Iconoclash: From “Tradition” to “Heritage” in Global Africa

by Z.S. Strother

’Tis the moment when “tradition” is metamorphosing into “heritage” in the literature on Africa. Through the model of “world heritage,” UNESCO is forging the universalism demanded by international institutions by providing a template to negotiate local difference within a global matrix. In the process, “heritage” is transformed from a tool articulating national identities to one assuring global interconnectivity. In this issue, Peter Probst wisely asks us to consider the “iconoclash” of this process: what is being created and what is being destroyed through the imposition of a model of “heritage”?

The term “iconoclash” originates in the groundbreaking exhibition organized in 2002 in Karlsruhe, Germany, by Bruno Latour and Peter Galison (two prominent historians of science), the artist and critic Peter Weibel, and a team of art historians. Since then, “iconoclash” has become one of those phrases, like the “invention of tradition,” which circulate independently from the original text and take on lives of their own. In this case, “iconoclash” is often in danger of being interpreted as a generic conflict over the nature or function of images.

For Bruno Latour, “iconoclash” marks a space of ambiguity situated between image-making and image-breaking (2002:22). Art historians will find compelling evidence for such ambiguity in Calvinist iconoclasm during the Reformation. During the sixteenth century, reformers in the Netherlands were inspired to pull down statues, to break apart altarpieces, and to empty the churches of ornate candlesticks and church furniture. And yet, this orgy of destruction, painful for so many, unleashed formidable creative drives since it pushed painters to build a secular market for their work by developing new genres: flower paintings, fruit paintings, church interiors, genre paintings, group portraits, intimate biblical narratives for domestic interiors. Without Calvin and Zwingli, we would never have known Rembrandt or Vermeer. As Latour asks, how is it that iconoclasts always seem to generate a “fabulous population of new images, fresh icons … stronger idols?” (2002:14–15).

The close relationship between image-making and image-breaking is essential to the history of the institutions of monument and museum, so much so that scholars have emphasized that “elimination and preservation are two sides of the same coin” (Gamboni 1997:331). Françoise Choay argued brilliantly that the French Revolution was not only responsible for “[b]urned churches, toppled and decapitated statues, sacked châteaux” but for preservation strategies that govern international discourse today (2001:63ff.). In 1789, the Constituent Assembly of the French Republic transferred the property of clergy, exiled aristocrats, and the crown to the nation. Choay analyzes the impact of a new vocabulary centered on “heritage” (patrimoine) in speeches and decrees through which national antiquties “metamorphosed into assets of trade value, into material possessions” (ibid., p. 65).

By invoking inheritance, a ready-made series of procedures was available to govern the transformation of a “heterogeneous” group of objects—ranging from table forks to gold reliquaries to townhouses—into “national heritage” (ibid., pp. 66–67). During the eighteenth century, law required an inventory to be made of the deceased’s movable and immovable property to assess economic value. This procedure is still followed in certain counties in the original thirteen states. For example, in Montgomery County, Maryland, records must be submitted following the death of a resident to account for all real estate and moveable goods. A licensed appraiser lists and attributes monetary value to all possessions. These values will be used to calculate tax liability and to distribute assets according to the laws of the state and the attested wishes of the deceased. One can easily perceive the ramifications of this model in current practice where, however “price-less” the work of art, economic value must be ascribed by the museum for reasons of insurance evaluation and by the donor in order to claim tax deductions.

The essential first stage of assigning commercial value allows for the comparison of wildly heterogeneous goods and for the ranking of their relative cultural importance. By inserting the goods into the marketplace, it also permits their redefinition as “monument” or “work of art” by stripping (or at least diminishing) religious or other functional associations.

This juridical history helps explain the overwhelming focus of international heritage initiatives on preserving land, buildings, and things as opposed to “culture” or cultural practices. In 2003, UNESCO expanded their mandate to include “intangible heritage,” pushed by practices in Japan and other parts of the world. However, the model of commodified goods is still determinant. To what degree are the “living treasures of Japan” or masks in Zambia “intangible,” i.e. impalpable to touch? Instead, it is the rationale of the financial world that legitimates cultural practices where “intangible” refers to property such as bank deposits.

