


2011

# L'évolution du patrimoine: Identity Politics and Cultural Policy in Contemporary Senegalese Art, 1960-2010

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*L'évolution du patrimoine: Identity Politics and Cultural  
Policy in Contemporary Senegalese Art, 1960-2010*

An Honors Thesis

Presented by  
Hannah Shambroom '11

to

The Department of Art History  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College  
New London, Connecticut  
May 2011

## Acknowledgements

The completion of this Honors Thesis was made possible through the efforts and guidance of many.

First, my greatest thanks go to Professor Steiner, my thesis adviser, academic adviser, and professor. Since the inception of this project two years ago your valuable wisdom and expertise in the field have guided my own research. I thank you for your patience in reading over countless drafts and providing insightful suggestions that motivated me to probe more deeply into my material. I have the utmost respect for you; thank you for making this process an intellectually stimulating and enjoyable experience

I am also exceptionally grateful for the input of Professor Zabel, my professor and second reader. Your course on modern art greatly informed my understanding of the material presented in this thesis.

In addition, I would like to extend special thanks to the present and past directors and donors of the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts (CISLA). Mary Devins, Robert Gay, Linda Camelio, Jennifer Stevens, and Dorothy Wang, thank you all for affording me the chance to live and work in Senegal, an experience that prompted invaluable personal growth in addition to crucial research opportunities. My work through CISLA has greatly augmented my liberal arts education and enhanced my passion for cultural exploration.

My primary research for this project was made possible, and enjoyable, by the many wonderful people I met while working in Saint-Louis, Senegal during the summer of 2010. Joëlle, thank you so much for allowing me to live and work Galerie Arte. The time I spent there was invaluable to my research and truly changed my life. To Coumba, Mbaye, Baye, and Maguette, thank you for your kindness, patience and hospitality in easing me into Senegalese life. You made the gallery feel like home, even thousands of miles outside the States. To El Hadji Keita and Abdou Karim Fall, thank you for sharing your art with me. Your work inspired mine, and it was truly a pleasure to analyze it in this thesis. Saint-Louis is a place I will always remember and love, and I hope to return there soon.

Finally, to everyone else who in any way shared this academic journey with me, I thank you dearly – your friendship and support kept me sane even when the process seemed endless.

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**Chapter I:**  
**Introduction**

Throughout human history, art has been used to express and understand life on this earth. It works broadly both to define a collective human condition and to construct an individual sense of self within unique societies. Aesthetic creation began with the formative process of cultural development in some of the world's earliest communities. This artistic advancement in mankind indicated "the awakening of a more complex human consciousness," one eager to actively engage in and make sense of the constantly changing environment in which life takes place.<sup>1</sup> Art stands as a uniquely human endeavor; no other species intentionally creates objects for aesthetic or expressive purposes, and for this reason the craft intrinsically communicates the condition faced by mankind.

Art at once acts as a universal human tradition while also remaining specific to each society that produces it. For many hundreds of years, art across the globe has been used as a means of expression, a way to promote beauty, to develop complex thought and to contemplate existential questions. Each culture develops its own aesthetic arising from its individual place in the world, from its particular customs and trends.

African art is especially compelling and rich, as its foundations can be traced back to some of the world's earliest societies. As modern humans evolved out of the lush lands of the continent, art evolved with it, developing from the simple abstract forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Big History: from the Big Bang to the Present*. New York: New, 2007. Print. 60.

Paleolithic cave paintings and artifacts to the sophisticated, contemplative compositions of today. The continuation of artistic production throughout time speaks of its endurance and relevance to human culture. It has prevailed within West Africa in spite of, or perhaps as a direct cause of, major changes to the region: its early history as separate tribal states, the introduction of Islam to the region, the arrival of Europeans, hundreds of years of colonial subjugation, and finally, in modernity, independence and the political and economic upheavals that often accompany it. Its importance does not wane in difficult times; in fact it appears to be strengthened. Uncertainty elicits creative responses, resulting in art as a source of comfort. It acts as a visual response to better understand or cope with the adversities of a world in flux.

Senegal, an artistic center in West Africa and the main focus of this thesis, provides especially interesting examples to study. Many of the aesthetic principles present in early art objects – clay pots, wooden masks, woven cloths – continue to inform contemporary art in the country. Senegalese art has also received influence from a variety of sources outside of the continent. The colonization of West Africa by France beginning in the seventeenth century introduced an influx of European culture to Africa, including new artistic materials and techniques. The art of the country today emerges from a reverence for indigenous tradition and heritage while also understanding its connection to the colonial past; these two elements fuse together to encompass contemporary identity. Within Senegal, art acts as a uniting force for the people, inciting national pride in a post-colonial era while also connecting them to fellow Africans across the continent. As time moves forward, heritage and tradition within Senegalese society endure while culture

evolves continuously, the future inventing itself from the remains of the past. Art acts as a constant in understanding this flux and in defining contemporary identity.

### **The Question of Identity in Post-Colonial Senegal**

The question of identity in francophone Africa<sup>2</sup> carries with it certain complications, questions and contradictions. These countries once ruled by the French Empire have undergone major political and cultural shifts in the past several hundred years, redefining their sense of self. Starting as separate tribal states, these nations were taken over by European ruling powers, beginning with Portugal in the seventeenth century and continuing with the British and French empires through the mid-twentieth century. Since its independence in 1960, Senegal has been under the rule of three different presidents, each with his own views on cultural policy, each leaving his own unique mark on the artistic community of the country. In the process of colonization, Europeans took the original culture of the people and imposed their own French culture upon them, obscuring the traditions of these African nations, or worse, misappropriating and exploiting them. Fragments of these two parts of the past, the traditional and the colonial, remain rooted in a new African identity today, and within this there exists a delicate tension: how to reconcile the two in the twenty-first century. Having won

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<sup>2</sup> The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie classifies a “francophone country” as one where the primary or secondary language of the citizens is French. 31 of the 70 states and governments included under this title are African, and the continent holds the greatest number of francophones (96.2 million dispersed throughout the 31 francophone countries). Many of these countries, including Senegal, were former French or Belgian colonies. Former Senegalese president, Abdou Diouf, is the current Secretary General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. (<http://www.francophonie.org/>)

independence only relatively recently, the countries of francophone Africa now face the second challenge of constructing their own autonomous identity, born from their individual ancient histories, detached from the colonial system that once defined them. They must also attempt to disentangle the pre-colonial past from the colonial legacy that engulfed it. These nations confront the question of self-definition in a post-colonial era, determining an individuality inevitably influenced by colonialism, yet also retaining a link to tradition, coming together in a unique cultural fusion that exists in the present.

Senegal has an especially dynamic and complex national identity, one that has notably evolved in the country's post-colonial years. Unlike much of francophone Africa, Senegal has retained a close tie to its colonial past;<sup>3</sup> it is something that the nation takes pride in, and it continues to be an important part of its cultural heritage today. As the capital of French West Africa during the colonial period, Senegal was France's most important African territory. The French had a more concentrated and central presence there than in other colonies, so European culture became particularly ingrained into Senegalese life.<sup>4</sup> The nineteenth century was the most economically profitable time in the country's history, and the nation credits this to its colonial rule. The cities of Saint-Louis

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<sup>3</sup> In comparison to other former French colonies, Senegal's decolonization process was relatively easy. The country was once the capital of the French colonial empire, and the lingering influence of this part of their history can be seen even today in the colonial architecture within the cities. Countries such as Algeria, which had a violent and difficult decolonization process, have tried to cut ties from all elements of their colonial past. By contrast, Senegal has maintained a positive relationship with France, and many elements of French culture introduced during the colonial period remain an important part of Senegalese identity.

<sup>4</sup> Of all the countries under French colonial rule, Senegal had strongest French presence. This was probably due to its status as a capital of the French colonial empire; the cities of Saint-Louis and later Dakar were home to a high concentration of colonial officers and administrators.



and Dakar were extremely profitable ports; due to the thriving business of trade, Senegal owes most of its development to colonization, in this way remaining connected to its past even post-independence. Strongly linked to European ideals, a truly Senegalese identity is difficult to classify, at once inherently African while also incorporating certain elements of French culture.

As the country grows into its independence, it continues to discover new challenges in its self-definition as an autonomous state. One way this self-representation manifests itself in a highly visible way is through the country's contemporary artists. In their work, they present a visual personification of that intrinsic sentiment that characterizes each citizen as Senegalese, providing a pictorial timeline of their continuously evolving sense of identity. Using a rich artistic vocabulary, they define what it means to be Senegalese in contemporary time.

A polarity exists between those who approach this self-definition from a backward-looking standpoint, quoting the past as a way to preserve the nation's original heritage, and those who wish to take a forward-looking approach, framing the future by pushing beyond tradition to form a unique cultural personality based more in modernity than antiquity. This duality can be broken into two categories: *enracinement*, or "rootedness," an artistic viewpoint corresponding with the first president's politics of *négritude* and relating more closely to ideas of "traditional" African culture, and *ouverture*, or "opening," which pertains to those embracing *Francophonie* and the cultural ideals of Europe.<sup>5</sup> The opposing dynamic between these two artistic and cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Snipe, Tracy David. *Arts and Politics in Senegal: 1960-1996*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1998. 44.

stances defines the dilemma faced by contemporary artists in their work - split between two conflicting elements of their heritage.

There exists some ambiguity as Senegal continues to break away from its colonial past, an aspect of its history that defined the nation for more than one hundred years. This involves the challenge of how exactly a nation forms its own identity, mixing history, culture and tradition to create a momentum forward to the future. Having never experienced self-governing unity, it became necessary in the years immediately following independence to determine what values the country wanted to project as it entered global politics, and the best way to reflect the beliefs and traditions of its optimistic, energetic people. The country's first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, saw art as an important agent of transformation, both within political principles and cultural ideologies. Defining clear cultural policies was a priority of the government in the immediate post-independence years. These ideologies were projected mainly through the arts, a field that played a meaningful role in the inception of Senegal's national identity and was heavily promoted by Senghor.

It is also important to note the conflation between the opinions of the individual citizen and the more comprehensive projection of values by the government during this time, as the two were not always in line. Immediately following independence, inhabitants of Senegal found themselves, for the first time in their history, led uniformly by their own central government. This effected a sort of cultural synecdoche in which the larger ruling power represented the identity of all its citizens. For the first time, the inhabitants of Senegal could classify themselves as Senegalese; they could consider themselves citizens of a comprehensive nation rather than members of separate ethnic

groups, or *indigènes*, as they were known under French rule.<sup>6</sup> To be a citizen implies an absorption of the values of the state in which every individual now plays an active role. However, the goals of the government are not always the same as the goals of the individual. It is important to distinguish between the identity of the individual and that of the citizen; the former develops through each person's unique circumstances, while the latter is a manifestation of ideals as projected by the government. In Senegal, this distinction manifested itself through cultural policy and each individual's reaction to it, a theme commonly played out in art.

Art acts as a powerful medium through which to sort out and express conflicting feelings towards this continuously evolving sense of identity. Though a relatively new African nation, Senegal has a particularly flourishing artistic community thanks to the patronage of Léopold Sédar Senghor, president from the country's independence in 1960 until his retirement in 1980. Senghor, a poet himself, recognized art as a means of self-expression, growth, and change within his new country. As the nation developed in its own right, independent from colonial influence, it began to cultivate an artistic sensibility present in its people, leading to high creativity and productivity from artists. Senegal is an ideal example through which to examine the role of arts in the formation of national identity because art and politics were so closely intertwined and emphasized in the foundations of the nation's independence. Throughout the country's relatively short history, the interconnectedness of art and politics has had an undeniable impact on the

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<sup>6</sup> French administrators used the name *indigène* to describe the natives of their colonies. They governed them by the "Code de l'indigénat," a set of laws applied in the late nineteenth century that gave inferior legal status to the *indigènes*. It was possible for natives to attain French citizenship if they assimilated to French culture, politics, and civil law; those who attained this status were called *évolué*.

character of the state and those living in it, one fueled in large part by artists themselves. Senegalese artists hold the ability, and responsibility, to express what they want the future to look like, and how to shape the nation to perpetuate this transformation. Art acts as a catalyst for change, evolution, and self-definition, for the artists themselves and for the nation as a whole. It acts as a means of expression, able to reflect values and beliefs, reflections on the past and projections for the future.

The alluring complexity of art lies in its subjectivity; it is up to the creator to infuse it with meaning, and to the viewer to interpret this meaning as it applies to his or her individual condition. Truly great art raises questions; it challenges its viewer to reconsider his own self, his own place, and how the world around him is changing. This argument focuses on the visual arts, though these issues of course apply to other creative realms as well. The objectivity of the medium allows the identity it portrays to continue to evolve, for it holds a slightly different meaning for each viewer depending on his or her background, current situation, and personal beliefs.

Contemporary artists in Senegal and the art they create are the literal blank canvases on which the ideas, challenges, and character of this relatively new nation come together. As the old adage goes, “art imitates life.” In the case of Senegal, however, art doesn’t just imitate life, it shapes it; it “functions as discovery, intensification, expression, record, communication, interpretation, reformation, enhancement, order, and integration.”<sup>7</sup> Contemporary African art has helped, and continues to help, build a national identity in Senegal by acting as a practice through which African artists can express their opinions and beliefs on the traditions, challenges, and beauty of the country

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<sup>7</sup> Snipe, 10.

and continent today. Artists infuse their work with this identity, perpetuating it beyond politics, beyond patronage, and into the hands of the diverse Senegalese people. This is a powerful position for the artist to be in: to possess the power to shape the nation, to illuminate its sense of self. Contemporary Senegalese art characterizes itself in the distinction between the past and present as it strives for cultural balance, reflecting upon the country's rich history in order to move into the future, a fragile balance between tradition and modernity. Artists convey their identity in two ways; on the one hand, those who wish to reference the past, creating an identity based on shared heritage and the perpetuation of deep-rooted traditions within Senegal, and on the other hand, those who wish to move beyond this heritage by framing a vision of contemporary life and aspirations for the future.

