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## Current challenges for African cultural heritage: a case study of Guinea-Bissau

*Desafios atuais para o património cultural africano: um estudo de caso da Guiné-Bissau*

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# Current challenges for African cultural heritage: a case study of Guinea-Bissau

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## NOTA DO EDITOR

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## Introduction

- 1 In 21<sup>st</sup> century museums, in the former metropolis of African colonies the place of African heritage is becoming an increasingly salient issue. How museums should display African cultural material is a question that is framed by a general concern with the role of museums and cultural heritage in civil society, when societies are increasingly multicultural and economically segmented, and by the level of access to formal education. Museums are now driven by the desire for democratization and inclusion. For museums in former colonial metropolises, inclusion and democracy involve building bridges with populations of African origin. This type of action emerges from a growing focus on pluralism, participation, minority representation of non-western cultures and the role of museums in civil society.
- 2 This orientation started in the 1980s (Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992; Karp et al. 2006) with the effects of globalization that brought about new museological practices, encouraging debates related to negotiation and community

management in museums, promoting the creation of transnational communities and generating cooperation, collaboration and sharing movements that have highlighted the power of cultural heritage as an agent of sustainable development, and the museum as a space for negotiating ownership (Golding and Modest 2013; Silverman 2014; Basu and Modest 2015).

- 3 The achievements of including communities in museums are reflected in the way recent studies address the issue of heritage restitution, from provenance research and collaborative knowledge creation processes that attempt to review colonial categories based on information sharing with communities of origin (Grimme 2020; Schorch 2020; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020). However, these are still one-off studies, and the issue of return of cultural heritage is mainly addressed from a legal and political perspective (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). Sarr and Savoy (2018) argue that the restitution of heritage should start from a system of “relational ethics” that uses heritage as a means for the reconstruction and reformulation of the history and memory of the African continent «through reconnecting these objects with the current societies and the questions and problems that these contemporary societies pose» (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 32).
- 4 In parallel, post-colonial studies argue that African museums emerge from systems of colonial governance that have implemented physical and conceptual structures that have enabled the development of heritage projects created to fulfil a symbolic and material desire for power (Arinze 1998; Adedze 2002; Edwards, Gosden and Philips 2006; Peterson, Gavua and Rassol 2015). Some authors also claim that even after independence, and despite their “Africanization” achieved with the help of international organizations such as UNESCO (Myles 1976; Abungu 2005), these institutions have continued to promote the production of an official past through heritage technologies that privilege certain memories and repress others (Jong and Rowlands 2010).
- 5 This article analyses the different perspectives from which issues of restitution of non-European cultural heritage have been approached internationally and in the Portuguese context. This analysis helps understand how the problem is experienced in Africa. I exemplify this experience with the museological reality of Guinea-Bissau, namely through the history of its National Ethnographic Museum.

## Cultural heritage and restitution: the international scene

- 6 Tythacott and Arvanitis assert that restitution is «a highly charged, political subject, entangled within shifting power relations between, and within countries» (2014, 2). Basu defines the act of restitution as a diasporic movement of cultural heritage defending that the «dominant postcolonial response should be to demand restitution in form of repatriation» (2011, 37) if objects are seen from the countries of origin as victims of forced displacement by colonialism. To clarify the difference between restitution and repatriation movements, the organization Collections Trust briefly summarizes restitution as «the process by which cultural objects are returned to an individual or community. Repatriation [on the other hand] is the process by which

cultural objects are returned to a nation or state at the request of a government» (Collections Trust 2020).

