 [1954]), the right to be imagined as nations (Mudimbe 1994: 66), and for the most part, they are experienced as such, whether they predate colonial conquest or became a reality during that specific period (Amselle & M’Bokolo 1985). One can see both the necessity for new States to invoke them, whether in the form of temporally undetermined concepts – « tradition », « custom », « pre-colonial » (Galitzine-Loumpet : 2011 : 18-23) – as well as the necessity to control them, in as much as they are included in a larger framework, at the risk indeed of creating a voluntarily essentialized “negro” culture (*culture Nègre*) (Senghor 1967 : 9).

## Off-site: Performance against the Museum

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the temporal continuity that had been broken down by the colonial museums was recreated through demonstrations of the performative aspects of African cultures - that is to say by showcasing a certain cultural vitality outside of the confines of the museum. The cultural festivals that multiplied throughout the provinces, celebrated the diversity that constitutes the nation, and participated in the elaboration of a supra-ethnic sentiment (Andrieu 2007: 89, Sow 2010), and in the legitimization of an “authentic” Nation-State as in the case of the Zaïre of Mobutu (White 2006: 46). On a larger scale, festivals celebrating the vitality of the African culture came to support pan-African ideologies from the *Négritude* of Senghor to the *Conscientism* of Nkrumah, or to the Bantu philosophy.

The most emblematic of these manifestations is without contest the world festival of Negro Arts, which took place in Dakar from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1966, under the auspices of President Senghor. It was then a question of transforming « Art Nègre » into a political project and ontological affirmation, so as to « become once again producers of civilisation » (Senghor 1966a cited in Ficquet and Gallimardet 2009: 142), and thus reinvent a pan-African identity to incarnate, more than a territory, the idea of a Nation (Kipré 2005: 26). Other than a symposium on the “Function and Signification of Negro-African Art in the Life of the People, and by the People”, the festival also included an important exhibition entitled “Negro art: sources, evolution, expansion”, which gathered pieces from collections the world-over in a “Dynamic Museum” (*Musée dynamique*) devoted to non-permanent exhibitions – officially for security reasons, it was not presented in the museum of IFAN. Inaugurated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1966, the museum called for by President Senghor displayed almost six hundred pieces selected by prestigious commissioners<sup>5</sup>. Beyond that, it introduced a modern museum culture for Africa in opposition to ethnographic perspectives (Ficquet and Gallimardet 2009: 152). This attempt to place the production of discourse in an alternative space lasted until 1977, when the school of dance, directed by Maurice Béjart, replaced the museum. Meanwhile, the exhibitions of internationally recognized European artists, from Kandinsky to Picasso,<sup>6</sup> had demonstrated the contribution of African art to the Avant-gardes and to the great national narrative of European modernity, and helped define an African identity via an outside recognition of its quality. Ephemerally reopened between 1982 and 1990 before becoming the seat of the Supreme Court, the “Dynamic Museum” was an attempt to integrate the ideal of the universal museum. In so doing, however, it formulated an enduring illusion about the capacity of African art to sublimate historical tensions by appearing as the unique incarnation of national cultural heritage. It also validated a distinction between art (exhibition) and craft (for sale, beyond the confines of the museum). Moreover, “craft” underwent a transformation during the independences, due to its proximity to museum spaces that in the long term contributed to a marginalisation of the museum.

The celebration of “living culture” promotes a know-how that incarnates the values of transmission. The colonial museums often arose from craft centres; the national museums that appeared in the colonial period hosted centres for craft production, either around or inside of the space of the museum itself. The most impressive example of the interpenetration between these two worlds is probably the National Museum of Niger at Niamey. Founded in 1958 by the archaeologist Pablo Toucet in the vicinity of the pavilion of an IFAN centre with the support of Boubou Hama, director of the centre and soon to be President of the National Assembly, the