## **Chapter II:**

### **Senghor's Senegal: Governmental Patronage of the Arts and the Creation of**

#### **National Identity, 1960 – 1980**

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president, was the country's main supporter of the arts at the onset of independence. Seeing the creative domain as a principle component in the formation of his new nation, he prioritized governmental patronage of local artists. A statesman and acclaimed poet himself, he saw a need, in the development of his regime, to bring the arts in tune to the goals of his administration. He did so by using the work of contemporary Senegalese artists as a catalyst for the creation of a clear and unique national identity. He aligned his nation's cultural policies with the principles of his own ideologies, weaving elements of his personal history into that of his country. The personal philosophies of Senghor, as interpreted by Senegal's artists, are infused throughout the country's independent, artistic, and cultural history.

Born in October 1906 in Joal, Senegal, Senghor grew up entirely under colonial rule, in the middle of the apogee of the French empire's reign over West Africa. He received his formal education at missionary schools and later at the Dakar Lycée, following Catholic and French colonial schooling. Of Serer and Fula descent, Senghor moved to France in 1928, completing his collegiate education at the Université de Paris. The first president spent most of his adult life in Europe rather than his native Senegal; throughout his adulthood he retained strong ties to France, both professionally as the official grammarian for the constitution of the Fourth Republic, and sentimentally by

establishing a life there. Senghor passed most of the 1930s exploring artistic pursuits (specifically poetry), establishing a strong basis for his later concern with the arts in Senegal.

During these years, and even in the years leading up to Senegal's independence, he avoided participation in politics because he believed that it was necessary for cultural nationalism to precede political nationalism, that a strong cultural foundation was necessary to build a politically sound nation. Unsurprisingly, the colonial regime did not share this enthusiasm for African pride, instead obscuring the cultural foundations of the colonies and replacing them with French traditions. This practice followed the colonial concept of the "*mission civilisatrice*." Through this mission, the French colonizers assumed that they could "civilize" the *indigènes* in their territories. Under the impression that these natives were intrinsically uncivilized, the French colonial administration believed that through the colonization process, the indigenous population had the potential to assimilate into European culture and beliefs. The colonizers denied that native heritage in Senegal had any value. The colonial administration focused its efforts on the acquisition and retention of territories rather than the establishment or preservation of local culture. Until some concern for this matter could make its way into the political sphere, Senghor chose to remain uninvolved.

Senghor enrolled as a French army officer during WWII. His role in the war was extremely different from that of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, or native Senegalese recruited during the war to fight for the French army, and underlines Senghor's allegiance to France at this time; unlike his recruited countrymen, he chose to fight for Europe. During the war, he was taken prisoner by the Germans and spent two years in various prison

camps, where he passed much of his time writing poetry, bolstering his belief in the power of art to communicate cultural and political ideals.

In 1945, immediately following the war, he was selected to represent Senegal in the French Constituent Assemblies, a post he held until 1946. From 1946 until 1958 he was a member of the Assemblée Nationale in France, where he led a group of African deputies. In 1948 he founded the Senegalese Democratic Block, which advocated the reforms that led to the Union Française, a precursor to the Communauté Française that ultimately resulted in Senegal's independence. Senghor hoped that the Union Française would be "a true federation of equals," though this seemed to be more a theory than a practice.<sup>8</sup> Through these roles in the post-WWII years, Senghor began to assert his presence into Senegalese politics, acting as a liaison between his birth country and its colonial ruling power.

Pre-independence, Senghor advocated strongly for equality between France and its colonies. As the French Empire lost some of its stature, it struggled to retain control over its overseas territories, which were pushing more and more for complete independence. Before France offered this independence directly (in 1958), Senghor acted as an influential proponent for more parity of power between the territories, working slowly to turn leadership over into the hands of the Senegalese people themselves. In 1959 he was elected to the Territorial Assembly of Senegal, eventually emerging as the president of the Federal Assembly. By this time the Union Française had devolved into the Communauté Française, to which France offered membership to its colonies. Senegal and French Sudan did not officially withdraw to independence, but in 1960 formed the

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<sup>8</sup> Snipe, 39.



Mali Federation, a self-governing country that remained part of the Communauté. The Mali Federation was short-lived, however, and Senegal withdrew in August of the same year, officially claiming its independence as a singular nation. Senghor was elected as president of the new country in Senegal's first official elections and remained in term for twenty years until his retirement in 1980. He died in France in 2001.

### **Senghor's Cultural Policies**

As a leader, Senghor was highly ambitious in terms of culture but not particularly aggressive toward territorial conquest. These were not the concerns of an emerging nation; his focus, instead, lay in the establishment of a solid foundation for his people. His presidency fell at an extremely historic time in Senegal's history: its birth as an independent state. Since its independence, Senegal has had a relatively peaceful history; even its decolonization process was not especially dramatic when considered against other French departments in West Africa (such as Algeria). Because there was no immediate need to deal with conflicts, wars, or the acquisition of more territory, Senghor had the freedom to focus his political efforts on other areas of nation building. Setting a creative tone to his regime, he developed Senegal into a peaceful, intelligent, culturally rich country. Rather than dismissing artists as politically worthless, he encouraged them, always "very sensitive to the image that Senegal project abroad," not wanting "to appear as the oppressor of the country's intelligentsia."<sup>9</sup> Under Senghor there was a heightened number of state sponsored artistic activities and a higher visibility of cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Snipe, 94.

programming than under any other president since. He invested a quarter of the national budget to education and culture, much of that going to specifically artistic activities.<sup>10</sup> This is a significant amount of money for a new country, especially in the developing world. There is no denying the fact that Senghor himself is responsible for the intrinsic place of art in Senegalese identity.

Senghor's cultural policies were some of the most important aspects of his politics, and the area in which he left his legacy as president. A cultural policy denotes the government's official policies in regards to artistic, educational, and cultural activities and institutions. These types of policies develop from a combination of elements including tradition, heritage, socio-economic systems, technological development, and political ideology. Senghor carried great personal investment in this aspect of his administration; "the cultural politics of the nation was inseparable from the personality of President Léopold Sédar Senghor."<sup>11</sup> The arts and concern over cultural policy were ingrained into Senghor's very being, an important element in his personal identity as an artist. He wished to pass this on to the newly independent Senegalese citizens, to ingrain this interest into the foundation of their country and into their emerging identity as a people.

In order to achieve this, he closely linked his government to the art world, uniting the political sphere with the cultural one, elevating the arts to "a prominent feature of the political landscape of Senegal."<sup>12</sup> Within his administration he surrounded himself with extremely intelligent individuals who also shared his passion for creative realms. This

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<sup>10</sup> Harney, Elizabeth. "'Les Chers Enfants' Sans Papa." *Oxford Journals* 19.1 (1996): 42-52. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2011. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Snipe, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Snipe, 42.

ensured a balance between culture and politics under his government; Senghor's political policy and his cultural policy informed each other equally, becoming truly intertwined. In Senghor's view, "politics and the political environment cannot be divorced from the arts or the artistic community... the arts have a profound impact on the promotion of cultural images and involve the interplay of politics and policies."<sup>13</sup> Under Senghor's reign, arts and politics stood as equally important foundations of the nation. By relying so heavily on the role of art in the establishment of other bureaucratic policies, Senghor insured that it would forever rest as an important element in Senegalese identity, a factor as important to the country as economic stability or technological advancement. He placed unprecedented emphasis on the arts within his politics; the two realms, generally kept separate, united as two major forces in defining the new face of the independent country.

For Senghor, the development of a strong Senegalese culture was akin to the development of a strong nation. The country could not stand independently without a distinct sense of who it was, an understanding of where it had come from, a confidence in where it was going. The debut of its independence was an important time to establish these cultural traditions, as "the initiative toward full-scale democratization is commonly followed by a flourishing of the arts."<sup>14</sup> As president of a new democracy, Senghor capitalized on this burst of creativity by imbedding it into his government, involving art and artists in all aspects of the creation of his new state. He created a unique space for culture within Senegal, strongly encouraging and supporting local artists in their work, even inviting them to presidential palace. By directly concerning his government with cultural policies in addition to other political issues, Senghor established art as a basic

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<sup>13</sup> Snipe, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Snipe, 18.

means of development for his country. It was not just a form of expression, though it certainly acted in that role as well, but also a catalyst for movement, growth, enhancement. He encouraged Senegalese artists to use their art not only “as a medium of self-expression and cultural enrichment, but also as means to legitimize, empower, and politicize their causes.”<sup>15</sup> Art helped to shape the face, and more importantly the voice, of Senghor’s new country.

Receiving his education under colonial rule and spending much of his adult life in France, “[Senghor] was a product of what the French colonial system sought to produce – a ‘Black Frenchman.’”<sup>16</sup> Both Senghor’s “international status” and established “prestige as a writer” influenced his politics, informing his moderate liberal stances on political issues.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this aspect of his identity, his Frenchness (or “*francité*”) facilitated France’s willingness to let go of this colony, once the capital of their now collapsed empire, and their willingness to concede authority to Senghor as new ruler. Senghor, at the start of his term as president, did not completely sever ties to France, wishing “to link Senegal to the intellectual and cultural West.”<sup>18</sup> He hoped his new African country could attain the same level of cultural prestige as the more internationally established European civilizations, aiming “to turn Senegal into a ‘black Greece.’”<sup>19</sup> It was not the colonial aspect of the country’s relationship to Europe that the president intended to perpetuate into independence, but rather the cultural emphasis. In his goals for his new country, Senghor aspired to create a new identity for his people, one rooted firmly in modernity,

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<sup>15</sup> Snipe, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Snipe, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Snipe, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Snipe, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Snipe, 93.

disassociated from the subordinate one that had been created for it during the colonial era. He acknowledged, however, that modernity in the 1960s was a concept defined by Western values, and in order to fully bring Senegal into the modern era, it was necessary to remain in some way connected to Europe.

Having spent many years living and working in France, Senghor was a true Francophile. While insisting on defining a truly African identity, he also emphasized certain aspects of French culture within Senegal, including language.<sup>20</sup> Though not the native language of most of the population, he made French the official state language, a policy for which he received much criticism. The role of language within the country was extremely important. Theoretically, Senegal had four other national languages: Wolof, Pular, Jola, and Mandinka, but these were neither taught in public schools nor officially used during Senghor's presidency.<sup>21</sup> Senghor used French exclusively, highlighting his focus on *ouverture*, his policy of opening Senegal to the rest of the world, here by practicing a language that was widely understood across Europe and America. This sense of *ouverture* would seem to contrast greatly with Senghor's other cultural policies of *négritude* and *Africanité*, concepts that promote specifically African culture, symbols and pride. Author Tracy Snipe points out, in his book *Arts and Politics in Senegal, 1960-*

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<sup>20</sup> As a poet, Senghor found language to be an extremely valuable tool of expression. In 1983, three years after the end of his presidency, he became the first African elected to the Académie Française. Established in 1635, his was one of five *academies* constituting the Institut de France, a society that manages cultural foundations, museums, and chateaux. This branch, consisting of forty members, concerns itself specifically with matters pertaining to the French language. Members act as official authorities on the language and publish an official dictionary. Senghor remained in this seat for eighteen years until his death in 2001.

<sup>21</sup> "People: Senegal." *CIA - The World Factbook*. CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, 12 Jan. 2011. Web. 13 Jan. 2011. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sg.html>>.

1996, that “the linguistic dispute was more than just an academic issue; it also reflected sharp political differences between the pro-French Senghor and Senegalese nationalists who saw the French inspired official orthography as still another manifestation of neocolonialism.”<sup>22</sup> By invoking French as the language in which official state business was conducted, Senghor’s administration remained connected to the colonial regime even post-independence.

This linguistic policy faced serious criticism from those who wished to sever ties from France and the colonial period. Language constitutes a major part of cultural identity, especially in terms of heritage. As a culture with a tradition of oral history, Senegal was deeply affected by this linguistic shift; it literally changed the voice and story of the nation. To instate French, a language that only a certain percentage of the population speaks, as a national language ensured that France and its role in Senegal’s history would forever be engrained into their cultural and national character. It also isolates the percentage of the population that could not speak the language, cutting them out of this part of the nation’s identity. The issue of language highlights an interesting contradiction in Senghor’s running of the country, one between his support of *Africanité*, a search for shared African roots, and his endorsement of *francité*, the insertion of certain elements of French culture into politics. Born in Senegal yet raised in France, he incorporated both sides of his personal heritage into the personality of his developing nation. This contradiction in his administration exemplifies contemporary artists’ dilemma of how to reconcile these two aspects of the country’s history in its identity.

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<sup>22</sup> Snipe, 82.

Part of Senghor's insistence on French as the national language lay in his hope to raise Senegal to the same level of cultural modernity as France, one of the most important artistic centers in Europe. He wished for his country to attain that same cultural prestige on the African continent and throughout the world. Sensitive to lingering anti-colonial sentiments, he wanted Senegal to establish its own artistic identity rather than merely perpetuating European heritage. For this reason, he encouraged the use of French within his country as a means of paradoxically legitimizing Senegalese culture; it proved the country to be as "civilized" as its former European rulers but with its own additional rich heritage separate from that of the colonial era.

The twenty years of Senghor's presidency were considered the "golden era for the arts in Senegal," thanks to his continued patronage and emphasis on cultural policies within his regime.<sup>23</sup> For Senghor, "politics became but a means. The arts were the ends."<sup>24</sup> Within his government, he used politics as a way to enhance and promote the arts, rather than the other way around, placing much of the political responsibility in his regime in the creative realm instead of the governmental one. Under his policies, arts and politics were interchangeable - they were one, equal forces in the development of the country.