- 7 During colonial times the despoliation of cultural goods was a widespread and systematic practice, not only associated with scenarios of war and military occupation. In general, the colonization of African, Asian and South American territories resulted in the dispersion of this cultural heritage into Western collections. Today, trafficking in cultural goods constitutes a global industry, although it is controlled at the national level (with the application of restrictive laws against theft and illicit trafficking) and at the international level through the action of organizations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the UNESCO, and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). The media also serve to raise public awareness (UNESCO 2001). Of all these bodies, UNESCO's action in protecting heritage at risk stands out, ensuring that State Members that have lost certain cultural objects of fundamental importance and wish them returned – if international conventions cannot be applied – may request them from the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Return in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP) established in 1978.
- 8 Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, general director of UNESCO from 1974 until 1987, wrote in 1978:
 

The return of a work of art or record to the country which created it enables a people to recover part of its memory and identity and proves that the dialogue between civilizations which shapes the history of the world still continuing in an atmosphere of mutual respect between nations. (M'Bow 1978, n.p.)
- 9 Examples of these prior agreements are the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO 1954) and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO 1970), which marked key moments and defined the existence of preventive measures and procedures for the restitution of heritage, as well as a dynamic of cooperation between countries.
- 10 In 1995 the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (UNIDROIT 1995) was created as an instrument drawn up at the request of UNESCO to develop a uniform minimum corpus of rules of private law relating to the international trade of art. The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention is a complementary instrument to supplement the provisions of public law contained in UNESCO's 1970 Convention (UNESCO 1970).
- 11 In 2002, the directors of 18 European and American art museums signed the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museums*. This declaration was an important moment in which the international museum community «share[d] the conviction that illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects must be firmly discouraged» (*Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* 2004, 4).
- 12 The ICOM Code of Ethics, unanimously adopted by the 15<sup>th</sup> ICOM General Assembly held in Buenos Aires (Argentina) on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1986, and revised in 2001 and 2004, relates to the origin of the collections, considering the principle of cooperation as a means of establishing partnerships with countries, which – for various reasons – have lost a significant part of their heritage. With this document, ICOM also asserts, regarding the restitution of cultural property:

Museums should be prepared to initiate dialogue for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin [...] based on scientific, professional or humanitarian principles, as well as applicable local, national and international legislation, in preference to action at governmental or political level. (ICOM [2004] 2017, 6.3, p. 33)

- 13 Countries like France, Germany and the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent the UK, are seriously engaged in the project of restitution/repatriation as testified by the international public debate initiated in 2018 with the publication of the report on the restitution of African heritage by the French government (Sarr and Savoy 2018). This effort entails knowing exactly how many and what artifacts from Africa their museums have, coupled with a clear understanding of how such objects were acquired. For the authors of the report, the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr and the art historian Bénédicte Savoy «the act or gesture of restitution should not be considered as a dangerous action of indentarian assignation or as the territorial separation or isolationism of cultural property» (2018, 2). Despite publicly positioning himself in favour of the restitution of objects to their countries of origin, the Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe (2020), disagrees with Sarr and Savoy (2018) arguing that very few countries are really concerned with understanding what originally justified their presence in Europe and what they meant within European consciousness. He asks himself what precisely we [Europeans] want to get rid of; what we are trying to repatriate and why; and whether the work these objects were meant to do in the history of European consciousness is complete. After so many years of the presence of these objects within its institutions, Mbembe questions whether Europe has finally learned to deal with what comes from outside (2020, 354). The Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne agrees with Mbembe. In his view:
- [...] restitution cannot be simply a return to the kingdom following exile. It must draw on the wealth of new energies and meanings which the objects in question have produced in the art world and will continue to produce after their return, to emphasize that the time has come to reinvent the museum as a realization of networks and synergies. (Diagne 2021, n.p.)
- 14 These authors make us think about objects as permeable structures of meaning. Shouldn't we ask ourselves if it wouldn't be better to make the museum collections circulate between continents, different institutions, and communities instead of being circumscribed to a single geographical area?
- 15 Following the position taken by the French government, the ministers of culture of 16 German states met in March 2019 to draw up a joint declaration on the maintenance of colonial collections. The German Museums Association (2021, 10) believes «that the colonial past of museums and their collections [should] be reappraised» based on three main principles: provenance research, transparency through digitalization and public access, and collaboration with communities of origin.
- 16 In England this issue is still awaiting resolution, seen for the time being from actions to decolonize the collections of different museums (Hickley 2020).
- 17 Dutch museums are sending scholars to the former colonies while developing guidelines to deal with complaints for the return of heritage (Hickley 2019), as in the example of Tropenmuseum, that had already established the principles and process for the return of objects to countries of origin (NMVW 2019).
- 18 Around the world there are several research projects that have been dealing with the colonial past. Focusing on recent examples, it's worth noting the Museums Lab, that