museum was mandated to represent the multicultural nation, and in so doing, offered the added value of proving the virtue of colonial sciences. The entire development of the “national museum” is of interest: detached in 1965 from the IFAN centre— seven years after Nigerian independence –, and directed by Toucet until 1974, the museum currently includes a zoo, a botanical garden and “garden of the nations” (created in 1963), a craft centre and village (1960), a school for the training of the handicapped (1971), the mausoleum of the « tree of Ténéré », as well as nine pavilions housing collections. According to a chronology that bears witness to the progressive re-appropriation of the most ancient past, as well as the dependence of the museum on its partners: the ethnography pavilion “Boubou Hama” (previous collection of IFAN, 1959), the costume and music pavilion Pablo Toucet (1963), the rock art pavilion (1969-70), the palaeontology and prehistory pavilion (1970, CNRS), the pavilion of uranium (1985), and, finally, a pavilion of temporary exhibitions and a park of dinosaurs inaugurated in 1998 in collaboration with the National Museum of Natural History of Paris. It is difficult to elaborate an *a posteriori* definition for such an ensemble, if not to consider it as a « socio-cultural and natural puzzle » (Chaibou 2001: 47), or an « open air » museum. Statistics show that public interest is characterised by a desire for the depolarization of areas dedicated to the display of objects towards external activities, such as the zoo in the case of the Nigerian visitors, or spaces dedicated to craft for others.<sup>7</sup> Laid out according to different zones organized according to the seniority of their artisans and vendors, who the case being, live on-site – the village, built in the interior of the museum for the artisans, counts more than 200 inhabitants today, these zones of artisanal practice are billeted as instances of national and ethnographical cultural heritage. Distinctions have nonetheless appeared over time, imposing a hierarchy between « objects of tradition » and « objects of tourism », the former not only acting as validation for the latter. Regardless, these categories remain permeable: the 21 silver “southern crosses” (“*Croix du Sud*”) were most likely almost entirely elaborated by Pablo Toucet before becoming an emblem of national unity and a symbol of Niger. The national imagination was in this way constructed by mirroring an imaginary for tourism (Bondaz 2009 : 366 et 368).

In all of these cases, no matter how odd these museum ensembles seem, the reinventions of “traditions” occurred during a period when the nation was building itself around the process of recomposition of an autonomous pan-Africa that pre-existed the colonial era. In line with the former descriptive categories, either by its own design or the inversion of discourse, the recomposed and decentralised museum space does not construct itself in reaction to a history subsumed in the dialectical relationship between African art, considered a “spokesperson” or “direct witness” of the common history of all of Africa (Jewsiewicki 1988: 1), and the idea of geological seniority, the “cradle for humanity”, that could escape the temporalities of modern man. It constructs itself against the recent past, notably absent from the museum space<sup>8</sup>, or present in a form that could only contribute to the maintenance of the inadequacy of the museum to the new Nation-State (Fig.1).



Figure 1: Musée IFAN de l'hôtel de ville de Douala (Cameroon) 1990 (Thirty years after Independence) Cameroon (cliché G. Loumpet)

## The monument against the museum

Parallel to the festivals and the vast field of historical rewriting that occurred in scholarly manuals, the elaboration of a national identity also included monuments, considered here as all constructions that serve to present a historical element of national importance, or express a position on this subject. After the independences and from the middle of the 1980s, commemorative monuments and vernacular or colonial architecture were reinvested to express elements of a great narrative, staging precise or secular historical events such as slavery, for example. Due to their visibility and symbolic function, they act as places for memory or *lieux de mémoire*, but also as museum objects to scale of the national territory: they either substitute museums to signify history or in the case of museum buildings, the architecture represents an historical moment, thus allowing the container to take precedent over its content. This section of our article does not intend to provide a detailed analysis of museum architecture, a study that remains to be undertaken, but rather outlines some of the functions of their buildings in the post-independence context of elaborating a cultural heritage.

Generally speaking, the national museums of the sub-Saharan African capitals tend to either reuse all kinds of former colonial edifices like the ancient buildings of the French Marine at Libreville, for example, or locales from the IFAN centre in Abidjan. They often reemploy former sites of power, like the IFAN museum created in the ancient Palace of governors in Dakar, and the National costume museum in 1981 at Grand Bassam, the former capital of the Ivory Coast. In Cameroon, it was in the dilapidated residence of the German governor (known as the 'palace Hans Dominik' used until the end of the First World War) that the first national museum displayed different pieces – essentially statues and masks exhibited without clear classification. Prior to this, the general tourism delegation of Yaoundé substituted as a national museum, exposing objects of art and hosting the national celebration of the return of the royal ancestor's statues, *Afo-a-Kom*, stolen a decade beforehand and restituted in 1973 by the United States. This is the first instance of such an event in sub-Saharan Africa, marking the awakening of a conscience about national heritage. In November of 1988, the renovated headquarters of the French governors that had served as the presidential palace for the first president of Cameroon,

Ahmadou Ahidjo from 1960 to 1984, was reattributed to become the new national museum. Since 1991, the team in charge of the creation of the museum has been able to measure the symbolic importance of this consistently vandalised site, loaded with the ambivalent charge of memories that reflect the absence of political consensus over the recent history of the country (as illustrated by the fact that the remains of the president Ahidjo have never been repatriated from their exile in Dakar). Even today, it is still considered as the “ancient presidency”, and the national museum was never really able to erase its former function<sup>9</sup>. In a different context, the Museum that was housed in the same buildings as the residence of Marshal Mobutu was looted at the same time as the residential part, underlining the consequences of the over personalization of Great Narratives. As we will see further on, in different cases, this personalization appears as a characteristic of post-colonial great narrative building in West and Central Africa.

