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To cite this version:

Hélène Quashie. What does restitution mean in Francophone postcolony ? Reflections from Senegal. Jahazi Journal. Culture, arts, performance, 2022, Reclaiming Our Cultural Heritage, 10 (1), pp.79-90, Nairobi Twaweza Communications. hal-03502280

HAL Id: hal-03502280

https://hal.science/hal-03502280v1

Submitted on 20 May 2023

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Jahazi Journal. Culture, arts, performance, 2022, Special issue Reclaiming our Heritage, 10 (1), 79-90

What does restitution mean in Francophone postcolony? Reflections from Senegal

Hélène Quashie

The debate about restitution calls into question the Western production of cultural and historical knowledge about African societies. This paper provides an analysis of how this debate in Senegal is entangled with the ongoing French and European presence in social, institutional, economic, political and academic spaces, and the consequences in relation to local interests for restitution. It primarily focuses on stakeholders' ideas about restitution rather than on the artefacts *per se*. For the return of artefacts mirrors the circulation of ideas, discourses and specific actors between Africa and Europe. Therefore, this paper calls for a broader reflection on how the decolonialisation movement inspiring restitution highlights mechanisms related to postcolonial entanglements: what does restitution mean in postcolony (Mbembe, 2000)?

For more than three centuries, Senegal was at the center of French territories in West Africa. A consequence of this historical position is that Senegal has remained very attractive to migrants from Europe (Quashie, 2018), especially from France. The presence of these Western migrants has not decreased even after Senegal's independence (Cruise O'Brien, 1972), despite changes in working conditions. They have been involved in the mining industry, international trade, construction, international aid, ICTs sector, media, tourism industry, teaching, research, and in the promotion of heritage sites from the slave trade and colonial eras (Quashie, 2018). Their presence has been increased by neoliberal policies and global economic crisis since 2000. In recent years, more and more return migrants and other African-descended individuals, born in Europe or in Africa, have also been part of these social and professional circles (Quashie, 2020). Finally, since colonization, Senegal has remained the place to be in West Africa for Europeans, especially for French citizens, devoted to African arts and culture. What does this context imply for the debate on restitution in Senegal?

Postcolonial predicaments in national exhibitions of ancient African artefacts

The Senegalese public museums related to the restitution issue face conflicted dynamics. Two of these institutions, located in Saint-Louis, the former Senegalese capital and in Dakar, the current one, have inherited artefacts appropriated and stolen by colonial-era ethnologists, scientists, missionaries, army officers and art dealers in several African countries (Bondaz, 2020). These museums have kept originals as well as reproductions of artefacts sent to France (Biro & Thiaw, 2020) and were designed for European visitors (Loumpet, 2018). Since then, like in other ethnographic museums implemented during colonization, part of the collections has been stolen or sold (Sylla, 2007). A more recent museum in Dakar emerged from post-independence history. Its conception originates from the Negritude ideology of socialist and first President L. S. Senghor; it was later promoted within the Renaissance ideology of A. Wade, liberal and third President of Senegal; and was finally built under the fourth and current president, Macky Sall, via economic relations with China. This museum is a refutation of the idea that African countries are not equipped to keep and to exhibit artefacts returned from the West. It also promotes a Black and pan-African identity that includes African diasporas, as it aims to convey a new way of reflecting on Africa, its past and future. However, although it is not an ethnographic museum, part of its collections gathers artwork plundered from African countries during colonization, sold on the global culture market or lent by French museums.

