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*The Musée des Civilisations Noires of Dakar. Past and Present Issues.* 06.12.2018.

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The Musée des Civilisations Noires (MCN) of Dakar aims to focus on African history and its artifacts and artworks, from yesteryear to nowadays. While we have to acknowledge the existence of such a major cultural center, the challenges of this project and the vision it offers about the continent have to be questioned. Indeed the historical aspects are not at the very heart of the museum.

*Image 1: The Musée des Civilisations Noires of Dakar*

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The MCN was officially opened on December 6, 2018, by the Senegalese President Macky Sall. It is located near the administrative district of the capital, close to the ferry boat to Gorée Island and therefore strategically close to tourist flows. More precisely, it is surrounded by two new buildings: the Grand Théâtre National de Dakar and the railway station, a colonial vestige that has been recently renovated. Thus, along the same axis, three „new“ and modern buildings stand side by side and provide a pleasant window on the capital. The MCN itself consists of an oval base inspired by the Great Alliance, a medieval construction in Zimbabwe, and a roof imitating Casamance’s inverted roofed huts (impluvium). Through its architecture, the MCN aims to connect African cultures and promote a pan-African identity.

It is indeed a pan-African project in the minds of its creators. The project was initiated by the first president of the Senegalese Republic, Léopold Sedar Senghor, at the World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966. Only fifty years later was it born, mainly with Chinese funds, in a political and intellectual context completely different from that of independence. If Senghor’s ‘Negritude Project’ was indeed in-

herited by the MCN, the Renaissance ideology of Abdoulaye Wade (2000–2012), Macky Sall’s predecessor, is also readable. As a liberal, although charged with authoritarian abuses by his opponents, Wade nevertheless had a relatively progressive relationship with the history of the continent. He rehabilitated the role of the Senegalese riflemen – the Museum is located just a few blocks from the rifleman’s square inaugurated in 2004 – he had a huge statue built, the Renaissance Monument, and organized „his“ World Festival of Negro Arts in 2010. Although these last two initiatives are ambiguous in more than one respect, many in Senegal have legitimately expressed indignation about their disproportionate cost, they reveal how the past is the subject of debates and challenges in Africa.

*Image 2: Baobab sculpture by Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié*

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This large museum is divided into eleven sections over three floors. On the ground floor, at the center of the first room entitled „The Birthplace of Humanity“, stands a *baobab*, a giant sculpture by Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié. Situated at the heart of the building, around which all the rooms are arranged, it sums up the museum’s ambition: one that symbolizes a united front around arts, techniques, and ideas forged in Africa. This room presents the evolution of humankind over several million years, through the exhibition of skeletons, cranes, tools, and maps aimed at explaining these shifts. From the continent came the first „human groups that colonized the world“, according to the words of an explanatory poster. The following rooms, „Africa and the invention of iron“ and „Neolithic“, also represent the continent as a pioneer in the history of science and technology. Whether it concerns iron (the director of the museum, Hamady Bocoum, wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the subject), ceramics, defense techniques (fortresses), mathematics, or medicine, the creators of the museum strongly insist on the primacy of Africa, especially Egypt, in the development of these technologies. Visitors then walk down a transversal corridor called „Lines of Continuity“, which dis-

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plays photographic portraits of famous men, Africans or of African ancestry, whose names are not mentioned. Nelson Mandela, Thomas Sankara, Martin Luther King, Toussaint Louverture, Haïlé Sélassié and Samori Touré stand side by side, with no biographical information or keys to understand the choice of grouping these illustrious men. The „Continental African Civilizations“ room is the last one on the ground floor. It exhibits objects presenting the cosmologies of the continent with the idea that, according to the initial poster, „Africans essentially see the universe as composed of two worlds: the visible and the invisible“. The interest of this room lies above all in the diversity of the objects on display, although it sometimes gives the impression of an exhibition of „traditional objects“, which a more systematic historical contextualization would have avoided. Interestingly, reference is made to the plundering of 4,000 pieces of bronze by Great Britain, which of course resonates with current debates on the restitution of African objects by the former colonial powers.

On the first floor, the „Hall of Abrahamic Religions“ presents an exhibition on the two main monotheistic religions in Senegal, Islam (in its diversity) and Christianity. Historical figures from 19th century West Africa, such as El Hadj Omar and Ahmadou Tall, are represented through their swords and Korans. The „Room of the Globalization of Negritude“ intends to show how Africa and Africans appropriate the past related to slavery through artworks engaging in the criticism of a dominating Europe. One should note here that the history of the slave trade and slavery is dealt with in a rather superficial, even elliptical way. The pictures of camels in a desert on one side and an ocean with turbulent waters on the other are projected and are supposed to symbolize the trans-Saharan and Atlantic slave trades – all is suggested, nothing is explained. „Now Africa“ is a space exhibiting award-winning works at the Dakar Biennales. Contemporary art is honored and gives special emphasis to artists engaged in a reflection on their epoch and on the continent’s past. Finally, three smaller spaces offer an exhibition of masks from all over the world („Dialogues of Masks“), a presentation

of West African fabrics („Textiles“), and photographs of famous but unnamed women, as a counterpart to the male acolytes exhibited on the ground floor („Black Women and the Production of Knowledge“). Oscillating between the classical definition of a museum and a space intended to be didactic – an objective that is still to be achieved with more contextualization – the museum raises the issue of the transmission of an African heritage.

Nowadays, another political dimension has been added to the museum’s functions: the restitution of African objects that were brought to Europe. In autumn 2018, two social and human sciences researchers, French Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese Felwine Sarr, made their conclusions to Emmanuel Macron in the „Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage. Towards a new relational ethics“. In this document, which has already received a significant amount of attention, they recommended various ways of redressing what can be considered a generalized plundering of objects at a continental scale. The MCN, as a modern museum able to stock and preserve such objects, fully addresses the recommendations made in this report. Moreover, since its opening at the end of 2018, a piece of particular symbolic value was on display: the sword of a major colonial resistant, El Hadj Omar. In autumn 2019, the French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe visited Dakar and gave the sword to Macky Sall for a five-year period, before it became possible to finalize a restitution agreement. Some sad spirits nevertheless pointed out that, at the same time, Philippe was taking the opportunity to sell missiles, among other things, to Senegal. Museums are political in more than one respect and the MCN in Senegal, in such a post-colonial context, is no exception. The issue to be addressed is how these objects are introduced, to help understand the narratives they carry for the continent and its history.

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