Inversely, the purpose built architecture of the national museums of Niger and Mali are a result of an adaptation of vernacular architecture, as is the case with many museums in Nigeria, from Jos to Kano. Since the creation of the first pavilion in 1959, the National Museum of Niger in Niamey has attempted to create a hypothetical syncretism by integrating a “wise combination of Hausa palatial architecture, the vaulted arches and arcades of Sahelian mosques and the domes of the Fatimid mosques (...) decorated with the geometrical motifs of the Zinder region » (Chaibou 2001 : 49) with the motifs of a transnational community, the Tuaregs, who pose problems for regional politics. The architectural style and colours used elaborate a metanarrative that unifies the representation of a nation that is fragmented throughout the various locations of the National Museum (Fig.2). It thus becomes a measure for the authenticity of the traditions put on display as well as the means to express the legitimacy of a supra-ethnic order. The pavilion is the first “object” to be exposed, to the detriment of its contents. In the eyes of the tourist it has progressively come to represent a tradition of the independent Nation-State, a recognition that has been generalised by the reuse of some of its architectural characteristics in urban spaces.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 2: National Museum of Niger *Musée National du Niger* (entrée principale)

The National Museum of Mali (<http://www.mnm-mali.org/>) in Bamako followed yet another path. Initially established in the classrooms of an engineering school, nationalised in 1960, the



museum was reinstalled in a neo-Sudanese styled building in 1982 (architect Jean-Loup Pivin), invented during colonial times and given the status of cultural heritage by the Malian State (Arnoldi 2006 : 66). In 2002, new buildings were added and renovated, notably a vast garden comprising small-scale reconstitutions of remarkable national monuments (the mosque of Djenné, for example). Presented as a local initiative and a collaborative effort with France, le museum nonetheless kept the traditional categories of Art in their organisation of the exhibitions: Archaeology / Ethnography (*Mali Millénaire*), technique (*Textiles du Mali*, 200 pieces), rituals (*Chefs d'œuvre d'Arts rituels*). Over the past few years, the most important transformation has consisted in the introduction of an exposition entitled “*Contemporary Africa*” (*Afrique contemporaine*) involving 82 pieces from continental artists but also artists from France, Tahiti and Australia<sup>11</sup>. Although diverse, the temporary exhibitions privilege, as does the architecture of the building itself, the demonstration of a neo-tradition, modern and ahistorical.

Beyond the architecture of the museums themselves, the often composite architectures of family heritage, (*patrimoines familiaux*, Daavo 2001 : 73) royal palaces, community museums, cultural goods or sites susceptible of being classed as historical, can also come to be considered as part of the country's cultural heritage. The dual process of musealizing culture and recognising it as heritage is directly linked to the convention on world heritage of 1972, as, for example, in the Palace of Abomey (classified in 1985 and again in 2007), with a total of 184 buildings spread out over 47 hectares. At the crossroads of “living” culture and local history, these cultural heritage sites broaden the field of what can be considered to be a “museum” by integrating the container and the content, building and ritual sites, signs and objects. Accordingly, these places constitute a spatial and memorial “in between” that is fundamental to their integration in the national narrative, and to the superposition of affective, national or regional cultural heritage (such as the program “The Slave Route” initiated by Unesco in 1994). Such ensembles are often central to issues tying together various local and national concerns, as vassal villages or new elites look to individualise their territory along lines that have progressively become standardised (Martineau 2009: 105) or in the context of renegotiating traditions that have been re-valorised by the gaze of the Other (Gérard 1999: 942).

The conflict surrounding places of historical importance is particularly significant in Gorée, characterized as an “island of memory” (Camara 2001: 83).<sup>12</sup> Several museums founded at different moments, of which at least two - the historic Museum of Senegal in Fort d'Estrées, inaugurated in 1989 by IFAN as the successor of the former historical museum of the A.O.F.; and the House of Slaves, a conjoint initiative of the world Festival of Negro Arts and its curator Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye, are engaged in a direct confrontation with each other (Gaugue 1999b). A place of memory more than a museum, the House of Slaves, receives far more visitors than the historical “western-style” museum, including many Heads of State. Its existence lead to the inclusion of Gorée in the world heritage site list in 1978, and a virtual tour is also available on the Unesco website (<http://webworld.unesco.org/goree/fr/visit.shtml>). Since 1996, the island's exact function during the slave trade has been questioned by western journalists and scholars and paradoxically this has awakened a re-evaluation of the importance that it has been accorded not only to the grand national, but also to the grand global narrative. A vast memorial is currently in the works. ([http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id\\_article=66](http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id_article=66)).



