

THE RESTITUTION OF AFRICAN CULTURAL HERITAGE – FELWINE SARR

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It is a pleasure to comment the timely provocative conference by Felwine Sarr on the *Restitution of African Artifacts* (2020). I have to thank the colleagues that are involved in the AFROPORT project, for the invitation to comment this challenging topic. Thank you Iolanda, Inocência and Apolo for all your trust and friendship.

Over the last years, in Europe, we have been witnessing this sort of 'goodwillingness' to retribute African Cultural Heritage. The restitution of stolen or misappropriated African cultural elements to their heirs, a debate that has known more visibility over the recent years in Portugal, has been a topic of discussion for some time.

Restitution was on the table when the liberation movements took up arms to fight for their future, for their self-determination, as it is hinted in their political manifestos. And this agenda moved from the guerrilla into the halls of power when transition to independence was negotiated in Angola, Guinea-Bissau or Mozambique, for example (Bragança & Wallerstein, 1978). Against the odds, this ethical, but also monetary case, did not know, as in other situations, such as Haiti, the need to pay back to become independent, as C.R. James masterly analyzed (1938). It has been a long marathon, claiming the restitution, and we are still running. For the former African colonies, decolonization has a deeper meaning, beyond the transition to political independence; decolonization is an ongoing process, plenty of unresolved struggles. Indeed, debts from the past, both ethical and monetary, cannot be easily wished away; the question is – who owes whom? To talk about restitution is to talk about decolonizing history, is to democratize the rereading of our frequently very violent and mismatched past encounters (Santos & Meneses, 2020). Achille Mbembe describes in detail how the extensive immaterial and material damage of European colonialism has resulted in the forced break with the self, expropriation, and humiliation. This challenge is the core question that Felwine Sarr explores in his conference,

showing with acuity how these conditions continue to affect Africans to this day.

Indeed, the Enlightened creation of Europe as the core reference of what civilization and progress means, as the reference of what counts as valuable and not, enshrouds any possibility of acknowledging other perspectives, other legitimate centers of knowledge production. It produced a set on monocultures that condensed the spirit of the Epistemological reasoning of the Global north, masterly analyzed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his most recent book, *the end of cognitive empire* (2018). The result is a world portrayed as hierarchical ladder of values at the top of which are European values, whatever they are. And the Global south become the nothing, the no place of knowledge, the symbol of the abyssal Eurocentric thinking.

As Felwine Sarr insisted in his conference, the questions steam from the centrality of the canonic interpretation of what is a 'cultural' good, what is a collection, how was it formed, and above all, what power-knowledge relationship is at the core of the constitution of these collections; why is it problematic to 'return' the objects? Is it because it means European countries have to acknowledge their violent colonial past and that they have robbed the history and cultural production of others? Can we move beyond invisibility towards emergences (Santos, 2014)? Can we overstep the epistemic violence that shapes our times?

Ironically, one feels often as the Schrödinger's cat, in a paradoxical situation. One has to love the Schrödinger's Africans who were incompetent and lazy but, at the same time, produced wonderful art pieces. It means to exist in a quantum superposition state where Africans have no history – let's remember Hegel (1956) -, while, at the same time, their objects were collected to be part of world history in European museums.

The contemporaneous quantum state requires us to discuss, inspired by the Sarr-Savoy Report (2018) what to do with the knowledges that have been appropriated from the continent, and that report, in detail, a long history of contacts and contributions to world history. History has always, at least, two side. And as we say in the continent, the story cannot just be told by the

hunter; one has to listen to the hunted. And this is one of the major achievements of this discussion: to open up the Pandora box of world history made in Europe, claiming, the (re)writing of the history and the (re)education of the public, of the people, expressing, above all, the impacts of this very violent encounters, of the history of violence of modern colonialism (Meneses, 2018).

