Senghor identified this “maximum-being” with God and then cited Jean Jaurès, who was one of the founders, in 1920, of the French socialist party and, before that, of L’Humanité, which is still the daily newspaper published by the French Communist Party. Here are Jaurès’s words as quoted by Senghor:

Socialists today are forced by the imperatives of the struggle to stress materialism as absolute and total truth. After the victory, when they are able to examine it more closely, they will perceive that they cannot and must not abandon materialism, but rather complete it. They will realize that they are not expected to lose themselves in the supernatural, but that nature itself, opening its depths to the probing mind, lets God appear (Senghor 1964b: 142; emphasis in original).

God as the end of a process of emergence: yet another illustration of how Senghor’s African socialism reconciles African cosmologies, Teilhard de Chardin, and Bergson’s elan vital with historical materialism as read by the father of twentieth-century French socialism.

And then there is the aesthetics of African socialism; there is the philosophy of African art.

At the center of Senghor’s philosophy is the idea that the cosmology of vital force is manifest in the visual language of African classical art. The poetic act that creates the art object, an act that Senghor calls “rhythm,” consists in the composition of the lower forces to make emerge a higher one. Artistic creation is thus a movement of spiritualization that elevates the “most material, the most sensual” and “channels all that is concrete into the light of the spirit” (Senghor 1964a: 211–12).

Creation is thus a religious act of creating spiritual force out of lower ones. To insist that African artifacts are not art because their raison d’être is their religious function is simply to ignore that what makes them “religious” or spiritual is not primarily the particular role they play in a ritual but the poiesis that created them. And that is what makes their artistic nature. That is also why Senghor was always adamant that African art, being the expression of African socialism, keep itself away from so-called socialist realism. To do otherwise would be to betray its true nature and indeed its duty: to be a testament to the force of life.

References cited


dialogue

RESTITUTION: PATHS TOWARD A CLEARING

Christine Mullen Kreamer, Deputy Director and Chief Curator, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

In her First Word, “African Restitution in a North American Context: A Debate, A Summary, and a Challenge” (Afri can Art 53 [4]: 10–15), Amanda M. Maples presents a well-researched and compelling argument for museums in North America to join together and develop a process of restitution regarding Africa’s archaeological and colonial-era heritage. I would emphasize that this initiative must embrace a process of true partnership and inclusion that involves, from the start, the participation and insights of African colleagues working on and off the continent.

In 2019, I attended Columbia University’s Restitution Debate symposium; I co-organized, with National Museum of African Art (NMAFA) colleagues Kris Juncker and then-director Gus Casely-Hayford, an October 22 double panel listening session to solicit ideas and strategies from invited colleagues from Africa as part of a two-day Yale-Smithsonian symposium devoted to global cultural heritage preservation; and I presented a paper on December 3 at a conference on restitution organized by the University of Ghent. Rather than characterizing the restitution debate as heated and divisive, as Amanda asserts, my own observations suggest that the debate is impassioned—as it should be given the importance of Africa’s arts to the world and to the histories and heritages of Africans living on and off the continent—and that colleagues working in museums in North America and Europe are genuinely seeking approaches and processes to guide the restitution of colonial-era collections. Indeed, our colleague Costa Petridis, who attended the Ghent conference, and I were slated to co-chair a Museum Day roundtable session on restitution at our June 2020 ACASA Triennial Symposium, which has now been postponed for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains our hope that this roundtable will initiate a coordinated effort to articulate approaches and guidelines for US museums in the moral imperative that must drive the process of restitution of Africa’s heritage.

Based on these meetings, and my own readings on the subject, I find myself circling back to a persistent question: Isn’t the issue of restitution more about equity, inclusion, decision-making power, and true partnership—areas of intellectual and professional engagement that have historically excluded the equitable participation of Africa’s museums, scholars, public intellectuals, and community spokespersons? These areas, in my opinion, encompass the process of restitution, which is distinct from a relevant outcome of that process, namely the action of repatriation—the return of African objects to their places of origin.