If “heritage” is culture conceived as property, it is also property obtained through legally determined rights of succession, particularly those defined by patrilineal birthright. This legacy is particularly clear in French, where (continued on p. 4)
the word is *patrimoine*. In the crucible of revolutionary France, seized buildings and goods were transformed into the inherited property, the cultural patrimony, of the French people. The initial justification for the dépôts of confiscated goods, soon baptized "museums," was to provide "instruction of the nation" in "civic values and history, as well as artistic and technical skills" (Choay 2001:67). At a moment when it was by no means clear if the nation should invest precious funds in preserving the "idols of tyranny and superstition" (ibid., p. 72), defenders found their most persuasive arguments for "national value" to be how such monuments and objects 'dart could be marshaled to provide narratives of civic duty, models to industry and manufacturing, and attractions to develop a tourist industry (ibid., p. 77–78). Some texts mentioned the importance of providing "masterpieces" to train artists but this was incidental (ibid., p. 78).

Although the Revolution failed in six years, the model of heritage as cultural patrimony is still with us. Donald Preziosi has argued that the museum has proved to be a formidable tool in articulating and justifying the modern nation-state because it teaches how to weave narratives from collections of objects:

"Museums, in short, established exemplary models for "reading" objects as traces, representations, reflections, or surrogates of individuals, groups, nations, and races and of their "histories." They were civic spaces designed for European ceremonial engagement with (and thus the evocation, fabrication, and preservation of) its own history and social memory (1998:509)."

What he says about museums can be extended to monuments and heritage sites. The tangible fragment bolsters credibility for the stories linked to it.

In Europe and the US, "heritage" has long been used to legitimate the patrimonial state, the citizen, the nation. What will be the consequences in Africa as UNESCO acquires multiple "properties" (as "world heritage centers" are described)? During the twentieth century, the model for cultural history in Africa has been "tradition" rather than "heritage" and it is imperative that we explore the overlap and differences between the two conceptual categories.

According to Raymond Williams, the English term "tradition" originally referred to "matters handed down from father to son" but always conveyed a "very strong and often predominant sense of this entails respect and duty" (1983:319). "Tradition" therefore described an idealizing attitude towards the past that was always self-deceiving since, as Williams emphasized, the process of maintaining traditions must always and necessarily be discriminating or "selective" (ibid., p. 319). Williams remarks that in the modern period, "tradition" became a pejorative term referring to "habits or beliefs inconvenient to virtually any innovation" (ibid., p. 320). For the modernist imagination, "tradition" signifies what had been left behind—for good or ill—in the fast pace of social change. In the famous summation of Marx and Engels:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind (1948:12).

Critics constructed "tradition" as the antidote to the evils of modernization: as a source for communal identity, religious faith, and the healthy integration of past and present. Throughout the twentieth century, cultural interpreters wrote of "tradition" as a respectful engagement with the past in the literature on Africa. Nonetheless, since the 1990s, and many other scholars of African art have struggled to demonstrate that the selective appropriation of the past constitutes an act of re-invention, which radically reinterprets events and artistic practices for contemporary audiences (Strother 1995, 1998). In a recent issue of *African Arts*, Mary Nooter Roberts wrote that innovation in ""[t]radition-based African arts" sprang from perennial quest for relevance (2012:11). Olabiyi Yai has demonstrated how far modernist nostalgia misrepresents human reality. Yai explains that in Yoruba, the term for "tradition" is *àṣà*, derived from the verb *sà*, which means "to select, choose, discriminate, or discern." Consequently, *àṣà* is the product of a "deliberate choice (*sà*) based on discernment and awareness of historical practices and processes," whether by the individual or collective body. "And since choice presides over the birth of an *àṣà* (tradition), the latter is permanently liable to metamorphosis." Yai remarks that this receptivity to change explains what appears as an oxymoron in an English expression savored by Yoruba artists: "Our tradition is very modern" (1994:113–14). Sadly, however, recent scholarship has done little to shake the conviction, described by Williams, that "tradition" is at odds with modernity and represents little more than a mindless repetition of the past. In analyzing the interaction of "heritage" with "tradition" in Africa, it is important to remain mindful of unresolved tensions emerging from these competing representations of "tradition."

In European formulations, "heritage" carries with it the stench of death, coming into existence at the deathbed of the father, while "tradition" evokes a living relationship between parent and child. Whereas "heritage" comprises commodities, real estate, and movable goods assigned commercial value, "tradition" exists to the degree that it is able to cocoon human relationships from the capitalist economy. Ironically, the commercial value of an African mask is tied to its "authenticity," to the question of whether or not it was actually danced in rituals performed by individuals for the good of the community outside the global economy. Likewise, the altar sculpture’s authenticity lies in the coating of libations and sacrifices testifying to religious belief. Part of what moves European and American audiences is the promise that somewhere there exist communities with "fixed, fast-frozen relations" and where the holy is unprofaned. If "heritage" is culture conceived as property, "tradition" is culture conceived as ritual. Whereas "heritage" was initially mobilized in Europe and the US to negotiate the relationship of individual citizens to the nation, "tradition" is more oriented towards family relationships, which can be extended into clans, chieftaincies, and ethnicities.