Because of the historical development of these national institutions and even if a new relational ethics with Europe is expected (Sarr & Savoy, 2018), staff and researchers at local museums participate in conferences and events that indicate the inability to avoid collaborating with their French and European counterparts. This situation has so far facilitated the circulation of artefacts more than their return, as well as the movement of museum directors and researchers between Senegal and France or Europe. Does this collaborative scheme encourage reciprocity, or does it reproduce asymmetry and rationales of assistance as in "development projects"? The scenario may change when Senegalese museums reject proposals from French or European individuals and organizations, and host meetings and artistic performances with diasporic or pan-African networks only. However, postcolonial entanglements between museal institutions may explain why Senegalese museum curators and directors explain that restitution is important but not essential. Some of them advocate for Africa to focus efforts on sustaining the future of contemporary art: they refuse to be held hostages by Europe, now that the latter is finally dealing with its colonialist past, or to help Europe carry its guilt. Others discuss the matter of "authenticity" – regarding the changing artefacts and accessories over the years in ceremonies, the renewal of some artefacts from one ceremony to another, and the replacement of the long-gone ones by communities. These discourses underline the local complexity of the debate on restitution and how it may be linked to postcolonial relations with France and Europe. First, Senegalese curators know that the process of returning artefacts will be long – given that in France for example, it has only consisted of one law established for each artefacts' ensemble and in the promise of a new common law. Second, they know that the idea of circulation of stolen art, instead of its return, has a political history in Senegal: it has been part of Senegal-France diplomatic relations since the independence era. When president L.S. Senghor organized the First World Festival of Black Arts (supported by France) that took place in 1966 in Dakar, questions about the restitution emerged, as French and European museums, galleries, and collectors would lend artefacts. L.S. Senghor assured French, European and American governments, as well as private stakeholders, that there would be no demand for restitution (Ficquet, Gallimardet, 2009), so he could strategically maintain the festival. L.S. Senghor then agreed that the circulation of artefacts was more profitable to Africa. Twenty-three years later, A. Wade, who would later become president of Senegal, confirmed the same policy (Wade, 1989): he advocated for circulation against return. So far, Senegalese museums have not asked for the return of all stolen art: pieces will remain in Europe as "ambassadors" of local cultures. According to French public officers in charge of cultural diplomacy working with Senegalese curators, the circulation of artefacts is a priority. Senegal and France seem then to share a long-term political agreement that reflects on practices between their museal institutions.

The restitution debate in Senegalese public museums may also depend on differences among the generations and political engagements of the curators and intellectuals involved. Senegalese intellectuals of the independence era or the later generation have known, witnessed, and participated in anticolonial struggles. Several joined militant groups in France (Gueye, 2001) and some of them continue to defend anti-imperialist ideas, claiming that independences were only political showcases. Others see, through their former struggles, contradictions and dead ends in the current decolonial criticism expressed by younger Senegalese and African-descended intellectuals. Others among the eldest consider that these recent discourses bring nothing new and may nourish paradoxically the "colonial library" (Mudimbe, 1988) they are supposed to deconstruct. All these arguments suggest that if Europe, especially France, fails to decolonize itself, decoloniality cannot be understood identically in every region of the world. Therefore, the way France and Europe experience it is different from African societies and should be considered as such. Still, one point has been left behind: the issue of reparation does not seem to be part of political and museal conversations.

Discomfort or refusal of the restitution debate among art collectors and amateurs

Restitution also questions ancient art exhibitions and sales in galleries and private museums. Their owners voice different positions, refusing or avoiding the debate on restitution.
French art collectors living in Senegal are mostly men, and several of them are married to Senegalese women. One of the narratives these art dealers defend is that they have "brought back" ancient African art to the continent through their own collections which gather artefacts from several countries. Yet, they stand against restitution. They argue that the artefacts they own are their property, as they have legal rights to possess them, and should they consider giving them back, the identification of the first owners would be a real obstacle. Therefore, most of these French art collectors consider that there are no other legitimate owners than themselves. To support their ideas, they claim that Senegalese public museums exhibit artefacts the same way they do: they have not given back any artefact to local communities and parts of their collections display artefacts that are not from Senegal. This rationale goes further: since not every artefact was stolen, the restitution debate appears unreasonable and ideological to theses French collectors. They view it as a way to blame White people and to humiliate descendants of European settlers. Thus, some condemn in blogs and art magazines French president E. Macron for making political decisions without a cultural goal or vision.
One of these French collectors living in Senegal spoke against restitution at the French National Assembly. He brought back his collection from France and is known for his books about African ancient art. A few copies can even be found in Senegalese museums. This art dealer recently opened a business in a touristic rural area including a private museum and a restaurant, which he claims to hand over to the local community. No Senegalese officials have come to see this museum yet. Its owner trains there two local female guides in African history – one is his niece originating from the village nearby. The two young guides have learned from their "teacher" that Africans first have to know how to preserve their heritage before thinking of restitution. This argument is used to explain why the pieces gathered in this private museum come from all over the continent and will not be returned to national museums or communities. The owner has recently announced that he will work with the major national museum in France that is reluctant to give back parts of its ancient art collections too. He also plans to open other private museums in touristic areas in Senegal and in other West African countries.