Finally, commemorative monuments of the anticolonial resistance and the struggle for independence, or for African unity, erected in the centre of large urban spaces can be considered an important expression of great historical narratives. In Bamako, notably, Mary-Jo Arnoldi has analysed the ideological spaces created by such monuments since 1992 by the president Alpha Oumar Konaré (also the former president of ICOM), underlining their contribution to the marginalisation of museum spaces (Arnoldi 2003: 58). The integration of history in the city equally reflects the correlation between changes in the regime and reinventions in the great narrative - a political transformation in which the museum ironically provides the continuity of a stabilised “tradition” with limited impact on civil society. This situation clearly depends on the cultural policies of the Nation-State, which was for many years been active in excluding citizens in favour of the elite (Kipré 2005 : 29); however, it also seems to depend on a recent division of tasks, where the enactment of “tradition” is left to the communities, and the national museum is reserved as a place for visitors from outside of the nation. The dates given here must be considered indicative; as a matter of fact, since the 1980s, different currents have contributed in parallel to redefining the function of national museums or to the creation of new spaces.

### **A new stage for the great narrative**

The museum has made reappearance on the national stage in the context of the renewal of great narratives. Several reasons explain this: the growing time lapse since the moment of independence, the contexts of democratization (following Mitterand’s speech of La Baule in June 1990), and the alternation of political parties in power, not to mention the impact of programs of intergovernmental organisations (UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOM, The French university Senghor in Alexandria), or others (West African Museum Programme), that have financed inventories, rehabilitated buildings, and trained museum staff. These new enterprises demonstrate the rise in power of cultural heritage in sub-Saharan Africa: capable of regenerating that unstable and exhausted first generation of great narratives, placing the universal within reach, a temptation that is all the more irresistible as it is the subject of great competition between different nation-states.

Several approaches to their analysis are possible, covering distinct aspects of the question: on the one hand there are the renewals or simply the new museums being created, and on the other hand, the emergence of new actors or partners. In the French-speaking countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, the new personal implications of the heads of State (Chad, Senegal, Gabon) are emphasized, rather than the implementation of a veritable heritage policy, often left to the initiative of civil servants or citizens.

### **Renaming, rebuilding**

The requalification of cultural resources induced by international conventions has lead many museums to change their name, as in the case of the National Museum of Abidjan. Founded by Bohumil Holas on behalf of the IFAN in 1945 and subject of a restructuring proposal that was never implemented by Jean Gabus in 1967 (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000081/008119fo.pdf>), the museum considered a “National Museum” since 1972, became in 1994, the *Musée des civilisations de Côte d’Ivoire*. The substitution of the adjective “national” by the substantive “civilisations” in its plural form, shortly after the disappearance of Félix Houphouët-Boigny in December of 1994, and a few months after the reintroduction of the concept of

« ivity » (August 1995) is an interesting fact in and of itself. Employed as a synonym for community and ethnicity, it signifies a “new museum language”, according to Savané Yaya, former curator of the National Museum of Abidjan. It is not surprising that the rhetoric accords privilege to dialogue and diversity, breaking with “the reductive, particularizing, isolationist and static vision of Ivorian cultural heritage” explicitly understood as colonial<sup>13</sup>. In 2006, a “new vision” for the museum is again proposed by the exhibition “Cultural Identity and Cultural Mixity (*Identité culturelle et brassage des cultures*). It comprises five elements: archaeology, the socio-economic organisation of the Ivory Coast, the social and political organisation of “colonial times and times of traditional power” (“cult and spiritual objects”), and, finally, contemporary life.