### **The Universal Language of Art**

Senghor's reign in Senegal marked a time of self-definition and growth in the country, exemplified by the cultivation of an already ingrained artistic heritage. In the

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<sup>23</sup> Snipe, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Snipe, 39.

years following independence the president attempted to resurrect the country out of the dissolution of colonial rule by distinguishing it from the European ideologies that had been imposed within the nation since the arrival of the French in the seventeenth century. There existed a need for cohesion within the country in terms of politics, social spheres and economic policies; Senghor recognized art as the arena in which these elements could coalesce. Attempts to unite the inhabitants of Senegal were complicated because in the pre-colonial era the country was composed of various ethnic groups, never led by one clear government for all the people. Senghor's crucial responsibility, as president of a newly independent nation, was to invent and establish this wholeness, to effect a unification of the government and the general public.

To do this, he turned to contemporary artists. During this time of extreme change and development, art acted as the perfect domain through which to bring together the diverse population of the nation. A universal language, it relies not on words but on more easily comprehensible visual imagery. Transcending the language barrier through descriptive symbols, art unifies the varied people residing together in Senegal. At the same time, its objective nature allows it to express personal reflections on the way in which these assorted identities merge into one enveloping national persona.

Artists at this time understood their role "not simply in the formation of a new nationalist sense of being but also as part of emergent systems of modern political, philosophical, and economic thought."<sup>25</sup> Artists not only helped to define national identity but also became an integral part of the governmental system by presenting a more widely understandable visual representation of the abstract political theories put in

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<sup>25</sup> Harney, Elizabeth. In *Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-garde in Senegal, 1960-1995*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 17.



practice by the state. As he built his administration, Senghor aimed to “[transcend] ‘politician’s politics,’” citing instead as essential “the cultural foundations of our common destiny.”<sup>26</sup> Known as an “*homme de culture*,” he was not merely, nor primarily, a politician.<sup>27</sup> Before being elected president, Senghor himself was an artist, acclaimed poet, and songwriter, and these artistic inclinations certainly influenced his stance on cultural policy within his government.

The basis of his interest in the arts stemmed from both a concern with unity for his people and also his own personal investment in artistic pursuits. He took an unusual approach to his political regime in his high regard for culture. Regarding art as a crucial medium of change, he hoped to make it something that would shape, rather than be shaped by, the country. He explained, “It is again art nègre which, saving us from despair, uplifts us in our task of economic and social development, in our stubborn will to live... African artists, Senegalese artists today, help us live today better and more fully.”<sup>28</sup> Artists found themselves in an unprecedented place of power; their work became a vehicle to advance cultural, political, and economic development plans. In this emerging country, the artist was the “representative of and advocate for a new nation,”<sup>29</sup> acting as both “agent[s] of development... ambassador[s] for Senegal to the rest of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Projects of decolonization and nation building require imagination in order to actualize into a sense of modern identity. To develop a country is one challenge, involving politicians, engineers and scientists that together construct an elemental,

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<sup>26</sup> Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité"* Trans. Mercer Cook. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Snipe, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

<sup>29</sup> Harney, 2004, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

functional, yet colorless system of administration; to develop that country's character is another challenge entirely, demanding creative input to infuse this political system with the vibrancy of the life it governs. The rise of the arts in Senghor's Senegal signified a cultural awakening in the country, alerting the Senegalese people of their new identity, not just as individuals, but also as parts of a functioning nation.

### **Symbols of Identity**

A sense of ambivalence and uncertainty characterized the first few years of independence in Senegal. After facing years of imposed European values that defined culture in the country, the potential for self-determination generated many questions. Would these French influences carry into the new independent era? Or would the country return to its pre-colonial roots, those that both united the people in their nature as authentically African, but were also disparate as traditions of many diverse ethnic groups? How could the country resolve a past composed of so many contrasting elements into a singular coalescent modern identity? Senghor implored art to resolve these questions, and thus established an artistic rhetoric centering on easily recognizable pan-African motifs that quoted the pre-colonial past but remained pertinent to Senegalese people in the 1960s. Symbols such as masks, carved statues, and hair combs reference a uniquely African heritage, embodying an aesthetic completely unlike, and unaltered by, European ideals. During the colonial era, European culture obscured much of the early African aesthetic present both in Senegal and throughout the continent. In the post-colonial era, Senghor hoped to return to this visual tradition by invoking these classic

motifs as symbols of modern identity in order to reunite his people with their past, repressed for many years under the colonial regime. This was part of Senghor's effort to shape a new modern identity in Senegal that was also recognizable throughout the rest of the continent, linking the rich and varied culture of his own country to that of others in Africa. By emphasizing these symbols, he proudly asserted his people's Africanness at a time when Western and European culture dominated the world. This unity in motif, drawing together common symbols from diverse ethnic groups across the country and continent, sought to create solidarity throughout Africa, consciously forging a unique aesthetic path unlike that of modern Europe, the predominant artistic tradition of the time.

Art in Europe was considered "culture" by the rest of the Western world in a way that the art of Africa was not. African forms and styles appeared barbaric to Europeans when they encountered them for the first time in the seventeenth century. They did not follow the canons of classical beauty from which most of modern European art evolved. Rather than soft lines and carefully formed compositions, African art contained bold abstractions and unbalanced proportions. To an eye accustomed to the European ideal, this seemed an unintentional aesthetic, primitive in its rendering, a result of childlike, uncultivated technique. Post-Renaissance, the art of Europe was considered the highest caliber, the most cultivated style. To consciously and distinctly lead the emerging artistic themes of Senegal away from this was to explicitly separate the new nation from its previous relation to France, a creative rebirth in a post-colonial era.

The symbols (such as masks or combs) that Senghor promoted and reiterated were all modified versions of *l'art primitif*, citing the origins and aboriginal heritage of his people. Ironically, Senghor used these allusions to the past to launch his emerging

country into modernity. Naming his artists his “*chers enfants*,” the president encouraged them to reference the modern techniques of European artists while still “creating an iconography that was drawn from pan-African visual traditions.”<sup>31</sup> The new aesthetic born from this artistic synthesis “suited Senegal as a country which prided itself on its role as a cultural crossroads and bridge between Africa and Europe.”<sup>32</sup> European artists such as Picasso had “discovered” African art during the colonial period, and appropriated it as sources of inspiration for their own modern works. The president capitalized on this prevailing interest in African art by perpetuating the symbols that Europeans felt made this art “authentic.” By doing this, Senghor retained a link to Europe, the apotheosis of modern civilization, while still severing his country from the colonial era by referencing its pre-Europeanized origins. Using this backward-looking viewpoint to lead his country into independent modern life, the president began to solidify a uniquely Senegalese identity.

In his politics, Senghor distinguished between race, ethnicity, and nationality. The first, race, connotes a physical quality, immediately perceived through sight. The second, ethnicity, has a cultural connotation, built upon custom or tradition. Finally, nationality refers to a political condition, an identity set by geographical location. Senghor hoped to infuse his Senegalese identity with all of these elements, creating a complete entity of being. He wished to create an essential Senegalese spirit, extending beyond a singular nationality, a singular race, a singular ethnicity; to be Senegalese in the first years of the country’s existence was to absorb its history and to embody the new ideals put in place by Senghor’s government. In fusing multiple elements of individual identity into one, the

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<sup>31</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

president aimed to bring about a sense of solidarity among the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups of his country and among all African people.

### **The Invention of *Africanité***

Senghor's presidency took place at a time of extreme Eurocentricity in the world. Though the French Empire had lost most of its colonies, it was still a highly influential global force. Western authority continued to spread in Africa, even in the post-colonial era. Senegal gained its political independence in 1960 with relatively no conflict; it would face slightly more adversity, however, in attaining its cultural independence. It proved difficult to undo quickly the effects of over a century of colonial rule, over a century of forced assimilation to French culture. As Senghor arranged his government, he wished to deny these forces of European cultural dominance within Senegal, to "unshackle the chains of cultural imperialism."<sup>33</sup> To do this, he turned to uniquely African qualities that he hoped would turn each "individual" within his state into a coalescent "people."

The general rhetoric during the process of decolonization was based on themes of independence. Senghor, however, believed that to base the new Senegalese identity solely on anti-colonial sentiments would make a weak foundation for the country. He claimed, "It is not the colonial past that characterizes us as *Africans*."<sup>34</sup> To dwell on that era would only perpetuate its impact. Senghor recognized, of course, that colonialism would inevitably have an effect on the emerging identity of his people; it was a shared and significant part of the country's past, but he wished for it to remain just that – the past.

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<sup>33</sup> Snipe, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Senghor, 7.

Aiming to push into the future on his own terms, free from European influence, he did not believe that the previous era should define his country post-colonialism. He explained, “[a]t any rate, [colonialism] will belong to the past tomorrow. It lies behind us now that our task is to build our future. This can rest firmly only on values common to all Africans and permanent at the same time. It is precisely the sum total of those values that I call *Africanité*.”<sup>35</sup> The colonial era was a long, but temporary aspect of the nation’s past. Senghor wished to invoke “common” and “permanent” African values, ones intrinsic to the people of his country and beyond.

This goal led him to the concept of *Africanité*, a pan-African unity between the richly varied cultures sharing the continent. Attending assemblies on the unity of the African continent, Senghor felt it was as important to promote pan-African identity as it was to promote national identity in Senegal, and therefore the foundations of the country’s particular culture are strongly linked to ideals found in other African cultures as well. Senghor’s politics and aesthetics placed an emphasis on the shared qualities of all Africans, a “unity in diversity of civilization and, therefore, of African people.”<sup>36</sup> In creating a harmony in the unification of identities across the continent, *Africanité* formed a sense of being foreign to outsiders in its intrinsically African values.

In a world dominated by white Western cultures, Senghor hoped to prove, through his newly developing nation, that the black world had contributed, even given birth to, a “universal civilization... He believed that African civilization had much to contribute to a universal civilization, despite his perception that it lacked scientific or technological

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<sup>35</sup> Senghor, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Senghor, 48.

development.”<sup>37</sup> What Africa lacked in modern science or technology at the end of the twentieth century, it made up for in rich artistic heritage. In turning to *Africanité* as a basis for a set of symbols to form an artistic vocabulary, Senghor renewed this heritage in the modern era. Some of the world’s earliest art came from the continent, and the president hoped that under his patronage the art of his people would again be recognized on a more global scale despite the widely accepted aesthetic and technique of Europe.

Primitivism lay at the heart of European modernism in the early twentieth century. Many artists liberally borrowed African forms in their own contemporary work, though they considered the motifs rudimentary in their original contexts. One of Senghor’s aims, in defining Senegalese culture, was to reclaim “art” and “civilization” from the white European powers that had dominated Africa. Through *Africanité*, he hoped not only to emphasize the culture of his own people, but also to highlight the “universal civilization” of which Senegal, and Africa as a whole, is part. Senghor wanted to prove that Senegalese and African culture, continually overlooked as “uncivilized,” was just as legitimate as, though different from, that of the Western world. In reinstating an African presence into the international art scene, Senghor hoped to remind the rest of the world that life and culture in his country were not dead, nor stuck in an antiquated or colonial past, but very much still alive and thriving in modernity.

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<sup>37</sup> Snipe, 44.

## The Politics of *Négritude*

Senghor's artistic and political policies in nation building were also largely rooted in the idea of *négritude*. Where *Africanité* created a canon of aesthetics in Senegal, *négritude* formed a canon of thought, serving as an esoteric African ideology meant to capture the spirit or essence of being black. The term was coined in 1932 by Aimé Césaire, a Martiniquais poet, politician, and friend of Senghor, which he broadly defined as the “simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and of our culture.”<sup>38</sup> In the 1930s Césaire meant this as a personal philosophy, something to guide him singularly on his journey of self-discovery. Senghor borrowed the term as a basis for the ideology of his nation, redefining it as “quite simply the assembly of the values of the black civilization. It is not racism, it is culture.”<sup>39</sup> In his use of *négritude*, Senghor reasserted a positive black presence into the word “*nègre*,” a term imposed upon his people by white Europeans to broadly describe his race. Senghor's taking back of this word symbolically represented his taking back of power for his people. The embodiment and ownership of this idea ensured it could no longer be used as a tool of oppression. As Frantz Fanon explains, “it is the white man who creates the Negro, but it is the Negro who creates *négritude*.”<sup>40</sup>

*Négritude* also came about as a reaction against France's policy of assimilation during the colonial period. The French believed that by imposing their own culture upon their African subjects, they could “civilize” the *indigènes* of their territories. This

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<sup>38</sup> Harney, 2004, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Harney, 2004, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Scott, Joan Wallach. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007. 64.



assimilation was both social and cultural; the colonial administration attempted to conform the original inhabitants of Senegal to European societal practices by masking nearly all elements of “traditional” African culture. The exceptions were those elements that benefited French society by providing educational visual examples of the inferiority of African culture to that of France. Officers brought back to Europe objects such as statues or masks, stolen from their original context as colonial trophies, exposed in Paris as exotic remnants of a primitive society. These objects had worth to the French only in their own country as validation of their “civilized” European society. Through assimilation, the French believed that they were bringing culture to a place where none existed. The replacement of “traditional” African lifestyles with “modern” European values and beliefs supposedly enlightened the natives of the colonies enough to civilize them into *évolués*.<sup>41</sup> Senghor’s interpretation of *négritude*, a concept that celebrated African practices and values, was a social, political, and cultural reaction against these injustices to reaffirm African roots and history.