Behind these choices and discourses lies a "fear of division between White and Black people", as if the slave trade and colonization never built the premises of this divide a long time ago. French collectors also reject the idea of reparation from this perspective. Some of them favor the patronizing idea of offering gifts to African communities by developing cultural projects for them. Others declare that the return of artefacts might generate ethnicized conflicts between communities. Yet, these French art dealers value African ethnicity for the display and the sale of the artefacts they own. Others praise Europe for saving African cultures from destruction: they claim that a lot of artefacts were given and sold by ignorant or greedy Africans to Europeans and consider that nobody in Africa has ever been interested in them. They sustain this argument by the fact that African art dealers and museum staff also sold artefacts and copies, contributing to a lucrative business. According to these French art dealers, Africans neither know nor care about their own culture and heritage but are "obsessed with power and ethnic conflicts" and "used duplicity to deceive European art buyers". They consider that Africans should thank European collectors who allow them to refer to their past now. This reasoning simplifies the history of looted art by making Africans responsible for it.
All of these arguments have to be placed in the context of economic dynamics within the global culture and tourism market. Many French art dealers live by the seaside areas of Saint Louis, Petite Côte and Saloum regions, and have developed activities there. They need to sustain

profitable businesses and, therefore, they can only support altered narratives of the return of African artefacts. They exhibit and sell the ones they own in their galleries and private museums located in touristic areas, attracting many European travellers and residents in Senegal. Their activities raise the question of the global circulation of artefacts from another angle, as well as the issue of originals and copies, in a context where trafficking in cultural property still goes on throughout Africa and Dakar is an exit door to Europe. This increases the competition between French collectors, who do not fear any control by Senegalese authorities as they can only regulate illicit circulations of artefacts, not the sales in private galleries.

Senegalese art dealers and French collectors of African descent seem to act differently. They do not stand against restitution and do not promote it either. A well-known Senegalese collector, who has worked with national museums in Dakar, sold them a part of his collection and opened a private museum to exhibit the rest of it. This collaboration has remained discreet and exhibitions of his collections are not publicized in the touristic area where his private museum is located. In the same way, a French art collector of African descent, originating from French overseas territories, who travels back and forth between France and Senegal, did not bring back her ancient African art collections to exhibit them. She also tends not to display them in France anymore. Senegalese gallerists or collectors, some of French descent, do not publicize their collections either. They exhibit parts of them, like in special events organized by European residents and gathering wealthy Westerners who are not familiar with the restitution debate. Some also participate in public discussions where they admit that they would return the artefacts they own if it was demanded.