In other cases, this rupture has been established by the affectation, or the construction, of new buildings. In Chad, the discovery of the Toumaï (*Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, 7 million years old) in 2001 by the Franco-Chadian Palaeoanthropological Mission, allowed for a renewal of the national narrative. The former narrative was essentially founded on the Sao civilisation, which integrated the tri-national area of Chad, Cameroon (where the majority of identified archaeological sites are located) and Nigeria. The importance of the notion of anteriority, the famous « cradle of humankind » - a title previously held by Ethiopia - was also favoured by the discovery and exploitation of new petroleum reserves, that provided the necessary means for the construction of a quadrangular building costing 12 billion francs CFA - the counterpart of the new national library. On the occasion of the inauguration of the new National museum, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2010, the minister of Culture expressed himself in no uncertain terms as:

Very proud to be Chadian, a descendant of Toumaï (...) and of the country that is the cradle of humankind. Thanks to this historical discovery, our National Museum will become, no one will doubt it, the centre of Central Africa, if not the centre of the world.  
(<http://www.journaldutchad.com/article.php?aid=2053>)

The Ivorian and Chadian examples attest to a reappropriation of the museum that assigns it a conventional function— that is, to celebrate the glory of a Nation-State inscribed within specific territorial limits, and to eventually integrate ancient cultures related to broader territorial contexts.

The initiative of president Wade in Dakar claims a more radical ideological and symbolic rupture, without necessarily changing the rules of engagement. The Senegalese Head of State defines himself as the inventor of a « modern vision of African culture ». His plan, presented as part of the category of « large-scale projects » on the government’s website<sup>14</sup> is characterised by its monumentality. The cultural park, set in 10 hectares at the heart of the city, proposes the following “seven wonders”: the Grand National Theatre (1800 places, inaugurated in April 2011), the School of Architecture, the Archives and National Library, the House of Music, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Black Civilisations. The park is crowned by the square to African memory<sup>15</sup> (a sculpture of the African continent and two pantheons of neoclassical inspiration inaugurated in 2009, still remain empty) and by the monument to African Renaissance, an imposing and controversial statue erected by North Korea in exchange for urban and agricultural lands. Celebrated as a statue taller than the Statue of Liberty, and destined to last 1200 years, politically the statue represents a call for the creation of the United States of Africa<sup>16</sup>.

Like other cultural institutions, the future Museum of Black civilisations (<http://www.gouv.sn/spip.php?article1073>), whose foundations were laid in December of 2011, is the work of the People’s Democratic Republic of China. This shift to new cultural partners in the

context of projects traditionally carried out with the help of the former colonial ruler is symbolic of the desired change (Fig.3). The plans for the Museum, officially conceived by the architect Pierre Goudiaby Atépa for President Wade, were at first set to integrate the former plans elaborated by the Brazilian architect Javier Ramirez for Léopold Sendar Senghor. Interpreted as a potential case of plagiarism, it became a polemic that was even brought to the attention of the Director General of Unesco.

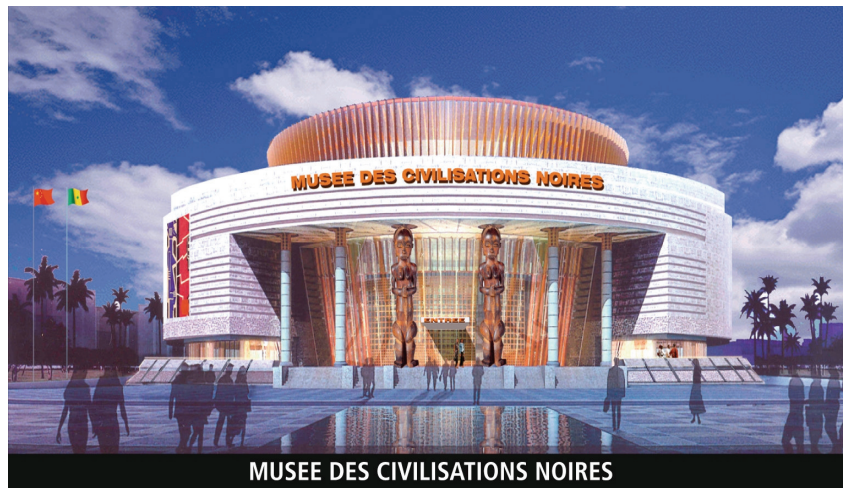


Figure 3: Previsualisation of the future Museum of Black civilisations, Dakar  
([http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php?id\\_article=50](http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php?id_article=50))