*Négritude* acted as a link between *Africanité* and modernity, transporting the values associated with the former into contemporary time. It expanded the symbols and values associated with *Africanité* into a “shared black consciousness,” a self-reflection that the country needed in order to more firmly develop itself and its people.<sup>42</sup> To develop as a unified nation, Senegal needed a distinctive cultural identity separate from that which Europe had imposed. The initial function of *négritude* in Senegal was to serve as a tool in the negotiation and articulation of a new sense of being. During the colonial era, Europe misappropriated black identity, using it to belittle its colonial subjects, superimposing

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>42</sup> Harney, 2004, 23.

white identity onto the culture of its colonies as a superior heritage. Post-independence, in a still increasingly Westernized world, Senghor recognized the need to break away from the “valorization of African identity through the canons of the West.”<sup>43</sup> A growing disillusion spread through Senegal in regards to European culture; this identity could no longer be assumed to be comprehensive throughout the former colonies.

As a new country, Senegal needed to end its dependence on France politically, economically, and culturally. For hundreds of years, African identity had existed only as an inferior juxtaposition to that of the West. Senghor’s goal was to reestablish a solidly African identity, one infused with pride, hope and resilience. *Négritude* and *Africanité* permitted both a return to the roots of African heritage and a reinvention of culture. These policies forced the people of Senegal to reconsider their past in order to reclaim their identity, effectuating a search back through recent and ancient eras to recognize and salvage those elements to transport into modernity. For Senghor this involved the salvation of his people’s blackness, that which was masked by white European colonizers, not only to reclaim it, but also to make it the foremost part of their identity. Within his government, he pushed this discourse of racial awareness through art. *Négritude* forced African artists to reexamine their heritage in a new context, not just as their roots, but as how these roots defined them. In this way, *négritude* was a “multidimensional” force, “looking eloquently and nostalgically to the past” while also embodying “a proactive, revolutionary role... a tool for forging a new supranational and national sense of being.”<sup>44</sup> At the dawn of his new country, Senghor envisioned a

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<sup>43</sup> Harney, 2004, xxiv.

<sup>44</sup> Harney, 2004, 38-39.

generation “reborn in [n]égritude.”<sup>45</sup> The philosophy evoked nostalgia for the pre-colonial past while simultaneously expressing the essence of Senegalese modernity, an intrinsic pride in black culture within the country and across the continent. *Négritude* expressed the delicately balanced identity that contemporary artists strove to communicate in their work – a base of shared heritage used to envision a fresh and original future. In this way it both affected and effected the birth of contemporary art in the nation. The idea illustrates perfectly how the president invoked art and culture into his leadership of the country.

Criticisms of *négritude* point out that it romanticizes Africa by placing the continent and its diverse heritages in its own permanent past. While Senghor aimed to cultivate African culture, in many ways he prevented it from developing, instead freezing it in time by perpetuating certain symbols, values, and traditions that were indeed uniquely African, but that had roots in the deep past. One must question how genuine the sentiment of *négritude* was for most people living in Senegal at this time. While perhaps its themes held historical relevance as beliefs practiced in the pre-colonial past, the country found itself now inhabited by a generation raised within the colonial administration, one that more closely identified with that period and its values than with its own distant past. The French policies of assimilation had become deeply ingrained in the region, and those growing up under colonial rule were more familiar with the imposed European culture than with their own roots, ones that had nearly been erased under hundreds of years of French presence. The people to whom Senghor preached this *négritude* no longer recognized as their own the “African past” that he insisted was a

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<sup>45</sup> Harney, 2004, 39.

common one across the continent. The most recent and well-established past was highly Westernized, a result of colonial rule. European attempts to assimilate West Africa reached as far back as the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese first arrived on the shores of Senegal. The president's visions of *négritude* seemed more romanticized than realistic, touting a past that did not exist for those urged to return to it. This, however, was the goal of *négritude*, to reconnect with this uniquely African heritage, the one that gave birth to the continent's rich culture and diverse people, urging them to "rediscover their Africanness through contact with one another."<sup>46</sup> *Négritude* combated French assimilation policies by attempting to legitimize, in the eyes of the West and the Africans themselves, the original African culture and civilization.

*Négritude*, like *Africanité*, manifested itself visually through certain artistic symbols common in the work of contemporary African artists in the 1960s. These motifs worked to explore and express the shared qualities in the experience of being Senegalese, of being African, at a time of radical readjustment and change. As the country headed in a new direction, free from the colonial era, Senghor hoped that a set of artistically rendered symbols would help to define abstract ideas about identity, giving his people a concrete visual expression of who they were, and who they were becoming. Citing early limestone statuettes found in surrounding regions as inspiration, Senghor explains the characteristics he wished to perpetuate in contemporary art: "curly or Nubian style hair, a face typical of that of a Grimaldi man, geometric markings on the statuettes... and, naturally, the 'very pronounced callipygia' of all of them."<sup>47</sup> The characteristics he references are all specifically black African physical features that differentiate the people

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<sup>46</sup> Snipe, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Senghor, 25.

of the continent from white Europeans. The visual vocabulary created by these distinctive attributes “conforms to the Negro-African aesthetic, which, by stylization, more precisely, by rhythm, transforms the sign into meaning, that is to say, into a symbol.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, the president fused anthropology and art, quoting the physical formal features of ancient traditional statuettes to define a uniquely African convention. The origins of these symbols still used in Senegalese art today illustrate how an artistic custom is established. Such symbols are linked intrinsically to heritage: they evolve from past traditions while simultaneously creating new ones. At a time when the new country was reflecting back upon its pre-colonial history while concurrently attempting to define and establish its current identity, this artistic vocabulary of symbols was an important tool of representation. Emblems of *Africanité* and *négritude* became visual impressions of a singularly Senegalese identity, classifying the inhabitants of the country in the way they themselves chose to be defined, as a coalescent, richly cultured people. This signified a new self-articulation in their own visual language rather than that which was imposed upon them. The ownership of these symbols through contemporary art represented their newfound autonomy in determining their own values, beliefs, identity.

The establishment of a set of symbols in the mid-1960s represented the transition from the immediately post-independence struggle for Senegalese people to understand their new existence as citizens, to a pride and control over their new identity. They both acknowledged the link to their past and actively participated, through the arts, in the momentum forward to modernity. Senghor himself explained:

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<sup>48</sup> Senghor, 25.

It is this force [symbols] which, placed at the service of the community and of its leader, becomes, better than an instrument, a generator of action... When stimulated by passion, this force becomes, paradoxically but actively, a spirit of organization and discipline. This is because, influenced by a high charge of emotion basic in the structure of Fluctuants [Africans], the city – I mean the region or the tribe – has become, in the person of its chief, a myth, or rather, the image of a living reality, the most intimate reality.<sup>49</sup>

Here, he highlights the importance of symbols by pointing out that they serve as more than simple images; in the newly independent country they functioned as generators of action, driving forces in developing a response to what defined the Senegalese people as a group. For the president, such motifs were not merely superstructure, but were perceived as powerful entities that could affect the political infrastructure. Senghor hoped that in collecting these signs of *Africanité* and *négritude*, they would come together to form a “unitary spirit” with which all his people could identify.<sup>50</sup> To see an artistic representation of vague feelings of identity ignited “a spirit of organization” within the country, uniting all those who understood and related to them. They acted as a visual reality for an abstract identity.

These symbols became a catalyst of self-definition, carving out and defining a uniquely Senegalese identity, taking elements of the past and pulling them into modernity. This is precisely what Senghor hoped to achieve in his leadership of the country – to cite his people’s heritage, both the shared (symbols of pan-Africanism) and

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<sup>49</sup> Senghor, 44-45.

<sup>50</sup> Senghor, 45.

the distinct (Senegal's colonial past), and to use these references to create one coalescent new identity to unite them all. Within his government, Senghor aimed for the "predominance of images over concepts."<sup>51</sup> He wished to articulate the doctrines of his new government through an artistic rhetoric rather than a strictly political dissertation. Through images, he was able to bridge the language barrier among the many diverse dialects spoken. Art and its related symbols commit to no singular language, ethnicity, or religion. Its importance lies in its evocation of shared feelings and experiences. Symbols such as "Nubian style hair" or "geometric markings" stand for something beyond their immediate visible value; they link the entire diverse population of Senegal under a blanket of shared recognizable features, drawing a line between the concrete, and that which is intrinsically felt. Symbols stand as a powerful tool to express that which cannot be conveyed with words, to evoke the same simultaneous feelings, in this case national pride, from large groups of people with a single image. Senghor himself once said, "Conceptualization is made by the symbolic image."<sup>52</sup> In order to help his people conceptualize their identity, he needed a forum through which they could visualize it, and for this he used the "symbolic image."

### **The Vocabulary of the Visual Arts**

The invocation of this new visual language of symbols was in itself a reference to, and development of, another Senegalese custom: story telling. Traditionally an oral practice, Senghor added his own mark to an established tradition, evolving it, bringing it

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<sup>51</sup> Senghor, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Senghor, 67.

into the modern era of independence. In gaining its independence, Senegal also gained a voice for itself; by transferring the tradition of story telling from a spoken medium to a visual one, Senghor added a face to this voice. The figure of the *griot* is an important part of Senegalese cultural heritage, and an essential part of the tradition of story telling. The *griot* was “a member of the caste of oral historians, praise singers, and storytellers of West Africa,” an important figure in the preservation of native culture and heritage.<sup>53</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, the artist, a “seer to his society,” was oftentimes “likened by Senghor and others to the figure of the griot.”<sup>54</sup> An “extremely important part of the social, ritual, and artistic framework of society,” the figure of the artist, in modern Senegal, became a contemporary *griot*. Where these characters were the “oral historians” of their time, artists now become visual historians, story tellers not only of their country’s past, but also of its present condition. Artists bridged the gap between the past, their indigenous heritage, and the future, a new heritage forming itself in their skilled hands. “Praise singers,” they projected the importance of the continued reflection on and articulation of the country’s past, even in a rapidly changing modernity. The themes and symbols presented in their work helped to preserve and honor their shared African past, but more importantly the very act of creating these works, the continuation of the artistic tradition, was in itself a reference to and perpetuation of this past. Visual art built upon the tradition of story telling, calling upon and modernizing an important ancient custom. The medium presented a new way to express traditions, to preserve the past while simultaneously articulating the present and shaping the future. It built a new

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<sup>53</sup> Harney, 2004, 82.

<sup>54</sup> Harney, 2004, 82.



contemporary identity by looking back to the roots of the culture. In this way, artists, the modern day *griots* of Senegal, acted both as preservers and modifiers of culture.

In their work, contemporary artists create physical, visible depictions of that vague sentiment resting in the bodies of the Senegalese people, the one that intrinsically reminds them that they are Senegalese, a concrete representation of who they are. In this way, art in Senegal represents the release of the “*âme nègre*,” the black soul, that Senghor insisted resided in the body of each person living on the continent. Through the creation of a symbolic identity, contemporary artists release this soul from its corporeal enclosure. Senghor “differentiate[d] the *âme nègre* from other identity-based groupings, distinguishing it as emotive, expressive, and rhythmic – ultimately a reflection of biological factors.”<sup>55</sup> This implies that this shared African soul, a fusion of “emotive, expressive, and rhythmic” qualities, exists genetically in the body of each African, a shared biological trait along the lines of curly hair or dark skin. In this way, the “emotive, expressive, and rhythmic” qualities are also biologically inherent in the African body, and these creative and artistic attributes are the ones Senghor wished to channel in all his people.

The main manifestations of *négritude* in the 1960s were not concretely visible, but spiritually and emotionally felt, connecting not only all Senegalese, but also all Africans. Using pan-African symbols to awaken these characteristics that all his people inevitably held within them, Senghor spurred an artistic renaissance in his country at the dawn of their independence. Claiming that Africans “approach life in a sensual fashion” and are “endowed with greater imagination”, he implied that art was a natural part of the

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<sup>55</sup> Harney, 2004, 40-41.

Senegalese identity, recognizable within everyone as an inherited trait that could drive the building of the nation. He presented it as something that already existed in Senegalese heritage that merely needed to be reawakened, reborn in the new era. As an established part of their tradition, artistic culture could not be overlooked as the country entered independence.

### **State Funded Cultural Institutions**

Channeling this creative energy into his government, Senghor established several state run and funded cultural institutions at the start of his reign. These centers fostered artistic enrichment within the country, giving artists a venue to create and display their work, and visitors and citizens a place to view it. This was an important element of Senghor's presidency and a lasting part of his legacy. Before the implementation of these artistic institutions, the general public could not easily access the creations of contemporary Senegalese artists working within the country. These centers gave average people the opportunity to view, contemplate, and interact with the art that Senghor so strongly promoted. Connecting the artistic world to the lives of everyday people in Senegal, these centers made art available to everyone.

The first government sponsored cultural center opened in Thiès, a city east of Dakar, in the early 1960s, followed closely by centers in Kaolack and Ziguinchor, two smaller towns.<sup>56</sup> Senghor found it important, as he began to organize Senegal's independent capital city to include these centers as a means of maintaining a cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Snipe, 102.

presence for foreigners of varied nationalities within Senegal, promoting the country as a place that was both proud of its own heritage and also accepting of and open to others'. Centers in and around Dakar included the Blaise Diagne Cultural Center, located in a densely populated suburb of the city, and the Centre Culturel Français (now known as l'Institut français) directly downtown. The opening of the Centre Culturel Français in 1960 exemplified Senghor's continued relationship with France – his alliance with their culture while simultaneously promoting *Africanité*. The center organizes cultural events, activities and exhibits featuring works from Senegalese and African artists, as well as artists from abroad, including France. The aim of the Centre Culturel Français was to create “une fusion dynamique qui renforce la coopération culturelle et linguistique entre la France et le Sénégal.”<sup>57</sup> It was a neutral place of exchange between the two countries, inextricably linked even in the post-colonial era, where artists could come together to share work, ideas, and influences. Senghor dreamed of Senegal as a place “open for artistic and cultural impulses from inside and outside and wish[ing] to play a sustaining role in the cultural exchange among nations in order to promote understanding.”<sup>58</sup> The Centre Culturel Français encouraged this type of positive creative communication as a place that combined the rich artistry of both Africa and Europe. Its website specifies that it is “destiné à la diffusion de la culture française, à la promotion de la culture

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<sup>57</sup> The aim of the Centre Culturel Français was to create “a dynamic fusion that strengthened the cultural and linguistic cooperation between France and Senegal.” “L'Institut français de Dakar.” *Institut Français Du Sénégal*. Web. 21 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.institutfr-dakar.org/L-Institut-francais-de-Dakar.html>>. Trans. Hannah Shambroom.