In her article in this issue, Elisabeth Cameron has demonstrated that the model of "heritage" entered Africa in individual hands before the UNESCO initiatives. It is her provocative thesis that Belgian priests, inspired to preserve Kuba "heritage," manufactured a coherent and reproducible corpus that has been successful in promoting Kuba culture and in creating a market even as it proved fundamentally destructive to Kuba practice and creativity. As Catholic priests who wished to distance themselves from Kuba ritual and religion, the secular model of heritage focused on objects of art and history held evident appeal. One wonders: once heritage has been frozen, is there any way out?

In terms of UNESCO initiatives, the establishment of a world heritage site at Osun Grove in Osogbo, Nigeria in 2005 remains the best studied in Africa, thanks to the scholarship of Peter Probst (2011). UNESCO justification for the selection of Osogbo conforms to the norms for international heritage in emphasizing the importance of the site: it is described as the "largest" and most "revered" of Yoruba groves to survive and "unique" in sheltering a collection of twentieth century sculpture. It is telling that UNESCO downplays the importance of ritual in the annual Osun festival, instead implying that the Grove has become a "symbol for identity for the wider Yoruba diaspora" because of what it contains as a grove and sculpture garden.

When Elisabeth Cameron and I arrived in Osogbo in 2006, the town was still abuzz with excitement about the consequences of the heritage designation for "development." In fact, the economic value of "heri-
tage" became the primary subject of our interview with Ibrahim Mukandam, whose name had been linked by the rumor mill to iconoclastic attacks on sculptures by Susanne Wenger in the Grove. Mukandam was anxious to refute these allegations, emphasizing over and over again that he did not wish to be remembered as an "opponent of development." He applauded UNESCO's decision to turn the Grove into an "international tourist center" and merely sought reimbursement for the school he had built in the grove as far back as 1959—before Wenger made the grove internationally famous. He also remarked that the boundaries for the Grove had never been fixed until UNESCO made this a prerequisite for registration of the site. On the instructions of the government, Mukandam sought an assessment for his lost property, evaluated at 2,500,000 naira. In January 2006, his foundation, the Islamic and Arabic Studies Center, received a check for 500,000 naira from the National Museum, Osogbo, stipulating that the funds were "to assist" him with the costs of relocation. Mukandam interpreted this to mean that the government refused any claim to rights of ownership. The surveying of the "property," the conferral of cash value on both land and movable goods, and the hopes of many that UNESCO will "develop" its "property" according to "international standards" as an "international tourist center" demonstrate the full integration of African centers into the model of heritage established during the French Revolution.

While the existence of the Grove does not seem to trouble many, as least for now while there are still hopes for economic benefits, the role of the annual festival is another matter. Nigerians recognize that historically it is the religious ritual that distinguishes the site and attracts pilgrims (Fig. 1). In his book, Probst analyzes a controversial attempt by Osogbo's ruler Matanmi III and the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council to reinterpret the festival as a cultural institution:

It has been said times without number that this festival has no religious connotations as such. .... As a matter of our cultural base, Osun Festival stands for commemoration of founding of Osogbo as a settlement. It also stands for the remembrance of all the past monarchs, various warriors and patriots who had done a lot to make Osogbo a famous city of international repute (in Probst 2011:123).

Notably, Matanmi II attempted to shift focus from a site dedicated to a timeless, female-gendered orísa to one commemorating patri-linear inheritance and state-making. Moreover, he attempted to prioritize cultural history over religion. Since the French Revolution, the secularization of religious artifacts in museums and heritage sites has become part of a strategy to secure their preservation. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York goes so far as to give guards special training to prevent Catholics from praying before medieval altar-pieces in the Cloisters collection. Despite the good intentions, Rambelli and Reinders have made a compelling argument that the "striping" of "sacred value" and the transformation of religious icon into "art object, cultural property, institutional symbol" should be recognized as a form of iconoclasm because the metamorphosis of meaning is brutal and debilitating (2007:30). In the case of Osogbo, the Heritage Council was attempting to diffuse Muslim and Christian discomfort with orísa religion by transforming the festival into a "carnival" open to all; however, devotees of Osun experienced this redefinition as an attack on their beliefs and attempted to reinstate the festival as an act of "homage to the goddess" (Probst 2011:124).