started in 2021, in Berlin, as «a platform for joint learning, exchange and continuing education regarding the future of museums in Africa and Germany» (Museums Lab 2021, n.p.). Another relevant project is the European project “Taking Care – Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care” that, since 2019, «explore[s] under-tapped potential of these [ethnographic and world culture] museums, for thinking critically about planetary pasts and about sustainable, convivial futures» and focuses «on questions related to the unequal sharing of heritage resources and restitution» (Taking Care Project 2021, n.p.).

## Portugal’s positioning on cultural heritage restitution actions

- 19 Considering national legislation, the question of restitution was mentioned for the first time in 2001 in the context of the Law that set the basis of the policy and regime of protection for cultural heritage (Law n.º 107/2001).<sup>1</sup> This legislation only briefly contemplates the main aspects of restitution of heritage (art. 69) and the position of museums regarding requests for repatriation or restitution of cultural heritage is not explored. Later, in 2004, the framework law – *Lei-Quadro dos Museus Portugueses* (Law n.º 47/2004) regarding the national museum policy principles, would foresee the «principle of international cooperation, through the recognition of the duty of collaboration, especially with museums from Portuguese-speaking countries [...]» (art. 2.º, § 1.º, i).
- 20 In 2012, the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC) was created under the Ministry of Culture (Decree-Law n.º 115/2012) to guide the action of museums and other heritage structures, replacing former governmental bodies in the area of museums and heritage. In what concerns restitution issues, the newly created Department for Cultural Assets (*Departamento de Bens Culturais*) (Ordinance n.º 223/2012), has the following responsibilities within the DGPC:
 

Monitor the issues related to the return of movable cultural objects between States of the European Union or of other States under conditions of reciprocity and, within that framework, to rule on requests for return in accordance with the law. (art. 2.º, § 5.º, f)
- 21 Meanwhile, in 2016, the Law n.º 30/2016 specifies the regime of restitution of cultural goods that have left illegally the territory of a member state of the European Union (transposing the Directive 2014/60/EU).
- 22 In 2019, one year after the launch of the French report, the Resolution of the Council of Ministers n.º 35/2019 approved the creation of the Future Museums Project Group. The main objective assigned to the Project Group was the responsibility to «design and propose the instruments necessary for the implementation of management models» (§ 2.º, a, 1273), which shaped the whole project (2019-2020) and the interaction between the five axes that the research and reflection was based upon: management of museums, palaces and monuments; networks and partnerships; digital transformation; collection management; and audience engagement (Camacho 2021, 7). The theme of heritage restitution is not explored in the Project Group final report, stressing that «patronage, internationalization and disincorporation [are] topics whose complexity would require more time and other means to enable more consistency with these matters» (Camacho 2021, 96). However, the Report also acknowledges that

disincorporation «has gained public visibility and deserves an informed and dispassionate professional approach that promotes reflection (...) and guidelines arising from the tutelage [Ministry of Culture]» (Camacho 2021, 83).