As the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report points out, objects of African cultural heritage are also forms of access to knowledge and memory that are disrupted for future generations when objects are removed from their places of origin. Memories, histories, meaning-making, traditions, as well as the making of new traditions and memories are disrupted by the absence of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Recognizing that there is not yet a rulebook on how to mount and implement claims of restitution and that it is not a “one size fits all” proposition, what are some of the approaches and strategies we might consider to move this initiative forward? The first is for us to embrace an open, honest, and transparent dialogue with our African peers about the realities and enduring impact of colonialism and the role of restitution in addressing this history. And then, we must listen much more than we speak, ensuring that stakeholders who have long been denied a voice in these matters are truly heard.

Repatriation of objects must remain on the table as a possible outcome of the process of restitution, without descending into a discussion about what a museum in Africa might lack in terms of trained personnel, adequate facilities, and sustainable funding. While important, these issues cannot be deal-breakers in processing claims of restitution. Such inclusive conversations would enable Africa’s museums to speak for themselves, to express their urgent needs as well as their hopes and aspirations at being equal partners in the global circulation of knowledge, expertise, collections, exhibitions, and audience engagement, including access to collections by source communities. Further, these conversations would open up productive discussions regarding the sustainable development of Africa’s cultural sector so that claims for restitution could be effectively made and implemented.

One possible strategy that would benefit museums in Africa, Europe, and North America would be the creation of a consortium of institutions on and off the continent that would partner in the sharing of expertise and in strengthening Africa’s cultural sector. Such a consortium could leverage its collective weight to encourage governments to dedicate more of their annual budgets
to strengthening museums and the wider cultural sector. We could band together to convince corporations and foundations of the social and economic advantages—in terms of education, tourism, and job creation—in supporting the sustainable development of Africa’s museums and other centers where changing forms of expressive culture are displayed, preserved, and cherished. Once funding is secured, and with sustainability as a critical objective, collaborations and partnerships defined by the priorities of our colleagues on the African continent could address a range of initiatives, including the training of successive generations of curators, conservators, and a host of other professions in the museum field. Working together on needs assessments, feasibility studies, and training programs deployed to areas of greatest urgency leverages scarce institutional funds and avoids duplication of effort and the appearance of institutional competition.

Consortium-led working groups could address particular restitution issues—from legal definitions to ethical imperatives to sustainable funding and capacity building—or focus on collection-specific concerns, such as the relevance of museums to the communities they serve, or mass digitization and public access to collections. An example of the latter is the Digital Benin project (https://digital-benin.org/) undertaken by African partners in collaboration with the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg, under the direction of Barbara Plankensteiner (Museum am Rothenbaum 2020). The project proposes a global, digitized information system of object records and provenance regarding collections of Benin kingdom artworks, most of which were looted from the Benin royal palace in the 1897 raid mounted by British soldiers. Among the complaints voiced by African colleagues is the lack of object-specific information about colonial-era collections and where they reside. Such a digitization project would be the first step in broad-based information- and knowledge-sharing about a particular collections area.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) may also provide guidelines useful to the restitution of colonial-era collections of African art. When NAGPRA was enacted, there were fears that implementing the legislation would lead to the depletion of museum collections, but that has not occurred. That might have something to do with the time-consuming process of mounting a repatriation claim, but it may have more to do with the process itself empowering Native Americans in the decision-making procedures regarding collections access, care, interpretation, and knowledge-sharing. As Amanda points out, there have been important strides in linking Native American communities with historical objects housed in museum collections. At the request of source communities, these have included the making of replicas to conserve fragile objects held by museums and by the communities themselves. There is also the possibility of communities borrowing objects from the museum for ceremonial use, something that requires the adoption of a more flexible museum mindset about object conservation that considers, for example, a resulting change in an object’s condition as evidence of use, not damage. This opens up the possibility to work with partners on the continent to share digital and object collections and to create and circulate joint exhibitions. For example, NMAA’s 2014–2016 exhibition on the photography of Chief S.O. Alonge, the photographer of the court of Benin for sixty years, was developed by NMAA archivist Amy Staples with travel and collaboration with our Nigerian museum colleagues in mind. After its two-year showing at our museum, the exhibition then opened in fall 2017 as a permanent exhibition at the National Museum in Benin City.