<sup>58</sup> Harney, 1996, 43.

sénégalaise, et au rayonnement de la francophonie comme de la diversité culturelle.”<sup>59</sup>

Unlike the colonial politics of assimilation, this center was not meant to impose French culture upon Senegal, but to celebrate the element of francophonie within Senegalese society. It celebrated the fusion of the two cultures that ultimately created a uniquely Senegalese identity.

Another institution created during Senghor’s reign was the Society of African Culture (SAC). This was a non-governmental organization that sought to combat the “cultural inferiority complex reinforced by Western education.”<sup>60</sup> While Senghor’s government did not fund the institution, it stood for the same principles that he practiced, namely the promotion of distinctly African symbols and cultures, and the reversal of the domination of the white West on the arts. SAC supported *négritude* and opposed the cultural imperialism that happened during colonialism. Despite his persistent relationship with France and distinct francophonie, Senghor greatly concerned himself with the issue of cultural imperialism. He wished to crush the assumption that sophisticated culture could be associated only with Western societies. In order to do this he had to instill in his people an artistic sensibility of their own, and he established this through his government’s patronage of artists, and its support in the creation of public open spaces in which to create.

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<sup>59</sup> Its website specifies that it is “intended for the distribution of French culture, the promotion of Senegalese culture, and the spread of Francophonie as cultural diversity.” “L’Institut français de Dakar.” Trans. Hannah Shambroom

<sup>60</sup> Snipe, 31.

## The World Festival of Negro Arts

Under Senghor's reign, Senegal hosted the first World Festival of Negro Arts (*Premier festival mondial des arts nègres*) in 1966, the most recent edition of which occurred again in Senegal in December 2010. This first exposition gave the country tremendous exposure on the international arts scene. Held in Dakar, the festival was an interdisciplinary celebration of all artistic pursuits, including sculpture, painting, music, dance, cinema, and poetry. Artists from around the African Diaspora contributed work, and a diverse international audience from nearly every continent attended. Throughout the capital city and extending to the nearby island of Gorée, gallery spaces and museums were created; even the town hall was temporarily converted into an exhibition space.

Planning for the festival began in 1959, before Senegal was fully independent. In this year, SAC met in Rome and decided that a festival of black arts was necessary, and that it should be held in Dakar, one of the more developed cities in West Africa at that time. Hosted by Senegal under the patronage of UNESCO,<sup>61</sup> the festival became the crowning achievement of Senghor's cultural policy, and one of the greatest artistic events in the country's history. The president used it as an opportunity to present and promote his own ideologies throughout the African continent. In his remarks at the opening ceremony, Senghor stated,

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<sup>61</sup> UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, a group that “works to create the conditions for dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based upon respect for commonly shared values.”  
(<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/about-us/who-we-are/introducing-unesco/>)

This Festival is not an antiquarian's empty display, it is an articulate demonstration of our deepest thoughts, of our most genuine culture. To whatever God, to whatever language they belong, the Nations are invited to the colloquy of Dakar, to bridge the gaps, to clear up the misunderstandings, to settle the differences. Partaking at all times – but at a distance and through intermediaries – in the building of the Universal Civilization, united...<sup>62</sup>

This statement expressed the encompassment of the president's goals for the festival within Senegal and his hope for them to be projected into the rest of the world.

His assertion that the festival would not serve as “an antiquarian's empty display” clearly references the indignities African art faced during the colonial *époque*. At that time, it was exposed internationally as “colonial trophies,” objects and artifacts stolen from their original settings, displaced from their appropriate contexts and displayed as relics of a distant, uncivilized society. Displayed in the inappropriate enclosed setting of a museum space, they were treated as objects of the past, of an unknown barbarism, rather than relating to contemporary time. With this festival, contemporary African art asserted itself into the present, proving itself not antiquated, not outdated, but extremely culturally relevant.

The exposition also presented the opportunity for Senghor to expose the final artistic product of the ideologies he had been using to run his country, the creative culmination of his cultural policies. The festival acted as an arena through which Senghor could showcase the achievements of his regime, firmly establishing himself as a patron of

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<sup>62</sup> Snipe, 47.

the arts within his own country and throughout all of Africa. By bringing together artists from all over the continent, cooperating, collaborating, and sharing their artistic gifts, Senghor presented a united Africa, the diverse countries joining together in shared heritage. This unity generated a promising image of both the continent and Senegal itself, projecting strength and solidarity even independent from the European support that controlled the country for so long. The festival allowed Senghor to demonstrate to an international audience how Senegal had prospered and cultivated its unique identity under his guidance, establishing itself as a strong artistic force in its own right, without the influence of non-African sources.

The first World Festival of Negro Arts accomplished two main goals. The first was that it pushed Senegal into the modern age in the eyes of the West. The country no longer remained rooted in its pre-independent past, but inserted itself creatively and distinctly into the contemporary global artistic community. Secondly, it successfully united Senegal and many other African countries with European and Western nations in a respectful way. The French writer and cultural critic André Malraux wrote of the exhibitions, “you have got seven or eight painters of international distinction here who in no way fall short of the World’s best.”<sup>63</sup> Clearly, Senegal’s emergence into the international art scene made a big impression. It “established Senegal as one of Africa’s cultural leaders... reveal[ing] to the world the dynamism of African art – a fact of immense importance psychologically.”<sup>64</sup> At the festival, the European presence did not dominate the African one as it had throughout history, but equaled it. The French visitors were guests in the country, not rulers, strangers to the land they had controlled for so

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<sup>63</sup> Snipe, 48.

<sup>64</sup> Snipe, 48.

long. In a reversal of colonial policy, the Europeans were now the “others” in Senegal, forced to confront the culture they tried for so long to erase. To invite these colonizers back into the country was a politically astute move by Senghor. It forced the colonizers to return to the land they had disrespected, but on the terms of the natives who had been considered barbaric. In this setting, Senghor insured that the Europeans could see that the culture they had tried to abolish through assimilation was in fact relevant, not just in the past but in the present as well. “The festival provided an extraordinary venue for black artists to demonstrate their achievements before a world audience. From this perspective, its political and cultural importance remains unquestioned.”<sup>65</sup> In coming to Senegal for this celebration of contemporary black art, other European nations were forced to acknowledge that the country existed alongside their own, not in some strange removed past, but as equals in modern time. The festival firmly established that West African culture could and should coexist with European and Western cultures.

### **Ecole de Dakar**

Another positive result of Senghor’s artistic patronage was the creation of a state-sponsored art school during the 1970s. This decade saw the rapid expansion of state support for the arts, made possible as Senegal closed the first decade of its independence and optimistically headed into its second as a stable autonomous country. The government’s support was of extreme value to Senegalese artists because they did not have access to corporate sponsorship or any other independent means of support. In 1972,

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<sup>65</sup> Snipe, 48.



the National Arts Institute replaced the National School of Art, including in it a School of Fine Arts, a Conservatory of Music, Dancing and Drama, and a research facility.<sup>66</sup>

The 1970s also saw the creation of the Ecole de Dakar, a name which refers both to the first generation of Senegalese artists (mainly painters) showing their works in the late 1960s and 1970s, and to an art school funded under Senghor's government. The school included instruction in fine arts, drama, music, and architecture. Receiving patronage from the ministry of culture, it was initially split into two sections: *la section d'arts plastiques* and *la section de recherches en arts plastiques nègres*. Iba N'Diaye, a painter trained in Europe, lead the former section, which emphasized skills in oil painting, focusing particularly on techniques of perspective, composition, and form. Following his own education, N'Diaye taught skills based largely on those of the European fine art schools. Papa Ibra Tall, another painter schooled in arts and architecture in Paris, lead the latter section. "In his teachings he promoted the development of a new visual language – one that could be representative to Africa and her peoples."<sup>67</sup> In this way, Tall had a similar goal to Senghor: the development and promotion of a widely recognizable pan-African language to unite the diverse people of the country and the continent. His approach to teaching this philosophy, however, was quite different from Senghor's. While the president played a hands-on and active role in the instruction of arts, Tall taught with a more laissez-faire approach, believing that "too much academicism would hinder the creative impulses of his students."<sup>68</sup> Pierre Lods, a

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<sup>66</sup> "Ecole nationale des Arts." *Culture & Patrimoine*. Ministère De La Culture Et Des Loisirs, 23 Sept. 2009. Web. 6 Apr. 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Harney, 1996, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Harney, 1996, 43.

Belgian artist, joined the teaching staff in Tall's department in the 1970s, adding an element of internationalism to the school's styles and themes. Lods encouraged in his students an "innate sense of composition, of rhythm, and of colour harmony," similar to the intrinsic *âme nègre* that Senghor claimed existed within each one of his people.<sup>69</sup> In many ways Lods' "ideas of African sensibility, emotionality, instinct, and rhythm corresponded well with those of Senghor," however, while he agreed with the president's philosophies, he did not necessarily support his practice of them. He felt that art was too institutionalized under Senghor's reign, promoting more artistic freedom in his classroom, pushing his students to express themselves in ways beyond the themes he presented to them.

Lods' promotion of individualized creativity in his classroom was a rarity at the Ecole de Dakar; for the most part, the work of the artists within the school conformed to Senghor's aesthetic canon, as that was the style in which the teachers, themselves working under the president's patronage, taught. Through supporting the school, Senghor could indirectly monitor the art produced within the country, regulating artistic production from an invisible seat of authority. Following Senghor's aesthetic principles, the school taught techniques of European modernism, taking inspiration from Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism, while still maintaining an emphasis on symbols of *Africanité*. This type of cross-cultural canon underlined Senghor's European-African leadership style and helped to foster Senegal's place as a creative crossroads between the two continents.

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<sup>69</sup> Harney, 1996, 43.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ecole acted as the “central training ground for artists seeking success in galleries at home and abroad.”<sup>70</sup> Nearly any artist aiming for national or international success required the support of the government in order to have widely seen and professional shows, and the way to achieve this was through the school. This, of course, presented the problem of creative freedom, for the school was run by the government and therefore overseen by Senghor, who insisted it teach his own philosophies and personal stylistic aesthetics. This limited the variation of art coming out of the Ecole, leaving it formulaic, conforming to certain Senghorian archetypes with little concern for originality or ingenuity on the part of the artist.

### **Searching for Authenticity**

The main themes explored in the Ecole de Dakar included those linked to *Africanité* and *négritude*, Senghor’s most widely promoted ideologies. Within these themes, the works produced tended to speak of “an exotic Africa, either idyllic in its villages, lively in its markets, or mystical in its bush.”<sup>71</sup> African artists within the Ecole, taught in the modernist style, approached images of their continent in much the same way as European artists did, viewing it through a veil of exoticism. They tended to paint the Africa that outsiders wanted to see rather than the reality of everyday life. Like Gauguin searching for a vanished primitive on the island of Tahiti, African artists working in the school searched for this same non-existent exoticism within their own continent. These artists, aiming for success abroad, created their works for an international audience,

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<sup>70</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

presenting their country in the way that Europeans wanted to see it: as an idyllic untouched paradise even in a post-colonial era. The irony, of course, is that this natural unspoiled land that Europeans yearned for through these images was directly erased by years of imposed colonial rule. The mystical and exotic vision of Africa presented in the works shows no signs of colonialism, a phenomenon that transformed Senegalese society, land, and life. The French colonial dream was to “civilize” the African societies under its rule, yet now those same Europeans searched for images of a pristine, primeval world. Perhaps this image of the continent reassured European audiences that their colonial presence did not “ruin” the exotic Africa of their dreams. In producing these images, African artists maintained an image of their continent that no longer existed, that had not existed for over a hundred years, since the arrival of aggressive foreigners on their affluent, fertile land.

Senegalese artists perpetuated this contrived image of their country for two reasons. The first directly related to Senghor’s politics and philosophies. He called for a return to the roots of African civilization, a return to a pre-colonial era where the essence, the soul, of his people was free and unchanged by outside influence. This reconnaissance of an exotically pristine Africa recalled the roots of *Africanité*, what it meant to be African before colonization. The second reason was less ideological and more practical. Aside from the government, the only patronage available to artists was from international buyers who were largely European. The exotic was the image that these buyers wanted to see of Africa, so it was the image artists created and sold to them.