- 23 In the field of social inclusion of museums, the Report only refers to the importance of «policies aimed at the diversification of audiences, aiming at increasing access and reducing social inequalities, not only among the population but also the immigrant» (Camacho 2021, 16). After a careful examination of this report, one can conclude that the themes addressed are not yet clearly listed in the Portuguese museums and heritage agenda and the question remains: will Portugal follow the lead of France, Germany and Netherlands?
- 24 In 2021, probably in view with the global movement around heritage restitution, ICOM Portugal (ICOM Portuguese National Committee) took a first step and launched a survey targeting public and private museums in order to identify the presence of heritage from non-European territories in Portuguese museums (ICOM Portugal 2021). The survey preliminary results reveal that only 30% of museums answered the survey due to the precariousness situation experienced by these institutions, e.g. the lack of specialized staff to carry out the necessary research on the provenance of their collections.<sup>2</sup>
- 25 António Pinto Ribeiro, researcher and cultural programmer,<sup>3</sup> exposed this deficiency in an interview back in 2018, in the wake of the publication of the French report Sarr-Savoy:
- In Portugal, we have a very serious problem: there are no lists [of art pieces from the former colonies] either in relation to museums or archives. Many of these objects are in storage, not even on display. There could be 10 thousand, 50 thousand or 80 thousand. (Lusa 2018, n.p.)
- 26 In this article we argue that the theme of restitution is not in the Portuguese political agenda, in spite of recent developments and debates. In 2016, the former director of the National Museum of Ethnology (from 1993 to 2015), Joaquim Pais de Brito, recalled that the international debate around restitution «has been going on since the 1970s and is a problem with many dimensions» (Henriques 2016, n.p.). When asked about the topic, Pais de Brito seems to endorse a Eurocentric view on non-Western cultural heritage by advocating that Portuguese museums should:
- [...] encourage that the countries requesting the return are plausible interlocutors and develop institutions with the skills, the conditions of security, conservation and quality that allow the return, and that important documents for humanity are not lost by a demagogic political correctness (...) the returns are placed from a request made by a country or an institution, which must include concrete objects and reasoned reasons. (Henriques 2016, n.p.)
- 27 Nevertheless, in 2020, the controversial proposal for the “decolonization of knowledge” from the deputy Joacine Katar Moreira, then supported by *Partido Livre* (left-wing political party), that was rejected by the Portuguese parliament, would draw attention to the topic of heritage restitution. The proposal suggested that all the heritage from the former colonies in the Portuguese territory should be returned to their countries of origin in order to decolonize state museums and monuments. The proposal was included in *Partido Livre*’s electoral agenda and intended «that the heritage of the former Portuguese colonies, which is currently in the possession of national museums and archives, could be identified, claimed and returned to the communities of origin» (Lusa 2020, n.p). According to this proposal, the list of heritage to be returned would be

drawn up by a «group composed of museologists, curators and researchers» that would contribute for the «re-contextualization of the collections of national museums and monuments» in order to «stimulate a vision of the colonial slave trade past, reframing it and re-contextualizing it in the light of academic research» (Lusa 2020, n.p).

- 28 This proposal inspired some debate in the national press. In response to the deputy's proposal, Paulo Costa, current director of the National Museum of Ethnology – MNE – in Lisbon) replied, in the press, that «each case must be examined in its specificity; nothing can be defined by decree» (Caetano 2020, n.p.). He also guaranteed that «no request has been made to Portugal or specifically to the [National] Museum of Ethnology for the return of cultural goods» (Caetano 2020, n.p.). For Costa it is necessary to distinguish «(...) works that have been removed by the application of force, i.e., the outcome of looting, and those that are considered to result from improper alienation (...)» (Caetano 2020, n.p.).
- 29 One may also consider that this is not only a matter of problematizing the restitution of heritage, but also the need to reflect about new ways of documenting and exhibiting this heritage. In this sense, as a response to how Portuguese museums should deal with their non-European collections in exhibition terms, during the seminar *Descolonizar os Museus: Isto na Prática?* (*Decolonize Museums: This in Practice?*) organized by the Portuguese association *Acesso Cultura*<sup>4</sup> in 2019, Luís Raposo, president of ICOM Europe, drew attention to the need to:
- [...] review museographic narratives, rebuild collections and build collections that speak on the theme of slavery, also extending approaches with the intervention of communities with different sensibilities, for a greater democratization of these spaces. (Lusa 2019, n.p.)
- 30 In short, the need and the importance for museums to revisit the Portuguese colonial past. However, such topic is not a new one in the museum context. Already back in 2010, Maria Manuela Cantinho Pereira, director of the Geographical Society of Lisbon, stressed the need to:
- [...] re-evaluate the role of museums with colonial collections, drawing attention to the importance of this heritage in the reflection that citizens – Portuguese, Angolans, Mozambicans, all - can and should make on their past, their contemporaneity and the changes underway. (Pereira 2010, 9)
- 31 Indeed, only a large investment in the study of these collections will then allow for a more informed debate. It is important to note that, regarding the Portuguese academic field, African heritage has mostly been addressed from the perspective of social memory (e.g., Henriques 2009; Domingos and Peralta 2013; Leite 2014). Occasional case studies on African cultural heritage collections in Portuguese museums can also be identified (e.g., Pereira 2005; Botas 2013).