If the very concept of "heritage" was generated through iconoclasm in the French Revolution, it continues to be a cause for "iconoclasm." Do we celebrate the creative reinvigoration of the festival for a global public? Or decry the destructive impact on rituals to Osun? As the forces for globalization intensify, it is likely that "heritage" will become the prevalent model for cultural history in Africa as elsewhere and it has the advantage thereby of escaping some of the "othering" of modernist definitions of "tradition." Unfortunately, it also seems likely that modernist conceptions of "tradition" as mindless repetition will reinforce heritage models of inheritance as a fixed (inventoried) group of objects and surveyed properties. Nonetheless, the Osogbo case suggests that more flexible African models of "tradition" might well conflict with "heritage" on several different registers and change it in ways unforeseen. At least for now, the Grove at Osogbo is able to accommodate multiple and clashing perspectives.

In the catalogue Iconoclash, Bruno Latour wrote that he hoped to push the public to move "[b]eyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art" (the subtitle for the exhibition). As historians of science, he and Peter Galison were invested in the topic because of the bitter dispute in scientific practice over the role of images for the past 150 years. Increasingly, theoretical discoveries in physics, geology, medicine, and many other fields are triggered by the images generated from a host of scientific instruments: particle chambers, bubble chambers, sonar, etc. And yet, there is a deep distrust of these images by the majority of the scientific community, which demands abstraction, "exactly that which does not depend on pictures" (Galison 2002:300).

Latour defines the image as a "sign, work of art, inscription, or picture that acts as a media-
in memoriam

William C. Siegmann
(1943–2011)

by Kevin D. Dumouchelle

There is a tradition among Liberian peoples that an object which once belonged to a deceased person may be used to contact the spirit of the deceased. When a person dies, a possession which he or she has been especially associated with in life—a ring, a spinning bobbin or a pipe, for example—may be taken by a relative and placed first in the hand of the deceased and then over his heart while the spirit of the deceased is told to depart in peace.

The spirit is asked not to look back in anger upon the living, but to aid in bringing fertility, health, and prosperity to the survivors and the community at large. The ancestral spirit is also called upon to return with his aid when hidden through this, his former possession, which the Kpelle call a namôa kôni or “rock of the ancestor.”

—William C. Siegmann, 1977: inside cover

William was, himself, the ultimate “rock of the ancestor.” As he explained in the preface to the catalogue he wrote in residence at the African Museum at Cuttington University College in 1977, a namôa kôni functioned as a conduit between one entering the ancestral realm and the memories that the individual in question left behind. William lived this larger principle as a mission. Bill’s life can be read as a series of ongoing and overlapping drives to make connections to and around African art.

As a connoisseur, Bill sought to restore links between an object and its original maker and users, in a tireless and often fruitful search for individual hands. As a scholar, his long and cherished time in the field allowed him unique insights uniting an object and its social life.

As a curator, he brought together a number of art adherents that the professor cultivated in the circle of early African art adherents that the professor cultivated in the circle of early African art. He caught the eye of Roy Sieber and became an essential member of the circle of early African art adherents that the professor cultivated in the circle of early African art. Upon the end of his Peace Corps service, Bill began with service with the Peace Corps in Liberia in the late 1960s. Here, he grew in his deep affection for the country, his conviction in the necessity of knowing the continent through time spent there and, above all, in his capacity for patience. Posted to Cuttington University College, where he taught history, Bill developed his skills in museum practice on the ground, founding the Africana Museum and developing its collections from scratch. Pivoting from working with practitioners of the arts of masquerade and initiation in the field to developing links with the art traders in the cities, Bill parlayed that penchant for patience into diplomatic skills that would pay off handsomely in his later work.

Yet Bill’s connection to Liberia remained profoundly and uniquely personal as well. He was adopted, in the most literal manner possible, by the Boly family of Bolahun, with whom he continued to hold a place as a brother, uncle, and son.

Returning to the US and embarking upon doctoral work in history at Indiana University upon the end of his Peace Corps service, Bill caught the eye of Roy Sieber and became an essential member of the circle of early African art adherents that the professor cultivated in Bloomington. Bill’s relationship to Sieber was one of mutual admiration and respect, with the “big man” of African art maintaining a uniquely deferential respect for Bill’s extended time in the field, and above all for an impeccable connoisseur’s eye that Sieber quickly recognized and admired.

Corrections

We regret that due to a proofreading error, Enid Schildkrodt’s surname was misspelled throughout the review of her book Dynasty and Divinity (co-authored with Henry John Drewal) in vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 90–91.

The editors would also like to state that the decision to blur sections of pictures published in Rachel Ama Asa Asengmann’s article “Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts” in vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 46–57, was solely that of the author of the piece.