This detail underscores the dual character of this heritage construction related to national cultures but also to Senghor's push for a new pan-Africanism; indeed the latter's name and intentions are perpetually put forward to justify the project. In other words, it is a present-day monumentalisation of the achievements of the independence, a transmission of its heritage in stone, a way of catching up with the past and a means of reparation (Jewsiewicki 2004 : 8) From this perspective, the monumentality employed aims to demonstrate here within an African context, the criteria for "civilisation" that were elaborated elsewhere<sup>17</sup>. It is integrated into the great narrative through the association of the project with the political figure who initiated it, reinforced by the particular stature that is accorded to age in most African cultures. The game between the staging of national and African history, and between history and the commemoration of an emancipatory gesture is enough to give meaning to the project, and its content becomes less important than its existence. As in the case of the edification of the aforementioned pantheons, the collections of the future Museum of Black Civilisations have not yet been formed, but rather left to be defined at a later date by an international consulting commission. We will have to wait and see if this project will influence the great Senegalese narrative – and how the latter will adapt to the exhibition frame offered by China. The cultural park in itself exhibits a post-colonial situation, illustrating the strong influence of the past whose contestation here (in terms of cost, form, real functions, adequacy) paradoxically reinforces its hold.

## Deplacing

The most important reconfigurations are due to the transformation of museum spaces, or to put it another way, to the renegotiation of their perimeters, brought about either by the State, or, on

the contrary, by various communities that appropriate for themselves a national narrative left, so to speak, vacant.

This is the case of so called “Community” museums, developed in West Cameroon over the past ten years, in line with traditional heritage practices, reinforced by the Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Unesco 2003), and also known as treasures of chiefdoms, “*cases patrimoniales*”, or cultural centres. These museums can be micro-local, or identity-oriented, as in the example of a project initiated in 2005 by an Italian NGO, with the support of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). Other than creating museums in collaboration with four important chiefdoms, the Italian initiative resulted in the sanctification of entire territories, proposing an “itinerary based on collective memory” to include woods and sacred springs (<http://www.museumcam.org/>). This follows the current trend to take into account and even to « monumentalize » natural resources as outlined in the 2003 convention on intangible heritage and the development of the notion of « cultural landscape » (for example « Ecosystem and cultural landscape of Lopé-Okanda » listed in 2007).

But these museums can also be the result of local and national initiatives as in the case of the Museum of Civilisation of Dschang, which was inaugurated in November of 2010 in partnership with the city of Nantes and the Pays de la Loire. The Museum of Civilisations appears as a synthesis, including a panorama that takes the visitor from the origins to present day Cameroon, and explores colonization and struggles for independence. The private community museum substitutes itself in this case to the Nation-State (“At issue here, is the reconstruction of the genesis of a State and of an independent Nation.” (*Il s’agit ici de retracer la genèse d’un Etat, puis d’une Nation à part entière*), <http://www.wobook.com/WBRM0od5m72h>). Incidentally it follows the same museological plan as the one elaborated by the National Museum of Cameroon (Loumpet & Loumpet-Galitzine 1991 et 1993). Its potential as a space for the creation of a counter-narrative remains unexploited as the cultural capital of the museum is rather used as part of the tourist agenda called *la Route des chefferies* (<http://www.routedeschefferies.com/fr/index.php>)<sup>18</sup>. This means that it is integrated into a project focused on local heritage that values the establishment of intercultural dialogue expressed through a discourse of apparent consensus. It is nonetheless the only museum to deal with the question of the recent past on a national scale and significantly it is located in a region of political opposition. Although this fact does not presuppose a particular political orientation for the museum, it does underline the displacement of the great narrative of the national museum, and, in so doing, its absence in the state museum. Additionally, the legitimisation of this undertaking does not come from the nation state and refers rather to conventions or agreements with major European museums, as shown through the programme of collaboration established between the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) and the Museum of Civilisation.

The last example attests to yet another form of relocation. The Virtual National Museum of Gabon (<http://www.gabonart.com/visites-virtuelles/musee-virtuel-des-arts-et-traditions>)<sup>19</sup> was inaugurated in November of 2006. Describing Gabon as the “the first country in the world to have created its one virtual museum of arts and traditions” it is presented as the wish of the deceased president Omar Bongo Odimba. The museum offers the following collections: objects digitalized in 3 D, sound and audio-visual archives taken from the Museum of Arts and Traditions of Gabon at Libreville, and from private collections. As such, the collection largely



surpasses the Museum of Arts and Traditions of Gabon, founded in 1960 by researchers of Orstom, at the insistence of the Gabonese president Léon Mba. The museum did not gain national status until 1975 (Perrois 1999: 348) and is situated in the building that houses the headquarters of Elf-Gabon.

