

Politique africaine

CALL FOR PAPERS

African Cultural Heritages: The Political Performances of Objects

Coordinated by

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Deadline for submission of proposals: 1st November 2020

The gestures and “heritage emotions” (Fabre 2013) of politicians such as Georges Pompidou, Jacques Chirac and Emmanuel Macron in France have been extensively analysed and commented on, as have those of a handful of their African counterparts, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor (Harney 2004) and, to a lesser extent, Menelik II (Sohier 2012), Kwame Nkrumah (Hess 2001; Lentz 2017), Mobutu Sese Seko (White 2006; Malaquais 2008; Van Beurden 2015) and King Njoya (Geary 1994; Galitzine-Loumpet 2016). However, what do we actually know about the way African heads of state and their advisers, high-ranking officials and other political figures and activists considered the political role of heritage or, at a micro level (which is the scope of this issue) of sets of objects, from a personal, national and international perspective during the colonial and postcolonial periods? How did they and do they act on the definition of objects and their trajectories, thus creating the conditions for new layers of meaning (Kopytoff 1986)? At the same time, how do popular practices inform, inflect and appropriate these object conceptions in a back-and-forth dynamic?

The 1966 Dakar World Festival of Negro Arts opened with a symposium entitled “The Function of Negro Art in the Life of and for the People” during which, among other things, Aimé Césaire's famous speech established a straight link between “good African policy” and the future of arts on the continent.¹ These were, however, as Césaire himself wrote, reflections by men of science and culture, by experts. To reverse this approach, what do grassroots practices and knowledge do to the “(official) politics of objects” while interacting with the institutions that promoted them at different levels?

We have chosen the term “object” deliberately so as not to narrowly categorize the plurality of ontologies, meanings and functions that can be associated with very diverse productions, which are precisely those that need to be examined here. By using it, we can embrace a variety of political gestures that shape – sometimes simultaneously or conflictingly – very diverse productions in all their complexity. By “objects”, therefore, we mean any museum piece, “cultural good” or material production that does not necessarily (or not exclusively, or not yet) have a heritage value, but still engages in a singular relationship with history, identity or specific cultural and social practices. Indeed, far from the binary narratives to which many – now increasingly obsolete – museum displays seem to reduce objects (aesthetic contemplation *versus* “ethnographic” use), they evolve in complex contexts that vest them with political connotations. They become the *agents* of gestures, intentions and discourse that contribute towards shaping their meanings, thus sparking new political performances that can have national, transnational and even global resonances. In the same vein, we consider “heritage” in the sense suggested by Derek R. Peterson in his introduction to the collective book *The Politics of Heritage in Africa* (2012: 1) in which he writes: “Like Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, we take heritage to be a form of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past. But unlike her, we argue that the products of heritage work do not always have the museum as their destination”. Finally, our use of the term “performance” is twofold here: as the history of this artistic practice demonstrates,

¹ Aimé Césaire, Speech delivered in Dakar on 6 April 1966 as part of the colloquium “Fonction et signification de l’art négro-africain dans la vie du peuple et pour le peuple”, which marked the opening of the First World Festival of Negro Arts (30 March – 21 April 1966), in *Gradhiva*, no. 10, 2009, pp. 208-213.

performance not only *does*, but *shows what one does* (Christian Biet, in Le Lay 2015). Hence, our interest lies in what the political investment of objects produces in terms of uses, meanings, imaginaries or “counter-gestures”. In short, we aim to denaturalize the meanings of these objects in order to show how these artefacts are constantly (re)produced, (re)shaped and (re)signified.

This special issue is thus devoted to a study of the entire spectrum of official actors, from civil servants to heads of state, interacting with entities or individuals outside the state sphere (kings, non-governmental organizations, donors, citizen associations, etc.), who develop gestures, conceptions and narratives that create or reshape, assign or promote singular, political uses of objects in Africa.