It is possible that the decision-making processes developed with regards to restitution of colonial-era collections of African art and antiquities might result in favorable outcomes that enable museums in the West to retain selected objects in their care through joint-custody agreements, long-term loans, or other mechanisms that recognize the legitimate claims to ownership of contested collections but reflect, equally, the positive benefits of placing culturally significant works of art in museums around the world. In a BBC program aired in Ghent on December 2, 2019, the Oba of Benin noted that a limited number of Benin kingdom artworks displayed in museums outside of Africa can serve as effective “cultural ambassadors” demonstrating the kingdom’s long and rich history and cultural achievements.

In my opinion, it’s a great time to be in the museum business and to be working at a museum focused solely on the arts of Africa across time and media. Without having the answers, but knowing that the questions must be asked and the issues must be raised, conversations on restitution offer all museums with colonial-era collections the opportunity to negotiate new ways of working together with the source communities whose collections form part of our museum holdings. There is real potential to create a sustainable model of integrated museum practice that transforms Africa’s cultural sector from within and builds its capacity to deliver its own solutions via sustainable and globally engaged museum practice.

Notes
My title acknowledges the work of Jackson (1989).

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L’ENGAGEMENT FINANCIER DES PAYS DEPOSITAIRES : UN ÉLÉMENT CRÉATIF DE LA RESTITUTION

Dr Silvie Memel Kassi, Côte d’Ivoire

La problématique de la restitution des biens culturels africains s’avère complexe si on tient compte des enjeux que celle-ci revêt aussi bien pour les pays dépositaires que pour les pays d’origine. Dans la polémique provoquée par la publication du rapport de Felwine Sarr et Bénédicte Savoy1 et où on voit certains musées occidentaux s’attribuer le titre de musées universels ayant vocation de « mieux » présenter le patrimoine culturel et l’histoire des peuples, l’Afrique pourrait surprendre, elle qui n’a jamais été consultée. L’exemple de prêts d’objets entre musées occidentaux ou d’expositions itinérantes en Occident comprenant parfois des œuvres africaines, sans obligation quelconque vis-à-vis des états propriétaires, est symptomatique du sort peu enviable du patrimoine culturel africain. L’exposition internationale itinérante « les Maîtres de la sculpture de Côte d’Ivoire », qui a sillonné quatre pays européens (Suisse, Allemagne, Pays-Bas, France) en 2014 et 2015, a révélé que sur les trois cent trente objets à 80 % d’origine ivoirienne prêtés pour la circonstance par cinquante musées européens et américains2 (sans compter les collections privées), seuls douze spécimens ethnographiques sortis de la collection du Musée des Civilisations, étaient sous contrôle de l’état ivoirien. Même si ces publications bénéficient du statut juridique d’inaliénabilité et d’insaisissabilité, le fait que, sortis de leur contexte original, elles revêtent d’autres fonctions, nous amène à nous interroger sur leur identité réelle. A qui appartiennent-elles en définitive? C’est en effet que le discours du Président Emmanuel Macron à Ouagadougou en novembre 2017 sur le retour des biens culturels africains à leurs pays d’origine prend tout son sens. En effet, l’euphorie avec laquelle ce discours a été accueilli, de même que la Déclaration politique de décembre 2018 à Cotonou des chefs d’État et de Gouvernement de la CEDEAO3 qui s’en est suivie sur le même objet, prouve bien que la question des restitutions est une question centrale. En atteste les dispositions et mesures prises depuis lors au niveau de chaque état pour répondre à la volonté commune de réappropriation de l’identité culturelle africaine et de réparation des mémoires spoliées.

Les questions que soulèvent Amanda