The Virtual Museum of Arts and Traditions of Gabon merits comprehensive study, for its form – the use of a predicate of modernity – and everything from the elements chosen for the collection, the discourse that surrounds these objects and a presentation of contradictory and partial data seemingly indifferent to scientific concerns, invoke all of the presuppositions of the “Africa of the ancestors and mysteries, of authenticity and of purity” (*« l’Afrique des ancêtres et des mystères, de l’authenticité et de la pureté »*). Even the presenter, a young “metis” woman who speaks Parisian French is named *Owali*, (her real name, Christiane, appears to be less exotic). The exhibition conforms surprisingly with colonial representations and is divided into five sections: Origins, Archaeology, the Ritual Room, the Cult of the Ancestors, and Daily life, a fact that is all the more significant when considered in parallel with the development of a heritage attitude to the ecosystem of the great equatorial forest and cultural productions.



Figure 4: <http://www.gabonart.com/visites-virtuelles/musee-virtuel-des-arts-et-traditions>

As interesting as this attempt to deterritorialize the museum is, the virtual museum that Gabon is so proud of, presents some particular problems. The first is the exact status of the museum: is it a virtual museum designed to mirror the visit to a real museum or a new objet, essentially destined for external visitors? Or, more precisely, are we faced with a new “musée imaginaire”, in the sense of Malraux, transforming and adapting new forms of auto-representation and affirming modernity?

Above and beyond its evident function as a display case, the museum articulates a precise message employing the terms of Unesco. In the section that precedes the visit (but which is not obligatory), entitled “Why such a museum?”, a state official concludes that:

“Our ambition, moreover, our hope, is that thanks to cyberculture, Gabon will be able to receive in return, and in numerical form, the historic collections of the Gabonese cultural heritage that have been dispersed throughout the different collections of the world, to create the right to a cultural memory for our children and for ourselves ».

In fact, the “right to cultural memory” that is at once irrefutable and ambiguous is to be understood in the context of a long history of denial. Hence, the second comment draws on the transformation of conflicts surrounding the restitution of collections: the proposal to return the art works in numerical form is a positive initiative that aims to settle an unbalanced and often tense situation between the African States and the intergovernmental agencies concerned. Though the terms implicitly attribute guilt, they also show a good will that is difficult to ignore. But what or whose memory and what tradition are they referring to? The notion of the object and art has in itself been modified: in the different sections of the visit, the objects, constantly estheticized, are presented without information about scale or dimension, and in most cases, are vastly over-proportioned, with bracelets appear as large as tambourines, biface stone tools that are 25 times their original size etc.

In the same manner, audio-visual documentary sources that mix images of ethnographic studies from scientific fieldwork with often-problematic reconstitutions of traditional practices are always idealized and difficult to differentiate for an untrained eye. Finally, the aesthetic value of these numerically reproduced objects, largely dependent on the foreign collections to which they belong, calls once again into question the modes of selection and representation. This field of investigation is particularly interesting, providing opportunities to rethink such notions as authenticity, the function of the museum and its territories - that is to say their numeric and physical non-realities (*dé-réalité*).

On the whole, these new museographical constellations bring to light considerable recompositions: from the great national narrative as a traditional prerogative of State run institutions to these different projects that, either through their presidential backing, or their dependence on community or individual initiatives, allow us to rethink the relationship between institutional norms and their political/ethical translations, both local and international. In this perspective, the continuity of cultural heritage policies is not necessarily guaranteed: they are on the contrary characterised by the fact that they are constantly being renegotiated, through their inclusion, undoubtedly essential, of the cultural heritage programs of international agencies, reinterpreted according to the needs of local politics.

## **Conclusion: A necessarily unattainable consensus?**

The unattainable character of any consensus in the relationship that unites the museum and the great narrative that was offered as a question in the title of this article, can be affirmed in the case of the former French African countries as examined here. The result of an incompleteness and inadequacy on both sides, arising from distinct issues, expressed through modalities of absence, of repetition and of inversion and influenced by varying experiences of temporality in dealing with the weight of a difficult past that is still only too present. On the one hand, the great narratives that nurture the constitution of the national self still require recognition in the mirror of the West. On the other hand, the museum as an inherited institution with its rigid structures, exhibits an arbitrary and fragmentary image of national cultures in the context of incomplete ethnographic paradigms or a multiculturalism still struggling with the ambivalent power of ethnicity. Seen from this perspective, the relationship is always necessarily biased, always potentially alienating. Equally it points to the limits of an African art privileged in place of, or against, history: a situation that the African museums will find it difficult time to disengage from;



all the more so as it is exactly the situation that is valued in the West as a means of bypassing anthropological perspectives – as the value and essence of an African ethos.