On the contrary, most French collectors living in Senegal tend to market their exhibitions of ancient African art, which are well appreciated among French residents. For instance, French teachers from French private schools organize trips for their students to see these collections; others bring their families and members of associative groups. Even though some of them raise the issue of restitution, most French visitors do not support the idea of returning all African artefacts from France and Europe. They state that only human remains, and objects looted during colonial wars, should be restituted. French art dealers are also appreciated by Senegalese art amateurs and culture professionals, like former antique dealers in the tourism sector. Last but not least, some of these French collectors have friendly relationships with members of old, wealthy settlers' families still living in Senegal, who are now dual citizens and do not discuss whether or not they should give back the original artefacts they bought. Many of them came to the conclusion that there is no point in reviving this past and they do not want to address the issue of reparation. This idea seems to be commonly shared among residents close to European art dealers' networks and reflects part of the history of postcolonial entanglements in Senegal.

Entanglements in art support, research and defense of robbed African artefacts

In the field of visual and contemporary art, several of the French and European cultural stakeholders based in Senegal appear to be currently in favor of restitution. For example, some have funded Senegalese and African artists to travel to France and create artwork related to restitution. Others have supported the restoration and exhibition of part of the Senegalese film heritage from the independence period. The rhetoric of "assistance" that seems to accompany these cultural processes can be perceived again. A few European francophone residents (from Italy, Belgium, Switzerland) have collaborated with French institutions to work "for" the Senegalese society and assert its cultural heritage. Some advocate for the return of local archives, while others fund African artists to create work about restitution in Senegal. A few others supported exhibitions for the last African Contemporary Art Biennale in Dakar – an event intended for the global culture market and partly funded by European institutions. Its

“Off” program is directed by European residents in Dakar (some of whom are of African descent) and funded by French companies. Consequently, activities in contemporary art about restitution highlight the importance of funding and of its origins. In a liberal world that affects the cultural market, money supports ideas and innovations: does it not influence the restitution debate if major economic contributions come from France and other European countries?

The same observations can be made about art literacy and education. For instance, French associations organize discussions and cultural activities with high school students in Senegal regarding artefacts located in French museums. Some of these activities include theater skits about the spoliation of local artefacts. During preparations, which were filmed, one can see French organizers who came to Senegal refuse to be involved in the performances when students asked them to play the parts of white French settlers and ethnologists. This example illustrates the following question: are cultural activities about restitution only valuable as long as French history is not linked to current power relations, in which French organizations and institutions “assist” the process of restitution?

Similar contradictions occur in academia. The Senegalese one is public and theoretically state-funded. However, as in other African countries, the organization of this institution depends on Western, mostly French, collaborations and funding on the liberal academic market. A few French and European scholars have implemented collaborative research programs about history, artefacts and representations of restitution in Senegal. Some of them collaborate with Senegalese academics; others want to fund local peers to work on restitution. The French scholars and students involved, including those of African descent, go back and forth or become residents in Dakar. They aim to nurture the restitution debate from Africa, as it is saturated and restricted in France. It seems that this debate may get a special “cachet” when including Senegal due to the position of this country on the African art market, the history of its ancient art collections, and its place in the renewal of knowledge production about Africa in the Francophone world. Some of these French intellectuals are part of international networks including or led by Senegalese scholars involved in the restitution debate. But this Western elites’ gaze is shaped by their academic and institutional backgrounds: they often problematize the restitution issue in their own way or the way it is discussed in France and they tend to forget where they speak from. Positionality is not often addressed in French academia, but it does matter when discussing African cultural heritage. For example, when French scholars and students look for “native” points of view, even in a decolonial perspective, without questioning the contradictions at stake in their methodology and without speaking any local languages: they follow an old way of “studying” Africa from the West (Zeleza, 1997), which contradicts the epistemological perspectives fostered by the idea of restitution. From this perspective, their research projects tend to reproduce the international division of scientific labor and logics through which data collection is conducted by African “technicians” and theory generated by Western “thinkers” (Mudimbe, 1988). Which means no academic reparation. Moreover, most French scholars working on restitution present their work in French and European universities and conferences or publish in French journals and books that are not always accessible to African universities and to the people they interviewed for their research. Some French academics also work with museums or participate in conferences in France hosted by ethnographic museums still reluctant to the restitution process. Finally, their research, although conducted in Africa, is labelled as French. In global academia, publications and presentations are indeed recorded publicly by country, as units of analysis in scientific worth and rank (Gueye, 2021). Simultaneously, the production of knowledge in Africa remains very low, partly because it is extracted and dependent on Western funding. As a first consequence, Senegalese scholars tend to organize their own academic circles including their peers on the