## Cultural heritage in Africa

- 32 In 1989 the Angolan writer Henrique Abranches compiled a set of texts portraying the museological and heritage panorama of African countries in the publication *Identity and Cultural Heritage*. Regarding the question of the return of heritage to countries of origin, he stated that, at that time, African countries «[...] have not yet decided to face the question of the return of cultural goods or are not yet seriously motivated to recover these goods» (Abranches 1989, 15). In his view, these countries were «better

represented in museums in Europe and America than in their own land» (Abranches 1989, 20).

- 33 Abranches argues that in Africa there is «a total absence of the minimum conditions necessary for the conservation and preservation of material goods, whether those which have been returned to their country of origin or those from local collections» due to the state of general underdevelopment in Africa which aggravates the conditions for the return of the objects and implies the development of museums with the necessary conservation conditions (Abranches 1989, 31). He also notes that African countries lack legislation for the protection of cultural heritage and do not have a clear definition of the concept of cultural heritage, reality that can only be overcome through cooperation programs «with the most developed and progressive countries» (Abranches 1989, 32).
- 34 In this theme Abranches agrees with many other authors (e.g., Kusimba and Klehm 2013) defending the importance of international collaboration for the development of museums, exhibitions, and programs in Africa. By presenting these arguments, Abranches seems to agree with the western museum model inherited by African societies during colonialism and focused on the preservation of cultural evidence into the future. The author also seems to forget the international effort that took place during that decade (1980-1990), which culminated in the creation of museums in 16 West African countries. This initiative was due to the West African Museums Programme – WAMP (1982) and the International Council of African Museums – AFRICOM (1991) that coincided with the global bureaucracies of world heritage and the new museology movement that questioned representation and community relations in museums (Kratz 2014).
- 35 Between the end of 1980 and the beginning of 2000 Portuguese-speaking countries also contributed to the improvement of postcolonial African museum projects. This was achieved through a series of conferences that worked as a «binder body of museums and related institutions in Portuguese-speaking countries (...) offering knowledge of museum collections and reflections on the objectives, means and actions of museums» (ICOM 1989, 5).
- 36 In 2009, AFRICOM recognized the gap in the inventory of African collections and published a manual of standards developed to enable the management of collections in museums hoping to promote the security of objects, the exchange between museums and the development of common projects (research, exhibitions, training). This project enabled the digitalization of inventories and documentation of collections by organizing standardized and accurate information. This manual encompasses all types of collections in both the humanities (history, archaeology, ethnography, art) and the natural sciences (palaeontology, zoology, geology) and it was tested with the collections of five pilot museums of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe (AFRICOM 2010, 13). This measure is somehow aligned with the concern shown by Abranches two decades earlier when he stated that it was necessary to find measures that allowed the creation of an international inventory and information structure that would enable a planned and consented exchange (Abranches 1989, 25).