However, if the process of defining cultural heritage is the result of a misunderstanding, of an “ontological trap” (Jeudy 1990 : 7), this unattainable consensus is most likely also the bearer of a certain margin of positive indefinability. Necessarily impossible, it allows for the chance to come back to certain issues at some future point, more especially perhaps due to the increasing influence of the notion of intangible heritage, problematic in moral terms, it may be able to bring together the various parties involved. Yet, and this is not as paradoxical as it might appear, especially in this particular context, it also attests to the production of a « meta-culture » of heritage that is progressively erasing the need for a consensus in the form of a great narrative of the national museum and even of the very notion of the nation.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See notably <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20111115-autorites-decident-finalement-ouvrir-musee-senghor-maison-ancien-president>, <http://www.senface.com/blogs/225/musee-senghor-de-wade-les-reactions>, <http://www.slateafrique.com/68263/senegal-le-musee-des-polemiques-senghor> which evoke “the true spirit of Senghor and its cultural goods » (A. Lamine Sall, Nov. 15, 2011)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.louvre.fr/expositions/le-louvre-invite-j-m-g-le-clezio-%E2%80%93-le-musee-monde>. See equally « Invasion ou invitation ? » : <http://videos.tf1.fr/jt-we/le-clezio-expose-l-artisanat-au-louvre-forme-a-part-entiere-d-art-6809556.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Notably the exposition *Magiciens de la Terre* (Grand Hall of la Villette / Centre Georges Pompidou 1989)
- <sup>4</sup> But opened to the public in 1966.
- <sup>5</sup> Including Georges-Henri Rivière, Pierre Mauzé, Alexandre Adandé or Engelberg Mveng
- <sup>6</sup> Kandinsky et Miro (1970), Chagall (1971), Picasso (1972), Hundertwasser (1973), Soulages (1974) ou Manessier (1976)
- <sup>7</sup> In 2009, a museum survey presented the hierarchy of frequentation in the following manner: the hippopotamus’ basin, the pavilion of costume, the monkey cage, the pavilion of palaeontology and prehistory (Chaïbou 2001: 54-56). Not included in the survey, craft is presented by the same curator as a response to “the principal mission of the National Museum of Niger, that consists in reaffirming national unity and erecting a cultural Nigerian identity.” (Chaïbou 2001: 52)
- <sup>8</sup> According to the findings of Anne Gaugue in her thesis work in geography, of the 217 museums identified in « tropical Africa » (all of Africa with the exception of South Africa, Ethiopia and the insular microstates), 30 presented exhibitions dealing with historical content and only three spoke of colonial history (Gaugue 1997, 1999 : 337).
- <sup>9</sup> The project of the Cameroon Museum, open to an international call for proposals, was awarded to Germain Loumpet and Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet in 1992. A commission t worked for its realisation between 1992 and 2001. The reasons for its failure, too long to discuss here, are notably related to political tensions .
- <sup>10</sup> The guide of the National Museum of Niger, published by the Minister of National Education in 1975, displays one of these motifs on its cover.
- <sup>11</sup> [http://www.mnm-mali.org/page\\_expositions.html](http://www.mnm-mali.org/page_expositions.html)
- <sup>12</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/fr/list/26>. The island of Gorée has been classified as historic site since 1944.
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=3091>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.gouv.sn/spip.php?article1073> see also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1O1wNsfmaM>
- <sup>15</sup> Here again, lexical and theoretical fields are significant: [http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id\\_article=53](http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id_article=53)
- <sup>16</sup> [http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id\\_article=57](http://www.culture.gouv.sn/article.php3?id_article=57) et <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbLXplepoxw>
- <sup>17</sup> For an idea of its monumentality <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BriT32LdUGA&feature=related>. President Wade reacted to the critiques of the gigantic scale of the monument of African Renaissance in the following manner: « What was I to do, erect a small statue? The Statue of Liberty, is it excessive? The Christ our Saviour that looks over Rio, is it megalomaniacal? Do we ask ourselves why the Egyptians constructed the Sphinx? ». See also Mudimbe & Jewsiewicki (1990) for the paradoxical reproduction of “a culture of imperialism”.
- <sup>18</sup> Pour l’inscription de musées sur les sites web, voir Fauvelle-Aymar (2002) et Cafuri (2004)

- <sup>19</sup> The virtual Museum of Arts and Traditions of Gabon was realized by the french enterprise Novacom Inc., on the basis of collections from the National Museum of Libreville, and from private collections (Gérard Boyer, Pierre Amrouche) or French public collections (Musée de l'Homme, d'Aquitaine..) as well as Swiss (Neuchâtel) and the expertise of Gabonese museologists and historians.

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