Numerous works (Bortolot 2013; Lentz 2017; Peterson 2015; Sohier 2012) have highlighted the inclusion of material productions into various political practices and devices that have been developed by African governments over the decades. Through photography, postal iconography, public monuments, commemorative print fabrics, handcrafts, dance and masquerades, these publications have explored the use of images by postcolonial states in order to feed a “national imagination” in progress, emphasising the appropriation of local cultural “traditions” and the recycling of emblems of former African royalty or colonial powers that are now promoted as national symbols.

Far from being confined to state borders alone, this strategic use of images and objects has been also developed within the framework of foreign policy. Several studies have examined the case of diplomatic gifts (Arnoldi 2002; Bennet 2018; Geary 1994; Girard-Muscagorry 2018). These gifts, which are highly invested symbolically, contribute towards forging and disseminating the visual markers of state sovereignty abroad, while constituting important resources for rebalancing asymmetrical power relations.

The major pan-African festivals of the 1960s and 1970s have also aroused keen interest in recent years, revealing the central place of objects in these cultural machines and the multiple identity, memory and political issues they polarise (Ficquet & Gallimardet 2009; Ficquet *et al.* 2015; Murphy 2016; Chimurenga 2019). The case of the “Festac mask” – the famous ivory pendant of Queen Idiah, which became the emblem of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos in 1977 – epitomises the dynamics that place artefacts at the heart of pan-African mobilisations and imaginations (Malaquais & Vincent 2019).

However, these studies, which pertain to a form of anthropology of image-making policies, most often place themselves at a state level, in the sense of a “unified and coherent entity of decision, administration and execution” (Fouéré 2017: 584), at the expense of a detailed analysis of the mechanisms and the vast networks of actors involved. Consequently, alongside the “great men” and national heroes, who are the figures – including women working behind the scenes in protocol services, embassies and cultural administration agencies – who activate and transform the political meanings of objects in Africa by their choices and actions? How do they interact with the economic sphere, and in particular with the art scene and African and European art markets?

Following the methodological approach developed by Dominique Malaquais and Cédric Vincent in the context of their Panafest Archive Project, this issue of *Politique africaine* aims to question the political making of objects by fully foregrounding those who activate its machinery: “actors to whom little importance has been granted so far: those who remained in

the background (advisors, consultants, patrons, diplomats); ‘small hands’ [...]; development workers, expatriates, businessmen (and women), journalists, librarians, archivists [...]” (Ficquet *et al.* 2015). Thus, against the grain of linear understandings of the political appropriation of objects by African governments, what are the negotiations and tensions at work, and even the failures that may impact object trajectories? Furthermore, in addition to official African and European archives, what historical sources and methodological tools can be employed to gain entry to these power mechanisms?

Some past issues of *Politique africaine* have made “the heuristic bet of a ‘detour through materiality’”. In a similar vein, this call for papers welcomes contributions that explore the affective and multisensory dimension of this approach² from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology of the state (its bureaucratic bodies, networks and actors), political science, sociology, history and art history in Africa. At the intersection of state policies and individual itineraries, of protocols and affects and of materiality and symbols, this issue questions the processes leading up to the political investment of objects – beyond museum institutions and destinations – by focusing in particular on the circulations, stagings and uses of objects, as well as on the narratives they carry and provoke, from both a historical and contemporary point of view.

Thematic Axes

Submissions may engage with any of the following themes, which can be studied from a regional, national, transnational, diasporic or even transcontinental perspective, and within different time frames.

1. The Politics of Objects Exhibited: Actors, Gestures and Places

This axis focuses on the agency of those African political actors who, like their counterparts all over the world, may appropriate material objects for both strategic and personal purposes. Following recent studies based on African collectors, proposals can deal with their collecting practices, paying particular attention to the various ways and phases in which collections have been put together, as well as to the sensitive, intellectual and political conceptions they both underline and produce. The personal involvement of statesmen and stateswomen in the formation of public collections may also be addressed, as well as the histories of collections that allow actors outside the institutional sphere to establish themselves in the political arena.