## Museums and heritage in Guinea-Bissau: The National Ethnographic Museum unsettled history

- 37 The history of museums in Guinea-Bissau is a troubled one. This section will analyse the path of the National Ethnographic Museum of Guinea-Bissau (MEN), the post-colonial heritage institution in the country, which inherited the memories as well as some material evidence of the colonial museum, *Museu da Guiné Portuguesa* (1945-1974). Guinea-Bissau was a Portuguese colony until 1974, and thus it is possible to find several examples of this country's cultural heritage even today in several Portuguese museums.<sup>5</sup> However, in this article we will rather examine the steps taken by this post-colonial museum in the defence and safeguarding of Guinean heritage by going through several perspectives pointed out by a group of key actors during the Portuguese Speaking Museums Meetings, mentioned above and promoted by the national committees of ICOM of the Portuguese speaking countries, from the end of the 1980s until 2011, the date of the sixth and last meeting. These meetings were important for revealing the main questions that guided Guinean museology from the 1980's until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 38 In 1989, at the second Portuguese Speaking Museums Meeting, and one year after the opening of the National Ethnographic Museum of Guinea-Bissau, the director Leonardo Cardoso, reinforced the importance of the collaboration between similar international and Guinea-Bissauan institutions to promote «cultural exchange between our countries» (Cardoso 1989, 71). He recalled that the museum had inherited:
- [...] practically nothing from the Museum of Portuguese Guinea, whose activities ended in 1974, when powers were transferred to the newly created state of Guinea-Bissau. Not only were political powers transferred, but also the management of Colonial Heritage including the Museum itself. (Cardoso 1989, 71)
- 39 At that time, as he writes «(...) some collections and pieces in the Museum were diverted» and «(...) part of the collection reached the extinct INIC [National Institute for Scientific Research] from which an extremely small amount [was] recovered for the current Museum» (Cardoso 1989, 72).
- 40 For Cardoso «the fact that the collections in foreign hands have disappeared does not mean that no attention has been paid to safeguarding cultural values» (Cardoso 1989, 72), arguing that «[t]he need to study, collect, preserve and disseminate the culture of the various ethnic groups of Guinea Bissau led in 1985 to the creation of a museum project, under the tutelage of the General Directorate of Culture (...) called the National Museum Installation Commission» (Cardoso 1989, 73). The creation of the Commission was «an important and decisive milestone in Guinea Bissau's museum history, as it was a starting point for research in the field. The image of the future museum as a mirror of Guinea-Bissau's vast cultural heritage has begun to be conceived» (Cardoso 1989, 73).
- 41 In the third meeting organized by ICOM in partnership with the Secretary of State for Culture of Guinea-Bissau, in Bissau during 1991, the then Secretary of State for Social Affairs, Alexandre Furtado, referred to the ethnic-cultural diversity of Guinea-Bissau as «a solid foundation for the construction of the Guinean nation» underlining the «need to preserve the national cultural heritage [promoting] cultural development at the service of the transformation of Guinean society and in confluence with new cultural values» (Furtado 1991, 7-8). At the next meeting, in Macau in 1994, the director of MEN, Leonardo Cardoso, pointed out that Guinea-Bissau:

[...] still lacks legislation on the defence and safeguarding of the historical and cultural heritage, even though the text of the Constitution of the Republic states that the State defends the Cultural Heritage of the People whose value must serve progress and the safeguarding of human dignity. (Cardoso 1994, 33)

- 42 For the first time in an international context, Cardoso referred to the main guidelines of the new postcolonial museum, which, to a large extent, distance itself from the concept of a European-oriented colonial museum:

The commitment was therefore to show the evolution and dynamics of activities that reflect the economic, social and cultural life of ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau. A museum where people could appreciate objects not only old, antique or considered authentic. For us, these concepts have long been outdated, and therefore the concerns were to dignify our cultural identity by showing what is common to us and at the same time what differs us from others. It means showing all our values, the fruit of our creation and activity over time. (...) Contrary to what was and still is to some extent the concern of certain museums and collectors, that is, to have in their collection objects already used in socio-cultural manifestations, objects considered authentic, unique and very often plundered, we understand that these lose a great part of their value once they are out of context, and therefore cease to exercise their function. (Cardoso 1994, 34)

- 43 He also highlighted some important topics for reflection:

Still on the concept of the unique, authentic, we would like to refer to the Nalu cult objects, one of which is the Ninte Kamatchol used in initiation and funeral ceremonies and acquiring a sacred value. The Nalus live predominantly in the south of the country, (...) This geographical disposition makes it necessary to have several "Nintes" according to the different groups. Logically, there could not be a single object for the whole ethnic group, which, as we have seen, is scattered over several areas. Now we ask, which object is the most authentic? Another important factor to consider is that the objects are made of wood, so they are susceptible to being attacked by fungi, termites and other agents causing their physical deterioration. In this case the object is replaced by another object, which immediately performs the same functions, making the precedent a simple object without any validity. Should the unique concept prevail in this case? Is it this replaced, deteriorated, old, out of context object that is of interest to museums? (Cardoso 1994, 34)

- 44 The main question posed by Cardoso is then where does the value of African objects lie? According to him, value exists while the object serves a function that inserts it into a practice and assigns it a specific purpose. It seems relevant to compare the thoughts of the Angolan writer Henrique Abranches with those of Guinean museologist Leonardo Cardoso. While Abranches defends heritage as a static entity made to be preserved inside an institution, Cardoso recognizes its ephemeral, life-based character.

- 45 The National Ethnographic Museum collections are divided into sculpture, weaving, basketry and pottery. As Cardoso states, the constitution of these collections was based in:

[...] the making of objects must respect the basic traditional techniques, of course, always admitting new elements; the objects must be made by individuals belonging to the caste that traditionally makes the objects in question and in the making of the objects, materials traditionally known and used were used. (Cardoso 1994, 34)

- 46 In 1999, the Museum was occupied by the Senegalese military who came to support President Nino Vieira's troops. As described by Victorine Lopes Soumah, former museum employee «The collections were either totally missing or reduced to a minimum. The documentation was missing in its entirety and the furniture was destroyed» (Soumah 2000, 131). In 2000, the documentation and the museum pieces

existing in the National Ethnographic Museum were in very bad condition because the Museum didn't have a «(...) a building or the indispensable materials for this work» (Soumah 2000, 132). Through a project carried out with the Museum between 2012 and 2019 and the testimony of the current director Albano Mendes, it was possible to acknowledge that the institution returned to its original facilities in *Bairro da Ajuda* in Bissau between 2001 and 2009, and that the government decided that the museum would reopen in 2010 in the building that housed the Directorate General of Culture, located in the central *Praça dos Heróis Nacionais* (Mendes, Sarró and Temudo 2018). This last building occupied by the Museum served as the headquarters of the Museum of Portuguese Guinea in colonial times (Mendes, Sarró and Temudo 2018). This curatorial project carried out by a group of international researchers aimed to recover the history of this institution and contributed to another reopening of the National Ethnographic Museum of Guinea-Bissau.<sup>6</sup> Since 2020, the museum has closed again due, not only to the global pandemic, but also to the general political, social and economic instability experienced in the country that transformed the Museum building into the current premises of the Presidential Palace.<sup>7</sup> The National Ethnographic Museum of Guinea-Bissau opens, closes, and reopens at different times and places, and its history is always being reinterpreted and rewritten.

## Final notes

- <sup>47</sup> The resistance to the movement of restitution is commonly justified by the putative lack of safeguard resources and the dependence on international cooperation programmes encountered by non-Western countries (Makuvasa 2002; Basu 2008; Kusimba and Klehm 2013). Thus, maybe we can make some changes by standing with what Homi Bhabha reminds us: to recognize that we live in a time where «it is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated» (2004, 2). Should we not then ask ourselves to deal with cultural heritage in the interstice between nations, promoting the breaking down of physical and cultural barriers? Paul Basu's thoughts about object diasporas – primarily based on Peffer's (2005) *Africa's Diasporas of Images* – analyse African objects as containers of culture and consider dispersed collections around the world as “objects in motion”, a way of creating relationships between communities, generating networks of exchange that entail obligations and responsibilities. As Basu (2011) affirms, there we might see the value of maintaining objects in diasporic contexts rather than insisting on their return. A way to do this is by recognizing the entire life of the collections, their historic continuity and their “intertwined stories” (Said 1993) that allow us to go beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries and articulate different histories and cultural zones (Peffer 2005). It is important to highlight that these collections – and in this case the Guinean ones – relate to diasporic communities. They are full, not only of past memories, but also of post-memories (Hirsch 2012) that come alive through experiences of the present. A lot of work has been done with source communities (Peers and Brown 2003; Modest et al. 2019) and the question now is more related to fighting social injustice, racism and inequalities to enable the fair representation of African communities inside the museum arena. Finally, it is also important to underline that the value of objects in Africa resides in the context of their use and disappears or becomes lessened when they are enclosed within a museum. In this context, the return