continent and in the diasporas, as in other African countries (ibid.). Second, when their French counterparts participate in Western conferences about restitution, some speak in the name of Senegalese society or institutions to "defend" them, without having a clear understanding of the country's history, intellectual life and social dynamics. Can becoming an ally to promote the cause of restitution in Africa be confused with the role of leading it? For instance, French academics and students, along with French culture professionals, criticize Senegalese museums for narrowing historical perspectives about ancient art collections (whilst these institutions lack resources and trained staff), for not opening up enough their exhibitions to local populations (whereas French museums possessing African ancient art hardly start to associate African communities), and for not pushing the agenda for the restitution of some artefacts to other African countries. A few French academics and culture professionals position themselves within the intra-African aspects of restitution, which, according to their Senegalese counterparts, can "re-berlinalize" the discussion (many artefacts were spoliated when the current African borders had not yet been drawn). By speaking in the name of other African societies, these French intellectuals consider the countries they "support" to have "suffered more" of cultural dispossession, forgetting that nowadays Senegalese stakeholders deal with a colonial history they did not participate in. The latter actually demand to discuss intra-African restitutions with their African peers without any Western interference.

Finally, a subtle competition has arisen among French and European intellectuals and culture professionals in Dakar, due to the presence in their circles of Afro-descendants who have at least one parent of African descent (not necessarily Senegalese), and due to the existence of interracial relationships (most of them gather French/European women and Senegalese/African partners). Several French citizens of African descent or living with a Senegalese/African resident justify the specificity of their voices about restitution by their origins or their union. Once more, social dynamics nurture symbolical and political asymmetry. First, because the living conditions in Senegal of recent French Afro-descendant residents and of French residents married to Senegalese/Africans do not differ much from the ones of their other fellow citizens. Most of them enjoy social and economic privileges compared to most Senegalese residents, and many do not mingle in the local society. Second, by thinking they are leading a decolonial rupture in the restitution debate, they tend to speak in the name of Senegalese and African communities, sometimes asserting their position with nativist narratives (Way, 2017) or without checking the "colonial library" (Mudimbe, 1988) they use. Third, Senegalese society includes members belonging to old mixed-race Senegalese families (of French/Portuguese and Beninese, Brazilian or Caribbean descent) who were born out of the slave trade and colonization and have mingled within the local society. But they are not the most vocal in the restitution debate, even though they may know more about local history of looted artefacts than French and European individuals who are part of current migrations to Senegal or have only recently developed a (re)connection to Africa.

Processes of differentiation, asymmetry and misunderstanding are not new between Africans of the continent and Africans of the diasporas. During the independence era, Afro-descendants often failed to be and to feel at home in Africa, experiencing diverse black worlds fragmented by language, politics and ideology (cf. Wright, 1954). French people of African descent tried to reconcile their Frenchness and Blackness in Senegal in the 1960-70's, but they did not fit in Senegalese society (Labrune-Badiane, 2013). The same has been happening these recent years (Quashie, 2020) and this influences the debate on restitution. For instance, when Afro-descendants coming (back) from the Global North take over local cultural scenes thanks to their financial assets and select Senegalese artists according to their own idea of culture. Good intentions do not prevent the reproduction of postcolonial hierarchies, and Senegalese cultural actors may need to speak louder for their voices to be heard. One way may occur through

collaborations between Senegalese artists and members of African diasporas born and raised on the continent, knowledgeable in African languages, who sometimes met in the West through diasporic connections. They create fruitful cultural projects related to restitution with perspectives grounded in Africa – which French residents in Senegal, even though of African descent or partners of Africans, fail to grasp and to make theirs.