The first element relates to ‘knowledge’ production – we are talking about ‘stolen’, misappropriated knowledge that insists in situating African contributions to ‘world’ knowledge as secondary elements, raw data, to be interpreted according to the Eurocentric canonic structure. We should not forget, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos emphasizes, that the modern history cannot be subsumed to the European interpretation of the world. The world and their knowledges are much broader than the Eurocentric narrative.

Let’s take as example of Portuguese colonialism. In 1895 the Gaza state, that would occupy the southern part of today’s Mozambique, was military conquered by Portugal, affirming the emergence of modern colonialism. However, a couple of years before diplomatic treaties had been signed between Portugal and Gaza (Liesegang, 1986). Ngungunyane, the last monarch, lost the war, and was deported to Azores where he died. The massive destruction of Mandhakazi, the state’s capital was unnecessary, intentional, straightforward, systematic, harsh, alienated, premeditated, and purposely intended to expose the Nguni population to the new, colonial political regime. This is the example of what colonialism is about – the destruction of the other.

The second element regards the capacity to claim and the claim to be heard. The colonized can be silenced, but silences can be very eloquent, signaling other projects concurrent with Eurocentric projects. In the 1998 Diana Ferrus, herself South African, triggered the process that led to the return, in 2002, the remains of Sarah Bartmann back home. In a poem, she states repeatedly - *I’ve come to take you home.*

I have come to wretch you away –
away from the poking eyes
of the man-made monster
who lives in the dark

with his clutches of imperialism
 who dissects your body bit by bit
 who likens your soul to that of Satan
 and declares himself the ultimate god!

With the support of the late president Nelson Mandela, Sarah made her way back, away from the dissection laboratory where her body was analyzed, as she died in France, having been exposed, as part of a human exhibitions, to various European publics. This case, as others that I have observed here in Portugal, are part of the function of modern scientific museums, aiming at 'explaining the world' while reinforcing the racial structuring of the colonized world. These 'experiences', in research institutions in France, Portugal, UK or USA, to name a few, were used to perpetuate, illustrate, and define the conditions of slavery and to legitimize racial discrimination.

Ngungunyane himself 'went back home' almost one hundred years late. After complex historical research and excavations, and a transfer authorization granted by the President of the Regional Government of the Azores, his remains were symbolically delivered to the Portuguese State, in the form of a small urn containing earth from the grave where he was buried, which in turn was placed in the chapel of the Palácio das Necessidades, in Lisbon, where they remained for two years. And in 1995 Ngungunyane symbolically returned home.

These elements add to a small, but growing list of returning processes and historical rewritings. The lower half of a stone bird, sacred for Zimbabwe, was sold, under suspicious conditions, to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin early in the XX century. After the WWII it was taken to the Soviet Union as a prize possession, to be returned back to then East Germany in the 1970s. Germany returned the chopped-off pedestal of one of the birds in 2003 as a 'permanent loan'. One should mention that South Africa returned other stone birds, that also had been forcefully removed from the monument by in 1981, after the independence of Zimbabwe. Major institutions in Germany, for example, holding collections of colonial remains and relics are still cooperating with former German colonies in Africa to repatriate the items. Recently the German Historical Museum returned a maritime stone cross to Namibia, while a number of human remains collected by the Germans after a 1904 genocide were also

sent back. Even more recently a Dutch civil servant announced the return of an eighteenth-century ceremonial crown to Ethiopia.

My point is simple. We have come a long way reclaiming our history, our existence, to reclaim be part of global history. Against the odds, we are here. Sometimes we claim, sometimes we buy. My country funded the identification of core archival data here in Portugal to be microfilmed and sent back to Mozambique. This is part of our story; we can't surrender.

Falwine's conference touches upon a very sensitive topic– what do to with millions of objects, that we used at home, that were part of us, never destined for display in museums, as the Zimbabwean sacred birds, that were looted by imperial agents. It is no secret that many of these objects have been carefully handled, preserved, and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments, and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world. These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the 'civilized new world'. People and artifacts have become objects of observation and study, translation and care, custody and control by apparently unrelated sets of disciplines, institutions, and their scholars and experts. This brings the theme of 'restitutio' back to the debates. How were these collections formed? Are the words used written according to the national languages, symbol of their cultural belonging? Are that 'collections' acquired legitimately? Why are European countries so keep about conserving pieces and throwing out people that produced them? Should we just talk about restitution, or ask about reparations, as Manthia Diawara recently (2019) claimed?