Ironically, the images chosen to represent the traditional in African culture were those that had exotic and, therefore, market value to the European collector. The carvings and masks of a traditional, timeless, and pure Africa, untouched by Western civilization, provided the authority that was necessary to produce an authentic modern expression.<sup>72</sup>

In the first decades of Senegal's modern artistic history, "traditional" symbols, such as the carvings and masks promoted by Senghor, yielded to the "authority" of authenticity. This made it easy to identify these works as African and to recognize them as carrying the values associated with Senegalese identity. In the context of the international art market, however, these symbols really only served as a pretense of authenticity, for the Africa they described did not reflect the true state of the continent in the independent modern era. In the 1960s and 1970s, Senegal was a rapidly developing metropolitan country, with up-and-coming cities and a well-established and respected artistic culture. It is important to note, then, that in order to have financial success in an international market, Senegalese artists were forced to revert to symbols of tradition rather than modernity. This created a strict dichotomy between the past and the present, where the former represented a pure, "authentic" Africa that did not actually exist, while the latter reflected reality yet ironically had no place in the modern art world. Senghor wanted to look to these types of symbols to reclaim a uniquely African heritage, but in the hands of Europeans this type of attitude placed Africa in a permanent and ethereal past. In order to have an "authentic modern expression," the works of contemporary Senegalese artists

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<sup>72</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

needed to depict “a traditional, timeless, and pure Africa.” How could a work express modernity while depicting a place as “timeless”? This sort of contradiction exhibits the ways in which contemporary Senegalese artists working in the first few decades after independence were pigeonholed in terms of the style and content of their work. In order to create, they needed funding, which came from two places: the state, or international collectors. Both the government and collectors wanted these same types of traditional, authentic symbols that did not at all convey modern life.

This exposes a seeming contradiction in Senghor’s patronage of the arts; he aimed to use them as a means to push his country forward into modernity, to prove that Senegal was as developed as the Western world, yet he continued to perpetuate “traditional,” antiquated images of the country. These misleading representations catered to what European buyers wanted Africa to be: an untouched pristine land of natural (not social or economic or cultural) bounty. Europeans at this time did not want to see images of a prosperous developed modern Africa, but of an exotic, rustic one that reverted back to pre-colonial times. The former would root Senegal, or Africa, firmly in modernity, proving that Africans were capable of modernizing themselves, their society, and their culture without the rule or influence of Europeans. This would discredit the foundation and all principles of the colonial mission, a prospect France was not yet ready to face. In the mid-nineteenth century, the contemporary African artist “might feel limitations imposed on him by the very admiration for the non-African world for ancient African art.”<sup>73</sup> Senegalese artists faced limitations not only from Senghor’s constant presence in

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<sup>73</sup> Pataux, Bernard. "Senegalese Art Today." *African Arts* 8.1 (1974): 26+. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Feb. 2011. 26.

their work and the constraints of academic teachings, but also from the non-African art world and its singular interest in primitivism.

Within these symbols and themes of *Africanité*, artists were also encouraged to find “a balance between complete abstraction and African motifs.”<sup>74</sup> The promotion of this style proved an interesting reversal or re-interpretation of the work of European Cubists such as Braque or Picasso. These artists “discovered” traditional African art in the early twentieth century and used its simplified geometric forms as inspiration for their own modern work, exploiting African motifs as a starting point from which to delve into abstraction. African artists now studied European artists in their own schools, and in return used their works, once influenced by early African artifacts, as inspiration for their own contemporary works, completing a circle of cultural stimulus that ultimately returned to the original motifs of traditional African art. In the 1960s and 1970s, through the study of European modernists, contemporary Senegalese artists took these symbols back, reinventing them and releasing them from their European abstraction and reusing them in works that came close to their original contexts. While European modernists used the simplified forms as ideas to abstract their own subjects, contemporary Senegalese artists used the actual symbols themselves, reeling them back in to their homeland as symbols of African culture. In terms of style, artists coming out of the schools in Senegal were torn between a European academic style and a modern “primitive” style. Though this primitive style was directly inspired by early African art, it was no longer truly authentic in modern Senegal because it was a style invented by Europeans to project European ideals of African identity, and in no way reflected real modernity. The

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<sup>74</sup> Harney, 1996, 44.

contradiction in style and subject represented the duality of Senegalese identity at this point in the country's history, one stuck somewhere between the country's past and present, unable to reconcile the two. The implications involved in the employment of the "traditional" placed the country, and continent, in a permanent and exotic past, displaced from contemporary time and space, preventing its arrival in modernity. This, of course, was a point of view fabricated entirely upon antiquated European beliefs, when in reality Senegal was very much a fully functioning, modern, autonomous country. The challenge faced by artists at this time lay in depicting the internationally accepted and state sponsored "traditional" ideal while still maintaining some degree of artistic and creative integrity.

### **State Sponsorship and the Limits of Creativity**

With the majority of artistic patronage coming directly from the government, one must question the legitimacy of freedom of creative expression within the country. Senghor closely monitored the direction of artistic themes with his cultural policies and widely promoted ideologies. In many ways, this greatly benefited Senegal, giving the developing country a clear path toward cultural definition. Senghor's policies provided a solid base from which to manifest national identity, and from there, later on, for each individual artist to determine his own personal identity, one separate from that of the state. Senegalese artists owed their livelihood to the government's patronage of their work; it allowed the arts to flourish at a time when most other societal domains – the economy, the political structure, the advancement of technology – were still in the



process of developing. An already firmly established tradition, the arts merely needed funding in order to prosper. While positive for the foundation of a cultural identity within the country, the generous patronage of the state also meant that nearly all art leaned in the direction of the bureaucratic principles and agendas, which did not necessarily reflect those of the individual artist. Senghor's patronage of the arts was a double-edged sword; on the one hand, artists would not have been able to create without the government's support; the vocation was not extremely lucrative in a developing country where few citizens had the means to indulge in aesthetic pleasures. On the other hand, it meant that artists were limited in terms of expression. As a compromise, they sacrificed their creative integrity for their general welfare, limiting their work to a formulaic set of themes and symbols expressing a narrow cultural philosophy. This draws in the question, then, of how truly "authentic" the art coming out of Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s was. Of course the artist will cater to those giving him funding, so one must question if the messages presented in contemporary works at that time are those of the individual artist, or merely those of the government, perpetuated in many works by the motivation of payment.

Landing Savané, a Senegalese politician who worked in Senghor's government, explained the predicament artists found themselves in during the first president's reign:

Those artists who chose independence receive no state assistance in any form. In a country where people are generally not rich and artists have no direct access to international markets, or receive very little in the way of commissions, those who do not receive official support find it difficult to survive... only groups or

individuals who go abroad, such as the immensely popular band Touré Kinda, become truly independent of the government; anyone who depends on government support has to compromise.<sup>75</sup>

This placed the artist in a difficult position, forced to compromise either his welfare or his creative integrity. Artists needed the money the state provided to them, not only to create their art but also simply to live in the new country. Very few artists had wealth of their own, and in the first few years of independence, the government was the only institution with enough power or money to fund them. “Placed in this situation,” Savané continued, “they tend to mute serious criticism of the state, which has implications for the creative process. An ‘artist/civil servant’ differs from an artist who creates without constraints, which could result in the loss of job or an official reprisal.”<sup>76</sup> While Senghor’s interest in the arts was appreciated, at times he was so closely involved that it became stifling. Not everyone in the country agreed with his programs of *négritude* and *Africanité*. There existed, of course, diversity amongst the Senegalese people, and some envisioned an entirely different country, an entirely different identity. This issue of freedom of expression has affected the history of the nation, and continues to affect what we as outsiders view as Senegalese identity today. One must question if what we perceive as “authentic” or “traditional” is in fact a true reflection of Senegalese existence, or if it is merely a manifestation of Senghor’s personal philosophies, perpetuated through his aggressive patronage.

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<sup>75</sup> Snipe, 88.

<sup>76</sup> Snipe, 87.

The national persona Senghor successfully projected to the world was that of a highly cultured, richly artistic country. This is, certainly, one very important element of Senegal's heritage, however in his promotion of this, Senghor ignored many other aspects of life in the country. He overlooked, for example, many of the hardships of living in a newly formed country during a time of decolonization, the feelings of confusion and trepidation as the country entered an entirely new chapter of its history, unlike anything anyone living there at the time could imagine. Certainly the Senegalese people carried pride in their new identity as citizens, but at the same time, the extreme changes in their lives and lifestyles during this era were difficult and at many times bewildering. Nearly everyone living in Senegal at this time had grown up and lived their entire existences under the colonial regime. Unaware of any other way of life, they now entered a new era of shifting government, shifting ideals, shifting identity. This was at once exciting and frightening. Artists, however, were unable to express these mixed emotions in their work, instead focusing solely on the pride and optimism present in their identity. Because Senghor used art in his politics, it became necessary for contemporary artists benefiting from his support to portray the image of Senegal that Senghor wanted the world to see, that of a strong, unified emerging country. Artists could not depict the complexity of the shift into independence, the anxiety and unease felt by some, for to do so would weaken the country's self-governing image. There existed the need to put on a strong face to the rest of the world, setting a positive example for the other newly autonomous francophone African countries. This, of course, censored some of the art during the second half of the twentieth century, not allowing a complete exploration of the depth of Senegalese identity.

In Senegal, freedom of expression is guaranteed to all citizens under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “The Senegalese State... cannot encroach on the freedom of creative work... its arts and its culture can but stem from the people, and its policy in this area can but be the genuine expression of the national will.”<sup>77</sup> Censorship of some sort, however, exists in nearly every country, manifesting itself in many ways. There are instances of state censorship, market censorship, even self-censorship, in any country where art plays a role in politics. Senghor placed so much emphasis on his cultural policies, investing a considerable amount of time, effort, and money into their establishment within Senegalese society, yet in his patronage he violated the basic human right that ensures creative freedom to the artists he supported. Art comes from, and is made for, the people – first, the artist as an individual citizen himself, secondly, the artist as an individual citizen who is also part of a larger population, the Senegalese people, and finally this population of individuals drawn together under one intangible and abstract blanket: their national identity. For Senghor to interfere in this process would mean that the art representing the identity of the nation was coming not from individual citizens but from the government, which was the opposite of Senghor’s goals. “Today, neither the Senegalese government, which regards itself as a democracy, nor any other state pretending to democratic principles, would willingly admit to taking measures that restrict freedom of expression.”<sup>78</sup> Perhaps Senghor did not see his government’s direct involvement with the production of art to be a violation of the right to freedom of expression. His patronage and the role he made for art within his government was certainly a noble concept, however it would seem that he inadvertently interfered with

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<sup>77</sup> Snipe, 76.

<sup>78</sup> Snipe, 89.

principles of creative freedom. As a result, art under his patronage was more a reflection of state identity and political ideology rather than a true reflection of the identity of the individual citizen.

State sponsored art addressed broad concepts of the experience of living in the country during its initiation as an autonomous state, the transition from being an African colonial subject to becoming Senegalese. These are perfectly valid themes, and ones that have certainly been explored in nearly every culture, however what was lacking in the realm of art of this era were pieces that addressed average life and emotions rather than broad generalizations of comprehensive ideologies. Personal experience seemed absent from art at this time. It was the real expressions of every day life in the new country that truly described the Senegalese condition, the essence of living in the country at a time of self-discovery and exploration. This interpretive process seemed more a governmental duty projected onto the people than an expression of individual creativity. The personal experience of being Senegalese, whether exciting, difficult, frustrating, or liberating, was a far more accurate reflection of national identity than that which was being projected by the government.

Ousmane Sembene, a Senegalese filmmaker noted for films such as *Mandabi* (*The Money Order*), expressed his frustration with these creative restrictions by explaining, “Either do what the government wants you to do and become a civil servant, or try to do what the people want you to do and then you are censored, and if you want to be independent, you are attacked from both sides.”<sup>79</sup> By accepting monetary aid from the government, the artist ceases to be an artist and becomes a “civil servant.” This title of

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<sup>79</sup> Snipe, 87.

“artist-civil servant” combines roles in art and politics, a position similar to Senghor’s role as “poet-president.” Before accepting his leadership position in Senegal, the president was more an artist than a politician, so it is unsurprising that he would expect the same duality from other artists in his country. Under Senghor’s generous patronage, the artist had a duty to fulfill a role beyond merely creating art for art’s sake. The president placed art at such a high position within his regime that it became more than mere aesthetic objects; it carried weight, conveyed messages, promoted development, spurred change, and inspired hope in the new country. Art intrinsically carried political connotations. The “artist-civil servant” was bound by a patriotic duty to the country and to the people to create art that had meaning relevant to the experience of living in Senegal but only insofar as it reflected the ideals that the state wished to project. Therefore the messages and meanings in works of art at this time had a characteristic uniformity; they were neither original nor unique to the artist himself, but standard in every artist’s symbolic repertoire. Due to these factors it was inevitable that complete freedom of expression did not exist during Senghor’s time as president.

Censorship does not only encompass the restriction of what artists can depict, but also the act of altering or influencing artistic production by giving support only for certain themes, in Senghor’s case the symbology associated with *négritude*. Author Carrie Dailey<sup>80</sup> noted,

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<sup>80</sup> Carrie Dailey is the author of the book *Evolution of an African Artist: Social Realism in the Works of Ousmane Sembene*, which explores the works of filmmaker Ousmane Sembene.

I'm not sure that the population, in general, ever fully understood the term Négritude, nor how it applied in our lives. But at the same time since Senghor was a political figure, and therefore a figure in authority and power, I would have to say a lot of people adopted and adapted the term to whatever they happened to be doing at any given time because there were advantages to being affiliated with the idea.<sup>81</sup>

There were obvious benefits in this era to associating oneself with the policies of the government. To be backed by figures of authority put the artists in powerful and advantageous positions. One advantage was the increased likelihood of having their work shown to a large audience, gaining exposure amongst their peers in Senegal and internationally. Even if they did not fully understand the term, artists followed Senghor's canon of *négritude* in order to win his support. In this way, even the art that depicted Senghor's themes was not necessarily authentic because it was neither sincere nor genuinely understood, by the maker or the public. As a Francophile who spent much of his adult life in France, Senghor had opinions that perhaps other natives did not share, and his usage of *négritude* "glossed over the realities of the individuals confined within it."<sup>82</sup> His widespread and singular promotion of this personal ideology forced it to become common amongst his people, even if it did not reflect their own reality or philosophies. "Despite the government's focus on Négritude, it is doubtful that the Senegalese people every fully grasped its meaning or cultural and political

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<sup>81</sup> Snipe, 58.