Local perspectives and divides about restitution

The dynamics previously described result from social, economic, cultural and symbolical capitals and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979) nested in long term relations between Senegal and France/Europe. Critical narration of history and creative production are somehow trapped within postcolonial contradictions. This may explain why the restitution debate has been mostly discussed so far by intellectual, cultural and political elites in Senegal and in the national diaspora. However, their collaborations do not guarantee the representation of local communities. For example, a few intellectuals in Senegal and abroad mention L.S. Senghor's philosophy in the restitution debate. The former president's conceptions of Negritude (Senghor, 1967) were a cultural and political attempt to challenge and subvert French colonial politics and collective imaginary. Born out of diasporic networks in Paris, it later became famous and appreciated in France, Europe and North America. But its local implementation has long been fought against in Senegal (Benga, 2010) particularly in the context of a "democracy of intellectuals" (Diaw, 1992). The opposition considered Senghor's ideology as essentialist, against political, intellectual and cultural polyphony (ibid.), elitist and ignorant of social inequalities in Senegal, as well as neocolonial in practice and paradoxically too close to France. Still, some scholars support Senghor's legacy about culture. Others have encouraged partnerships with French museums. Others are more in favor of reparation than of restitution and advocate for French investment in Senegalese infrastructures for their "development". A few local academics agree on this last point, but this view contradicts a growing opposition in Senegal, partly led by the urban youth, against the capitalist system underlying the idea of "development" (Seck, 2015).

It should be noted that the youth in Dakar, who have a long history of being active in political mobilizations and cultural expressions (Diouf, 1992), have not engaged in the restitution debate (yet). A few intellectuals argue that it may be a matter of education, since stolen artefacts have been away for a long time and their history was not taught at school and in universities. Youth is considered here as crucial because they receive and pass on culture and heritage to other generations. However, other Senegalese scholars wonder whether current intellectual elites know how to engage in constructive dialogue with the youth. From this perspective, the youth's silence about restitution may be perceived as a passive resistance (Bondaz *et al*. 2012) to this process of re-patrimonialization orchestrated by the elites. The urban subversive youth do not belong to the educated middle-class anymore, as in the 1960-1980's: a great part of them comes from suburban areas with harsh living conditions. As explained by popular hip hop artists, their silence can be understood as an opposition to political arrangements, since only members of the government and intellectuals have so far discussed with French and European politicians, museum directors and intellectuals about restitution. The Senegalese urban youth have long been questioning social hierarchy and inequalities, as well as the powers held by the eldest and wealthiest members of the society (Niang, 2011). Further, members of the subversive youth movements in popular urban culture are known for their renewed pan-African conception of Negritude, against misgovernance of local elites and Western domination (ibid). Therefore, the youth's silence about restitution may also indicate their stand against what Africa represents in Western eyes. Cultural artefacts, such as masks, regalia, amulets and statues, have long illustrated the Western gaze about an "authentic" and objectified Africa – which is why these

artefacts were stolen and later used to regenerate European arts. As a consequence, they might appear of little interest in the light of local historical outlines.