The insistent claims of returning objects and archives has a long story. We should remember the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. More recently, the new EU Regulation 2019/880 on the Introduction and Import of Cultural Goods, could very well affect the treatment of colonial-era artefacts across the continent. Planned to begin imposing major controls

on the market by the end of 2020, among these controls is a prohibition on entry into the EU customs territory of cultural goods unlawfully removed from their country or territory of origin, with no cut-off date as to how far back the removal had to have occurred. In theory at least this could apply to certain removals dating from the colonial period.

To avoid such situations, the Dutch Museum of World Cultures, for example, has put together a guideline on returns, facilitating claims around three categories of collection items: those removed unlawfully, those removed without consent and those whose cultural value for their country of origin outweighs their value to Dutch culture. I am not saying I fully agree with this approach, but it means recognition of violent expropriation.

Several collections in Portugal were 'acquired' in colonial times, and behind the label 'acquired' is a power nexus that has to be bear in mind. Which were the political condition surrounding the process?

The Portuguese National Museum of Ethnology (1965), as many other ethnographic museums, holds collections that were assembled in colonial times. And I doubt the equity sensitivity as part of most of the colonial transactions. When one looks at the field note books of several of the researchers that assembled the collections, and pays attention to their notes, it is obvious that the 'acquired' gains another dimension, namely colonial appropriation by violence. These pieces, these objects, are part of the 'civilizing project' aimed exactly at portraying Africans as the imperial imagination sought to – a representation of Africa crystallized in the past, a tribal, apolitical Africa, always behind the civilized nations.

To reclaim the objects is to reclaim a rereading of the history of the violent encounter between Europe and Africa. The problem is not only the devolution; but to heal this violent trauma, the absences, the gaps in history, generated by colonialism, as Felwine neatly addressed.

It is not going to be easy to reclaim these objects, and the story goes back a couple of decades. In the 1980 Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, where I worked, asked for the collections of the anthropological survey of the

1930s-1950s to be returned. It has not happened so far, and the archaeological collections, the physical remains of several individuals and even pieces of cave art, have not been returned. This collection, as many others, are not a sign of friendly acquisitions. It is about objects looted in Africa. In Portugal, these objects are useful to confirm, on the one hand, a sound knowledge and documentation about 'our Africa', fundamental to legitimize the colonial presence; but still, very little is known about the recent history of Portuguese colonialism. To insist in reproducing the narrative these museum collections convey supports metaphorical interpretations and ideological conceptualizations that upkeep a growing white right-wing 'identitarianism' in Portugal. Can we decolonize the museums; can we share the archives?

I believe that the Memorial to pay Homage to Enslaved Persons will play a key role in this process. I am glad recently Kiluanji Kia Henda won the project, part of a very participative process. I am sure that "Plantation – Prosperity and Nightmare" will make sure that no one will forget this part of Portuguese past.

Perhaps this monument will be the first move to rewrite history; to recognize that the conquest of Gaza state was a violent, genocidal act, and that the Portuguese hero of the Gaza campaign, not only arrested Ngungunyane but looted his capital. A raffle and a 'cup offered by Queen Victoria to Gungunhana', were seized by Mouzinho de Albuquerque. These objects, with no 'scientific' or 'ethnographic' value, aimed, as I mentioned earlier, to create a 'terra nullius', to represent the Ngungunyane as 'tribal people', urgently necessitating to be colonized. The acceptance, be it by academics or politicians, of imperial categories of knowledge is a symptom of how scholarship was and still is shaped more broadly along the spatial, temporal, and political terms first set by imperialism. For example, did our history, as 'lusophone countries' initiated when the Portuguese started writing about us? I come from the Indian ocean shores, where Vasco da Gama arrived to find intense economic, cultural and religious connections. They came to a world 'made by the others'. My claim is to revisit archives and museums to rethink and offer alternate interpretations and read against or along the grain.