The deployment of objects in places of power (such as presidential palaces, assemblies, embassies, official residences, royal residences or museums celebrating the “Fathers of the Nation”) or during official ceremonies (including diplomatic receptions, official ceremonies and cultural festivals) is also a promising avenue for uncovering the strategies adopted and their models, the actors involved and the underlying political uses. Alongside this thread, other contributions may focus on travelling art exhibitions presented from a national perspective by newly-independent states during the post-colonial period, which served as

² See, for instance, Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier (eds.), “Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir” in 2001 or, more recently (2016), “Matérialités du vote”, co-edited by Sandrine Perrot, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Justin Willis. The expression “détour par la matérialité” (quoted by Perrot, Pommerolle & Willis in “La fabrique du vote: placer la matérialité au cœur de l’analyse”, 2016) comes from Guillaume Lachenal’s *Le médicament qui devait sauver l’Afrique: un scandale pharmaceutique aux colonies*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014).

diplomatic tools in the international political arena, illuminating both the claims they served and the negotiations that took place at an internal and external level.

2. Supply Networks and Regimes of Value

In order to better understand the mechanisms of official patronage, a focus will be devoted to the networks of object supply, and in particular on the intermediaries between state actors and the art and craft markets. From commissions to national manufactories to acquisitions in galleries or “tourist” shops, and from field collecting practices to artist sponsorship, this axis explores the various forms of intervention and the aesthetic criteria that underpin them.

Proposals relating to the analysis of policies that regulate the production and circulation of objects may also find a place in this axis. The study of the object selection processes promoted by institutional or political actors also raises questions about their regimes of value. While the emphasis on “authenticity” still profoundly shapes Western perception of African arts, what criteria and aesthetic imaginaries determine the choice and political use of artworks and objects in Africa? In what ways and to what end are the notions of “authenticity”, “ethnic styles” or “modernity” re-appropriated or redefined in these contexts?

3. The Politics of Objects through the Prism of Social Practices and Popular Imagination

The third axis invites an exploration of popular, grassroots engagements which, through specific objects that “sharpen the relationship with the past” (Fabre 2013), bring to light spaces for social negotiation or reconfigure the relationship with the present and the future.

We are thinking not only of phenomena of re-appropriation, re-signification and *détournement*, but also of rejection, dispute, and even vandalism caused by the political treatment of objects (such as heritage-making processes, claims, instrumentalization and alienation) by governments or political elites – including the symbolic or physical violence it carries and provokes – fuelling processes of political subjectification.

Finally, this axis also welcomes analyses that question the political investment processes of specific objects in the context of popular uprisings and their post-revolutionary aftermaths.

4. The African Making of Restitutions, from Independence to the Present Day

Since independence, and again in the wake of Emmanuel Macron's speech in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017, the restitution and return of African objects that are being kept in Europe has provoked a lively debate in the relevant countries, engaging ethical, material and technical aspects as well as sensitive and emotional dimensions. However, the way African and Afro-descendant politicians, diplomats and activists are dealing or have dealt with this issue has not yet been accorded the same visibility. Indeed, alongside bilateral discussions, restitutions are considered, formulated and negotiated in a variety of forums (including the African Union, Permanent Delegations to UNESCO, United Nations General Assemblies regional conferences and embassies, ICOM) and through a wealth of different actors (including activist and student associations, cultural and diplomatic advisers and businessmen or philanthropists) whose meticulous mapping has yet to be drawn.

Calendar

1st November 2020: Deadline for submission of paper proposals (in French or English) to Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry (girardmuscagorry@gmail.com) and Marian Nur Goni (m.nurgoni@gmail.com)

10 November 2020: Notification to authors of acceptance or rejection of their proposal.

10 March 2021: deadline for submission of articles to Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry (girardmuscagorry@gmail.com) and Marian Nur Goni (m.nurgoni@gmail.com).

For more information on the format of articles to be submitted, see the instructions to authors:

<https://polaf.hypotheses.org/soumettre-un-article>.

<https://polaf.hypotheses.org/soumettre-un-article/submit-to-the-journal>

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