Indeed, colonization in Senegal was organized in a different way compared to the rest of French colonies in West and Central Africa. Ties with France were closer, and Senegal was conceived as an entrance to the "real Africa" – this label is still used in relation to tourism originating from Europe (Quashie, 2018). Senegalese artwork was less stolen and showcased, except the one from peripheral and southern regions of the country – presented as more "authentic" by French settlers, scientists and Catholic missionaries who retrieved local artefacts used for worship. Collecting artefacts in Africa and their shipment to France were organized from the capital city, Saint Louis, then from Dakar. Thus, public museums in urban Senegal have a long history of transforming African cultures into museography (De Suremain, 2007) and of conceiving them through a distanced and objectifying gaze. Their ethnographic basis is at the core of current contradictions about local cultural heritage. During colonization, museums implemented by the French conveyed stigmatization, fear and mockery of local cultures, as well as the secularization of local religions (Loumpet, 2018). Museums in Africa were based on the naturalist patterns of cabinets of curiosity and they taught local populations retrograde images of themselves (ibid.). It is not a coincidence that masks may suggest fear or laughter in common representations in Senegal, except to collectors or antique dealers who sell copies to Western tourists. The images of artefacts that have become iconic for the restitution debate (masks, statues, regalia, amulets) can also be categorized in Senegal as components of religious rituals which should be kept secret among local communities. This argument can be heard when visiting local exhibitions of ancient art. Besides, several kinds of artefacts, still part of the everyday life even when they are not used, are locally showcased in national museums. Their history is known within families, even though their use is different and relies on other narratives. Thus, Senegalese visitors can misunderstand the reasons why artefacts they know and see every day are showcased, as museums have nurtured the idea of keeping traces of the past specifically. This misunderstanding reminds of the way the Western gaze froze images of African cultures as if permanently embedded in traditions and in an archaic past. In 1966, the African values and heritage discussed during the First World Festival of Black Art, organized by President L.S. Senghor, highlighted a vision of African art that borrowed codes of interpretation from Western conceptions (ibid.). The artefacts displayed today as symbols of restitution perform an Africaness at the crossroads of European representations of Africa and of African elites' representations advocating for the reconstruction of African heritage during the independence era (Gueye, 2001). Therefore today, when people keep their distances from museum objects in Senegal, it may echo a local rejection to belong to an "ethnologized society" (Doquet, 1999). This implies that the restitution process should not re-ethnologize Senegalese society through the return of artefacts evoking an Africa objectified by the West. In the same perspective, demands for restitution of audio-visual and cinematographic archives from the independence era seem to attract more people inside and outside elites' networks, including Senegalese youth and artists, than cultural artefacts spoliated during colonization.

Islam and cultural Senegalese heritage

Another aspect of postcolonial entanglements within the restitution debate lies in the growing interest from intellectuals, academics, students and religious elites (in Senegal and in the national diaspora) in artefacts and literacy related to Islam. These artefacts are perceived as a means to question and rethink the historical narrative of Senegal and of West Africa and its own production of knowledge. Colonization accelerated the spreading of Islam in Senegal (Diagne, 1992), which became a shelter and a means of resistance against French settlers. After the independence, whilst the first governments and Senegalese elites wanted to create a