The idea of the Ethnographic museum, displaying Africa through a Eurocentric gaze, together with the assumption that the archive is a depository of

documents from the past, are technologies of violence. Both institutions produce the past, and facilitate the appropriation of people's lives, as if people's refusal to be colonized, subjugated, is over, and what was acquired through violence is a *fait accompli*. The archive forces people whose worlds have been destroyed to fit imperial categories like 'slave' or now 'refugee', reinforcing the alleged past-ness and robbery of people's lives.

We have to access to archival documents as a power project, evaluating the categories used to analyze the people affected by those documents, and the representations included in concepts such as 'slaves', 'refugees', or 'undocumented'.

The return of the cultural objects requires a non-imperial temporality and agenda, one that insists that what is studied did not occur 'in the past', and that people's right to see their worlds returned and repaired is justified. And this study has to be done with them, and not about them. Why, we must ask, is Portuguese scholarship — even critical scholarship — still not aligned with reparations claims, and restitution, and is instead aligned with the colonial configuration of the world? To return the objects, or to open up that possibility, is to open up to reparations, to transforming reparations into a constitutive part of scholarship, to transform institutions. To dramatically challenge the predominant imperial history. To overstep the abyssal thinking about otherness.

Based on concrete cases, but above all taking aboard the metaphor of Afrocentricity or the Global South, I argue for a decolonization of our minds. A decolonization that helps us recover part of our lost humanity, to make our world habitable again, a world where reparations fertilize the recovery of various non-violent, non-hierarchical forms of relationships between people. To relearn to think with the South and about the non-imperial South, learning from knowledges supported in concrete experiences, learning how to politically generate translations that contribute towards an ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2014).

Unlearning colonialism and capitalism, its evil twin, is in some ways unlearning these many institutions we work with, and through which we produce our

knowledge. The question is not how to study imperial violence as another object of research, but how to withdraw, as much as we can, from the operation of these monocultural, imperial technologies of knowledge production.

The question, for example, with museums and archives, is about the right to name and to define, the right to repair and care for relationships outside of the terms set by imperial institutions, the right to deny perpetrators and their inheritors their imperial right to continue to own and profit off of what was looted (Conklin, 2013). This is at the core of the large students' movement "#Rhodes must fall" in South Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Still, many are benefiting from Rhodes scholarships. The example of #Rhodes must fall, of the decolonization attempts in various university of the Global South is an opportunity to endorse, envisage, experiment, rehearse, and pursue reparations. To rethink whom objects belong; what is the meaning of an objects behind its aesthetics. This is part of a global project to reclaim the past; the past of all of us that was robbed long ago. Thus, we should deny, denounce, renounce, disown the exclusive rights to keep what could not have become property without the brutal exclusion of others — art, documents, knowledge. This plundered wealth, accumulated in museums and archives, should be opened to communities dispossessed by its accumulation, and under their guidance and with their participation, we can gain other images of who we are. This is one small way that the academy can rejoin the world and partake in its repair.

Taking as a starting point the Memorial to pay Homage to Enslaved Persons, I think the museums exhibitions have to be open to multiple agencies and participations, establishing itself as an open catalog project that would take place under the sign of creating different relationships with the communities whose lives and knowledges are tacked by the exhibition. Thus, it would be possible to start from a controversial topic, demonstrating the possibility of co-creating collective knowledge and memories and transforming the gag into its opposite: that is, an exercise that deals with the complexity of the multiplicity of perspectives requesting the celebration of uncensored discourses and representations, constitutes an alternative to the models dictated by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Thank you Felwine for the possibility to

think aloud from your work on to keep struggling for what is ours, part of our past to project our future.

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