<sup>82</sup> Harney, 1996, 44.

implications.”<sup>83</sup> While Senghor worked hard to create a sense of unity within the national identity of his people, he ultimately created a “uniting” force that they did not fully understand or necessarily relate to. Artists took support wherever it was offered, even if it meant sacrificing their creative integrity or own ideals for those of the nation, an attitude that certainly does not yield creative freedom. The generation who followed Senghor’s preaching was often seen more as propagandists than artists, replacing creativity with “enthusiasm for the theoretic, unexplainable non-definability of material and [were] satisfied with an elevated ‘appreciation’ supported by poetic ‘criticism’”.<sup>84</sup> In perpetuating a social theory that they did not even fully understand or relate to, these artists reduced their artistic credibility, devaluing their own inventive talents.

Of course, Senegal was not a nation completely devoid of original creative expression, and there were several institutions through which independent artists could create work without pressure from the government. One such association was the National Arts Institute, a place where artists could go to create without governmental interference. Even free from constraint, artists did not create pieces that criticized the state. Evidently, this was not what Senghor’s administration was attempting to prevent. In fact the government did not necessarily intend to restrict any one theme; instead it tried to guide the work toward certain themes of their choosing. Senghor did not consider his role in controlling the arts in his state to be censorship. Through his support, he aimed to help and promote Senegalese artists, not to stifle them. In his view, issues related to nation building and art went hand in hand, so of course state-sponsored works would naturally reflect this. While one could contest the integrity of artistic freedom under Senghor’s

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<sup>83</sup> Snipe, 58.

<sup>84</sup> Harney, 1996, 44.



government, in many ways the president's patronage and promotion of his own ideologies prompted creativity because it forced artists to explore themes of a new culture that was entirely their own.

At the very least, the new independent state allowed for more artistic freedom and opportunities than at any time during the colonial era. "When political liberty is restricted," as it was under colonial rule, "freedom of expression suffers. Artists may not have been censored, repressed or jailed under French administration, but European power denigrated the history and value of African and Senegalese arts, languages, and civilization."<sup>85</sup> Though Senghor's close direction of artistic themes was stifling at times, it was well intentioned; he wanted to give his people the opportunity to express their new identity as Senegalese, free from the oppression of colonial rule, free from assimilation to French culture. Senghor would never have considered his role within the artistic community to be one that restricted creative expression. He wanted only to promote the creation of a uniquely African aesthetic with which to awaken Senegalese consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

Abdou Diouf, the country's second president, once claimed, "Senghor was the griot of his own cultural project."<sup>86</sup> A well-respected figure of authority, Senghor played many roles: poet, writer, statesman, president, and perhaps most importantly, cultural historian. As the nation's first ruler, he not only told the story of Senegal as an independent nation, but shaped it. Like the griot, he both perpetuated and preserved

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<sup>85</sup> Snipe, 92.

<sup>86</sup> Snipe, 42.

Senegalese identity, reinforcing the country's culture by first creating new traditions, and then passing them on to succeeding generations. As a politician, he allowed his own beliefs and principles to make up the foundations of Senegal, literally putting all of himself into the new country. Many have criticized him for this approach to cultural policy, citing it as too personal. There of course exists some risk in aligning the nation so closely with the beliefs of one individual, but nevertheless Senghor bestowed his ideology onto his people, passing it on to them as part of their heritage. In doing so, his philosophies became theirs as well, intrinsic parts of Senegalese identity and personality, and this was the goal Senghor had in mind at the start of his presidency. The president faced much criticism for his policies, but ultimately he is singularly responsible for the establishment of the strong culture of arts in the country, for bringing the country into modernity, free from colonial domination. His presidency was unique in that everything he did for Senegal was unprecedented; he had the extremely large responsibility of literally developing a country from the very beginning of its independence. It is both admirable and impressive that he successfully established a brand new nation, complete with governmental structure, formal cities, and unique culture.

At the same time, however, his own personal ideals did not necessarily make for successful political policies. His most lasting legacy on the country has been a cultural one. His politics were, in many ways, too idealistic, not realistically feasible enough to be sustainable in the long run. Senghor wished to bring his country's cultural prosperity to the same level of commercial prosperity it had seen in the colonial era, an unrealistic goal for a country with less than a century of independent history. His reign represented a period of great idealism and hope within Senegal, however the reality never quite met the

aspiration. In his nearly single-minded focus on the arts, Senghor neglected to deal with other problems associated with nation building. After Senghor's resignation, following his fifth term as president in December 1980, Abdou Diouf, his successor, implemented a focus on other areas.

Regardless, the legacy of the country's first president continues to manifest itself in the present through the rich artistic heritage still found in Senegal today. Criticisms of Senghor's politics have not tarnished his reputation as an effective and admired leader, nor have they defiled the "respect, inspiration, and intellectual influence Senghor generated throughout the African continent and beyond, and across several generations."<sup>87</sup> His cultural legacy lives on through multiple generations of artists whose creativity and ingenuity lie in the origins of their artistic heritage, one formed by Senghor and his beliefs. Directly and indirectly, his inspiration to create lives on today in the pride Senegalese people take in their identity. Acting as president at the onset of the nation's independence, he defined what it meant to be Senegalese, channeling this energetic spirit through the creative hands of the country's artists.

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<sup>87</sup> "Léopold Senghor." *African Arts* 35.2 (2002): 1+4+6-7. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2011. 6.

### Chapter III:

#### Iba N'Diaye, Senghor's *Cher Enfant*

Under Senghor, art was at once an agent of change and an enterprise, built upon the relationship between the government, the artists and the people. The state acted as sponsor, a public corporation providing funding and ideas. Those creating the artwork fulfilled the role of assembly, interpreting and expressing these ideas in a neat and easily comprehensible package of identity. Finally, the public, the Senegalese people, both consciously and unconsciously operated as consumers, viewing the artwork and internalizing its messages as a new part of themselves.

Artists working in Senegal in the 1960s acted as the vessels through which Senghor projected his ideologies, turning out works that appear to support unquestionably the president's belief system. They were his genius prodigies, creatively translating his poetic cultural policies into widely recognizable visual symbols. These artists functioned as Senghor's best means of communication; the president supported, cultivated, and nurtured them, at times like an overbearing parent, even going so far as to nickname them his *chers enfants*, his dear children. Representing all that Senghor wanted his country to be, the work they produced was of genuine interest to the president. Under his close supervision, artists supported by the state took guidance from his suggestions, pushing themselves to explore certain themes concentrating on the nature of *Africanité* and the meaning of being African in this exciting era of new independence.

Due to the president's active involvement in the creative process, many of the works produced during this period have a certain distinct look and general attitude about them – the one that Senghor wished to harvest into a sense of identity among the rest of his people. The country found itself with a large pool of painters who focused singularly on African subject matter, African visual language and African themes while utilizing European techniques and materials. Oil paints, canvases, watercolors, and ink pens were all materials introduced to Africa by the French, adopted by artists in the 1960s to communicate symbols of *négritude* and *Africanité*. This fusion of customs was exactly what Senghor had aimed for in his regime: to bring Senegal up to the same level of cultural legitimacy as Europe through the adoption of the materials of their fine arts while conveying inherently African ideas and content.

To call upon Senghor's motifs in order to project nationalism at times proved challenging for artists of this era, as the Senegal does not have a historically strong tradition of wood-carving, statuettes, or masks, the symbols Senghor encouraged his artists to allude to as inspiration. Converted to Islam as early as the eleventh century, the country's early visual heritage is more closely tied to the aesthetic of the religion, which does not allow for representational art. Crafts such as *sous-verre* glass painting, a tradition imported from the Mediterranean, are far more common than carvings [Figure 1].<sup>88</sup> In his advocacy for pan-African motifs, Senghor ironically asked his people to express their identity by promoting a heritage that was not even their own. This put

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<sup>88</sup> Papa Ibra Tall, an artist working in the 1960s and Iba N'Diaye's co-director at the Ecole de Dakar, works in a style that references the Senegalese artistic tradition of *sous-verre*. [Figure 1]. He narrates scenes of average Senegalese life using carefully outlined and intricately patterned forms in the style of glass painting done in the past and today by many craftsman [Figure 2].

modern artists in the “contradictory position of basing contemporary artistic expression on the art of the past when no such traditions exist in Senegal.”<sup>89</sup> This perhaps explains why many artists at this time had trouble understanding and relating to Senghor’s ideologies; they were based on traditions that, while not invented, did not have genuine roots in their society. In the 1960s and 1970s, artists conceded to these ideologies regardless, following the president’s direction because he funded them. In the decades following his leave from office, artists branched out to explore themes to which they felt a more personal connection, still occasionally stemming from these symbols, but making them their own. They stopped copying the past and began to reinterpret it in modernity.

Iba N’Diaye was one of the most active artists working under Senghor’s administration. Born in 1928, 22 years Senghor’s junior, he was one of the president’s *chers enfants*, receiving much guidance and financial support from the state. Trained in both Senegal and France, the artist practiced mainly in the mediums of ink, watercolor, and oil on canvas. He lived and worked in Paris for many years, but returned to Senegal in the 1960s at the personal request of the president to take a job as one of the first directors of the Ecole de Dakar. Senghor specifically identified N’Diaye’s work as exemplifying the themes and styles of his own beliefs, those he hoped to promote through his national art school. Senghor voiced his respect for N’Diaye, explaining that the artist “live[s] and expresse[s] that which we quietly celebrate: the meeting of cultural values of different peoples and nations at the level of universality.”<sup>90</sup> His work at once articulates pan-African symbols and evokes specifically Senegalese cultural values, all

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<sup>89</sup> Pataux, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Polakoff, Claire. "Iba Ndiaye." *African Arts* 10.3 (1977): 72. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2011.

comprehensible at a universal level. Exemplifying the syncretization of cultural influences present in modern Senegalese identity, N'Diaye uses his European fine arts training to depict African motifs. His art acts as a public celebration of the Senegalese spirit, arousing national unity while simultaneously making it intelligible to an international audience as well, overcoming the barrier of exoticism faced by many contemporary African artists.

### ***Sahel (1977)***

N'Diaye's paintings and drawings voice his commitment to his motherland. His work *Sahel* (1977) [Figure 3] conveys the artist's rootedness in his natural environment, the most basic compositional element of Senegal. In this abstract landscape, the artist presents a boldly color-blocked composition, splitting the canvas in half horizontally, the spatial symmetry broken only by a shapeless form on the right. Though nearly unrecognizable, the barren landscape manifests itself through the artist's use of color and shape; the warm uneven brown tones of the lower half clearly convey sand, while the line where it meets the blue upper half denotes a vague horizon. The darker brown shape to the right, blending slightly into the ground below and extending into the sky, is some sort of vegetation, the lone living element in an otherwise arid desert atmosphere. While impossible to conclusively identify, the shape could be a Baobab tree, a native plant of Senegal. This tree can grow even in the arid land of the Sahel, a testament to its strength and endurance. In this way it represents the spirit of the Senegalese people, rooted firmly in the earth of their country, alive and growing in this unexpected climate.

Though rendered in the European medium of watercolor on canvas, the work is unmistakably African in nature. N'Diaye ignores his European fine arts training, refusing the careful, refined brushstrokes that characterize traditional academic French painting for a freer, unrestrained style closer to anti-academic Impressionism. The nuances of tone within the paint look like watermarks on the canvas, reminiscent of batik, a traditional Senegalese craft of fabric dying. The colors further this comparison, the “inky indigos and undulating kola-nut browns blend to bring a hauntingly subtle resemblance to the patterns and images one finds in the hand-dyed textiles of West Africa.”<sup>91</sup> The artist literally saturates his work with Senegalese heritage through his application of paint, evoking the spirit of his culture not only through theme and subject but also through the act of artistic creation.

The painting's title, *Sahel*, translates literally from Arabic to mean “coast,” however the Sahel also refers to a geographic zone stretching horizontally through the middle of northern Africa. The transitional region where the Sahara desert meets the grasslands and savanna to its south, it marks the place where arid desert sand begins to meet sparse vegetation. Originating on the west coast of the continent in northern Senegal, the Sahel crosses Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Eritrea, touching also Burkina Faso and Nigeria. N'Diaye's strong, flat horizontal balance in his composition reflects the topography of the geographical domain itself, a long stretch of land reaching from coast to coast across the upper part of the continent. Its unique natural composition and vegetation exist only there, in this narrow band traversing northern Africa. This region makes for an interesting landscape subject; it is a natural embodiment

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<sup>91</sup> Polakoff, 73.



of the influence Senghor hoped Senegalese culture would have throughout the continent. Quite literally a pan-African form, the Sahel unites nine countries in northern Africa. In a similar vein, Senghor aimed to invent and foster a particularly African cultural identity within Senegal, but to spread it into other nations as well, uniting the diverse peoples of the continent with shared heritage. This desert-savanna zone therefore serves as a metaphor for the unique culture of Senegal as it relates to other African nations.

Relevant also is N'Diaye's choice to depict the natural environment at all. African landscapes of this era frequently romanticized the continent in an attempt to attract a European audience. N'Diaye decidedly does not exoticize his scene, instead rendering it nearly unrecognizable in its abstraction. His landscape expresses not his country's beauty, but that unnamed quality found in the roots of its civilization, the one particular to the people, culture, and society there that defines them as Senegalese. The terrain of Senegal, the actual land upon which the civilization was built, rests as an important part of the country's identity, supporting its history for thousands of years. Senghor spoke of *racinement* – a return to one's roots; the natural landscape embodies the earliest origins of Senegalese civilization. It existed pre-independence, pre-colonialism, pre-humankind. Entirely separate from political or social transformations, it has endured the growth and development of life throughout time, yet remains largely unchanged. This uniquely African terrain represents an element of Senegal's landscape that remained entirely separate from European influences; the colonial presence concentrated itself in the cities it built, not in the rural countryside. The Sahel reverts the country's environment to a past that in no way references the colonial era, evoking the nation's roots without recalling that difficult part of its history.