pantheon of heroes for the young nation that excluded Muslims leaders (Timera, 2021), Islam remained broadly shared culturally. Since the 1980-90's, local elites have turned again towards Muslim figures, artefacts, literacy and knowledge, which has also served political hegemony (Seck, 2021). Therefore, in 2019, the return of the sword, which allegedly belonged to El Hadj Omar Tall – a religious and resistance fighter against colonization – to Senegal, has been presented as a strong symbol in President M. Sall's and the elites' words. But its blurred origin, the fact that it had already been lent three times by the French army museum every ten years since 1998, and the ambiguity to make it a national symbol as Mali also laid claim to it, brought no nationalist fervor in a context of popular distrust of the government (ibid.). El Hadj Omar Tall is locally respected as a Muslim scholar, a founder and leader of one of the most important religious brotherhoods, and a historical figure of anti-colonial resistance. It also seemed a logical choice to many that his sword would come back to Senegal as his descendants settled there. However, the gesture from France to Senegal and the ceremony were mocked and criticized (ibid.), perceived as a performance of political asymmetry.
Religious representatives among Tall's family descendants were also more interested in the return of manuscripts, such as those located in the National Library in Paris. These manuscripts written by El Hadj Omar Tall question the Western perception of knowledge production in and about Africa, as European Africanist ethnology often ignored the embeddedness of Islam in local cultures and history (Diagne, Amselle, 2018). The manuscripts have been digitized and partly put online as a goodwill gesture from the French National Library, an action similar to that of British and American national libraries which own ancient manuscripts written by Muslim scholars. However, the question of restitution of the manuscripts is not addressed. For Senegalese intellectuals and scholars in the diaspora, acknowledging Islamic literacy as part of the Senegalese and West African cultural heritage contributes to an historical alternative to the West's narrative about the production of knowledge in and about African societies (Kane, 2016). This conception had already emerged in the 1950's and in the 1970's among African intellectuals in France, involved in activist associations for the political liberation of Africa (Gueye, 2007). In Senegal, one of the public museums works with intellectuals of the diaspora and has organized a specific way of visiting its collections that reminds of these ideas: a room set aside for ancient African art; the next one, which has welcomed El Hadj Omar Tall's sword, is dedicated to the appropriation of Abrahamic religions in Africa and partly focuses on Islam in Senegal and in West Africa. This room also features quotes from another Muslim leader's writings, Ch. A. Bamba, resistant to French colonial power and founder of one of the most popular brotherhoods in Senegal. In similar perspectives, local scholars and some in the diaspora look for ancient manuscripts, like several of their peers in Niger, Ghana, Nigeria, Mauritania. Others working with Senegalese public museums trace the origins of manuscripts written by Muslims enslaved in North America. This intellectual work follows the heritagization process of sites and artefacts related to Islam initiated in the 1990's in the ongoing writing of postcolonial Senegalese history (Seck, 2010). It also joins a long process of patrimonialization from below that values Islam as a way to position oneself into the world, as a shield against racialized postcoloniality, political deception, neo-liberalization and Western hegemony. This breaks away from the State's cultural orientations after independence (Diagne, 1992), de-linking local culture from the Western gaze as well.

Interest in the history of Islam and its intellectual life remains misunderstood in France and by most French and European cultural actors living in Senegal – except for a minority of Muslim faith. Most French and European citizens are more interested in ancient African art and in "ethnic" artefacts, that have long illustrated "African traditions". The same perspective lies in the promotion of heritage related to the slave trade and colonization organized by European residents and professionals in Saint Louis (Quashie, 2018). It values "traditional" know-hows

but erases the Muslim heritage at the heart of the history of the region. Some French cultural actors living in Senegal also prefer to promote the cultural philosophy of Negritude by L. S. Senghor. This led them to argue against the return of El Hadj Omar Tall's sword and to alert the French opinion and government, fearing that it would encourage fanaticism. This argument is linked to negative representations of Islam in France and more broadly in the West, and to the French military involvement against terrorism in the Sahelian region. This security issue was referred to by the French Prime minister when returning the sword, and besides the official ceremony, by the military contracts signed with the Senegalese government to keep ensuring the protection of France and the Sahelian region (Seck, 2021). Imperialistic logics were then renewed and perceived by Senegalese people debating about the ceremony of restitution (ibid.), as the sword brought back belonged to a jihadist defeated by the French colonial military.
French individuals and institutions in France and in Senegal, as well as many French of African descent, get involved in the restitution debate with their own understanding of global history, often misreading local history and erasing Islam as part of the Senegalese everyday modernity and postcolonial nationalism (Seck, 2010). A widely shared conception in France and Europe is that Islam does not reflect "the real Africa". However, no one there talks about returning the artefacts kept in French museums related to the history of local minorities partly converted to Christianism by missionaries. French museums have traces of this history of Senegalese Southern regions which might be claimed. Local scholars and curators have pointed out that enhancing Islam as heritage will imply to think about local slavery related to Muslim aristocracy and the cultures of communities who fled away from Islam to South Senegal.

In light of these complex dynamics, which Senegalese voices will participate in the restitution debate and write its narratives? Can they contribute to the disentanglement of the postcolony?

Hélène Quashie is a social anthropologist and a postdoctoral researcher at LARTES, Fundamental Institute of Black Africa of the University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar.

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