of heritage to the countries of origin must respect a non-Western view of the object to be returned, allowing it to fulfil the natural cycle of its existence.

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## NOTAS

1. From this section onwards all citations are translated by the author.
2. ICOM Portugal Encontro de Outono (Fall meeting) - *Museus com Coleções não Europeias (Museums with Non-European Collections)*, 4-5 November 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htTELioeQSI> (accessed 16 December 2021).
3. Pinto Ribeiro takes part in the project *Memoires - Filhos de Império e Pós-Memórias Europeias* (Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra), a research project that aimed to analyse the memories inherited by the children of the generation that lived through the decolonisation processes in the territories dominated by Portugal, France and Belgium on the African continent. This project was funded by the European Research Council between November 2015 and October 2021. See: [https://memoirs.ces.uc.pt/index.php?id\\_lingua=1](https://memoirs.ces.uc.pt/index.php?id_lingua=1) (accessed 16 December 2021).
4. Seminar *Descolonizar os Museus: Isto na Prática?*: <https://acessocultura.org/descolonizar-os-museus-isto-na-pratica/> (accessed 16 December 2021).

5. This subject constitutes the theme of my ongoing Ph.D. thesis entitled: “Representational Politics of Guinean Heritage in Portuguese Museums in the Transition from Colonial to Post-colonial Period: Histories, Transits and Discourses” (REF 2020.08039.BD), funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).
  6. The history of this museum is explored in depth in Sarró and Temudo (2021).
  7. Data obtained through an informal conversation with the Museum's director, Albano Mendes, in October 2020.
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## RESUMOS

A questão da restituição do património cultural aos países de origem tem ocupado a recente agenda política internacional. Este artigo analisa as diferentes perspetivas a partir das quais esta questão tem sido abordada, em Portugal e no estrangeiro, nomeadamente no campo legislativo que rege as instituições do património, no campo académico e na esfera pública. Esta análise visa compreender os atuais significados atribuídos ao património africano nos museus e outras instituições do património ocidental, bem como nos países de origem. Como estudo de caso, apresenta a realidade patrimonial da Guiné-Bissau e indica diferentes possibilidades para uma representação justa das comunidades da diáspora de hoje, com o objetivo de contribuir para um debate informado sobre o impacto do retorno e da restituição do património africano para os seus países de origem nas futuras representações da cultura e identidade africanas à escala global.

The restitution of cultural heritage to countries of origin has occupied the recent international political agenda. This article analyses the different perspectives from which this question has been approached, in Portugal and abroad, namely in the legislative field governing heritage institutions, in the academic field and in the public sphere. This analysis aims to understand the current meanings attributed to African heritage in museums and other Western heritage institutions, as well as in the countries of origin. As a case study it presents the heritage reality of Guinea-Bissau and indicates different possibilities for a fair representation of today's diasporic communities, aiming to contribute to an informed debate on the impact of the return and relocation of African heritage to their countries of origin on future representations of African culture and identity on a global scale.

## ÍNDICE

**Keywords:** cultural policies and museums, postcolonialism, restitution of cultural property, National Ethnographic Museum of Guinea-Bissau, provenance research

**Palavras-chave:** políticas culturais e museus, pós-colonialismo, restituição de bens culturais, Museu Etnográfico Nacional da Guiné-Bissau, pesquisa de procedência de objetos

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