In the pre-colonial era, the nomadic tribes inhabiting Senegal called the Sahel their home, roaming freely through not yet named countries, unattached to any one place besides this long strip of livable land at the edge of the desert. Before the European invasion of the region, the only discernible boundary was the natural one between the desert and the savanna. The colonial administration assigned the borders between the countries that still exist today, creating lines that arbitrarily separated the nations of West Africa. Before this occurred, the region stretched out as plains and desert, the two terrains united in shared geographical composition. N'Diaye's painting contains no hard lines, the earth and vegetation blending into the sky in an infinite, borderless landscape. This unrestricted scene depicts, without romanticization, true Africa, existing both in the past and present entirely outside of colonial influence. It is to this époque that Senghor wishes to return, to this very region to reunite his people with their Senegalese and pan-African roots.

Looking nearly the same today as it did hundreds of years ago, this enduring landscape reveals no signs of modernity. N'Diaye manages to successfully convey in his image a sense of timelessness while neither romanticizing nor exoticizing it. Of his work, the artist asserts,

I refuse to give into the folklorism that certain Europeans, hungry for exoticism, expect from me; otherwise I would have to live according to the ideas that they hold for contemporary African artists, a segregative idea, which tends to confine the African artist to the realm of naïve bizarre, surrealist and outlandish art.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Pataux, 28.

His style does not reveal a lush, unspoiled landscape, but an empty, unremarkable flatland that still somehow manages to convey the vibrant essence of the country. In refusing to conform to notions of a falsely exotic Africa, N'Diaye refutes the European beliefs that segregate his country from the rest of the developed world. From a Western viewpoint, modern African art and modern European art do not fall into the same category; Western critics hold different expectations for each, the former envisaged to be more simplistic, lacking depth of sentiment or theme, while the latter marks the high standard to which all other “fine art” gets judged. Under the encouragement of Senghor, N'Diaye breaks away from these biased, antiquated ideas with his unexpected landscape, pushing modern African art away from its primitive label.

N'Diaye uses the Sahel as a symbol of the Senegalese spirit. With an unrestrained style of brushwork, at once frantic and calm, energetic yet composed, N'Diaye visually describes the release of the African soul into its primordial natural environment. Present inside every citizen, the Senegalese spirit is as constant as the unchanging plains of the Sahel. N'Diaye's simple composition connotes this stability in both the environment and the personality of those living in it, while his variance in tonal qualities and haphazardly directed brushstrokes exude dynamism, vibrancy, and unexpected depth despite his flat perspective. There exists surprising energy in the motionless landscape, a reawakening of the *âme nègre*, dormant until the touch of the artist's brush on canvas. Like this countryside, the spirit of the Senegalese people is both resilient and enduring. To continue the comparison between the landscape and the Senegalese soul, one could consider European attitudes about African culture; to an untrained or uninterested eye,

the desert-savanna seems barren, the land as worthless to the colonizers as African culture. Yet beneath its surface it is full of life, color, energy, beauty. European assumptions might characterize African culture as simplistic or primitive, yet N'Diaye's work communicates subtle complexity and dynamic elegance.

### ***The Cry/Head of a Djem Statuette (1976)***

In another work, *The Cry/Head of a Djem Statuette Nigeria (1976)* [Figure 4], N'Diaye more literally depicts one of Senghor's emblems of *Africanité*: a study of a "traditional" African object. The features in the face of this statuette are bold and abstract, reflecting an aesthetic commonly found in early West African art. The title suggests that the drawing is a study of a Nok terracotta head [Figure 5], first discovered in the Jemma region of Nigeria in the early twentieth century, however the work's formal qualities more closely mimic the top of a Luba pot from East Kasai, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo [Figure 6].<sup>93</sup> Nearly identical in form to the head atop this pot, N'Diaye's drawing clearly replicates the wide stare, open mouth, and stylized hair of this ancient pot. The physical characteristics of the figure are all emblematic of *Africanité*. A literal rendering of a primitive piece, the ink drawing recalls the artistic roots of West African culture. Not so much an interpretation as a reproduction, the work takes this old and well-known statuette and presents it in a new medium, reintroducing it as a symbol of African identity. Through this work, N'Diaye "discovers" an object from his roots – not

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<sup>93</sup> "Figural Pot (Luba, East Kasai, Democratic Republic of Congo)," Fig. 96. In Masterpieces from Central Africa: The Tervuren Museum, edited by Gustaaf Verswijver, et al. Munich and New York: Prestel, 1996.

as a source of exoticism but as a common point of national pride. His drawing comments on the nature of “tradition” within African art, a shared heritage that incorporates motifs from a variety of countries.

One must question why N’Diaye chose this particular statue to imitate in ink. After attending art school in France, he returned to his homeland recognizing a need to educate himself in the art history of his own African people. He visited museums displaying early artifacts from around the continent and spent hours studying them, copying their forms, attempting to understand their formal qualities and uses. He explains that his interest in examining these pieces in his own art came from “mon désir d’intégrer son vocabulaire formelle à mon dictionnaire de peintre, mais aussi à une volonté d’enracinement dans mon continent d’origine, dont je saississais combien il m’était mal connu.”<sup>94</sup> N’Diaye took inspiration from the formal qualities in these early pieces, integrating their visual vocabulary into his own work. His research also lead him to a better understanding of his African roots, an element of his academic work and personal growth that he had missed while studying in Europe. He further explains that there exist two levels in his artistic process: these drawings “que je qualifierai de documentaires des ‘instantanées’ que je fais dans les musées notamment, dont je suis un visateur assidu,” and his final paintings, derived from these studies.<sup>95</sup> After reflecting on what he learned in the museums, he returned to his studio to translate them into more consciously planned

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<sup>94</sup> ...his interest in examining these pieces in his own art came from “my desire to integrate their formal vocabulary into my painter’s dictionary, but also from a desire to root myself in my home continent, understanding that I did not know it well. N’Diaye, Iba. “Questions à Un Artiste Africain D’aujourd’hui.” Interview. *Art in Africa*: 44-46. Print. 44. Trans. Hannah Shambroom

<sup>95</sup> He further explains that there exist two levels in his artistic process: these drawings, “which I would label as a documented ‘instant’ that I do specifically in museums, of which I am an avid visitor...” N’Diaye, 44. Trans. Hannah Shambroom

paintings. His sketches, done instantaneously in front of the artifacts themselves, acted as a secondary education for the artist, both in formal qualities, and in the history of his own African culture. They helped him to consider more thoroughly the connections in his own work to the past, stylistically and historically. In educating himself in African culture, he enabled himself to extract emotive qualities bred from his people's background in addition to communicating their primitive forms.

*The Cry* (1976) comes from a series N'Diaye did for a show titled *Le cri d'un continent*, documenting themes of oppression and racism in Senegal. The subject's face, with its empty eyes and round dark mouth, looks pained, frozen in an expression of horror, of suffering, a pointed reaction to the injustices faced by his culture. Articulating the motivation for his work, the artist once stated, "I want to translate the song of a people in their will to exist."<sup>96</sup> Here, he translates this song, a transformative ballad at once poignantly affecting and beautifully tragic, into an African visual language composed of traditional motifs and modern materials. This work evokes the communal cry of his people, exhibiting the artist's role in modern Senegal to draw out this scream as an expression of their will to exist.

N'Diaye's reproduction of this traditional statue illustrates how symbols such as this one have new functions in the context of modern Senegal. Regardless of its original meaning or purpose, re-rendered in ink this figure conveys anxiety, agony, the carnal cry of a nation in distress. This anguished cry could act as a reaction to the continued ignorance of other nations towards Senegalese and African culture. It at once alludes to the artistic and cultural roots of modern society through its reference to an early object,

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<sup>96</sup> Drame, Kandjioura. "Le Cri D'un Continent." *African Arts* 14.1 (1980): 74. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Feb. 2011.

while also describing the frustration of a nation emerging from a period of colonial oppression.

In terms of medium and technique, the work exemplifies the *mélange* of traditional principles and contemporary influences that formed the composition of Senegalese identity in this era. The artistic tools of ink and paper used by the artist for this piece are not native to the country. These materials were likely introduced by to West Africa by the French, either through colonial trade, or later in European art schools where many African artists adopted them to hone their craft. The artist's technique in the shading and shaping of his forms reflects a distinctly European style, though his subject does not. N'Diaye uses Western artistic practices to articulate an African visual language. His rendering of this motif of *Africanité* in a traditionally French manner illustrates the reinvention of Senegalese personality in a new independent era, an identity related to these ancient symbols of the country's heritage but moving in a new, increasingly globalized direction. The artist's mastery of European styles and materials in recreating an existing antique African pot represents the evolution of Senegalese civilization in coming up to par with the cultural standards set by European societies. This is the image Senghor wished to project, through his artists, to the rest of the world in order to validate the rich and deeply rooted artistic history of Senegal. N'Diaye symbolically executes the president's message through the form of this traditional statuette, implying that the country and its heritage, though originating in the ancient past, exist very much alongside the other developed countries of the world at the end of the twentieth century.

This fusion of African symbols with European techniques illustrates the point that colonization did not erase Senegalese culture, but did inevitably alter it. The new identity

born in independence was a reinterpretation of pre-colonial heritage, celebrating uniquely African symbols while also invoking certain influences from the colonial period that allowed the country to develop as much as it did during that time, specifically the introduction of new goods and the exchange of cultural ideals from France to Senegal. The new identity projected through N'Diaye's art validates African culture as important and relevant in modernity. His choice of a European presentation for an African motif acknowledges the need in Senegal to alter certain elements of its culture in order to independently match the Western world in modernity, while still preserving those symbols that convey the valor of Senegalese identity.

### ***The Cry (1987)***

A later work from this series, *The Cry* (1987) [Figure 7], illustrates N'Diaye's evolution in style, form and theme as artists began to distance themselves from the immediately post-colonial period. Done eleven years after the original, this work demonstrates the development of artistic thinking that occurred with the transition to a new administration with new cultural policies. The government changed hands in 1981, Senghor succeeding power to his former Prime Minister, Abdou Diouf. Under the new presidency, the government decreased its patronage of artists, backing away from the close involvement of Senghor's time. Becoming increasingly removed from Senghor's era, artists also began to distance themselves from his appointed set of symbols, employing them mainly as starting points from which to explore their own themes. N'Diaye, once a principle promoter of Senghor's ideologies and motifs (as illustrated



with the previous example), now experimented more with developing, rather than merely coping, their forms. The new aim of his work was “to capture the African essence without merely imitating,” evolving his style to “a technique that transforms his original inspiration into an expression that is uniquely his.”<sup>97</sup> N’Diaye completed the previous work in while still under the heavy influence of Senghor, who actively and aggressively encouraged his artists to cite key symbols of pan-African identity in their works. *The Cry* (1976) was more a study in imitation than analysis, using careful techniques of line and form derived from the artist’s education in Europe. With the earlier drawing the artist replicates both the symbol of the mask, and the style of European artists. In his later piece, his symbols and style evolve, capturing “the African essence” in a more complex, evocative way. As the country moved away from Senghor’s politics, artists moved beyond his sphere of influence; N’Diaye’s two *Cry* images illustrate this evolution from imitation to expression.

N’Diaye’s first attempt at *The Cry* (1976) reflects his years of study at European schools, evident in the carefully controlled lines and easily recognizable shapes employed in rendering the face. The second image reveals a looser style, marked more by the hand of the artist as an individual than the product of mass-taught technique and aesthetic. In N’Diaye’s second composition, he abandons his stiff European style and works in a less controlled manner, one that better expresses his evocative subject. This shift in style coincides with the change in political administration. Senghor remained, for the most part, in control of artistic production while he was president. Under his rule, artists produced works in a more constrained style. As the presidency changed hands, Senghor’s

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<sup>97</sup> Polakoff, 73.

*chers enfants* were set freed from their patron's supervision, and their style became freer as well. No longer confined by certain canons or themes, they allowed their technique to become looser, a better fit for the new, more emotionally infused subject matter they created in the 1980s and 1990s.

This is easily recognizable in the remarkable stylistic shift between N'Diaye's work of 1976 and that of 1987. His newer, less careful manner of painting "transforms his original inspiration into an expression."<sup>98</sup> While clearly referencing the statuette depicted in the earlier drawing, this face now appears to belong to a real person, not an object. The artist carefully blackens the hole of the mouth on the earlier image, indicating hollow, empty space, open in a cry but frozen statically that way. In the second, the artist uses quick, imprecise lines to render the mouth, now more a vulgar grimace than spherical hole. His hastiness in line conveys urgency, a cry propelled from an open abyss by sudden, pressing primal impulse.

Retaining his use of stylized forms, neither image portrays a particularly naturalistic face. Both are intentionally this way, though for different reasons. *The Cry* (1976) accurately and purposefully repeats the geometric facial features of the Luba pot. N'Diaye's re-presentation of this artifact is technically accurate, but flat, lacking real thought or emotion, neither brain nor heart evident in its creation. There appears a lack of critical thinking in the work, the artist's concern lying more with careful rendering of form than the subject's emotional associations. The composition is as static as its stationary subject; it simply presents an inanimate picture to the viewer rather than allowing him to truly feel the message represented by it.

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<sup>98</sup> Polakoff, 73.

This underlines how Senghor's insistence on certain symbols limited his artists' creative intuitions. They did not push themselves beyond the stylistic and thematic boundaries that he set for them. With the end of his presidency, these boundaries disappeared and artists, forced to re-evaluate their role in modern society, entered a period of inventive exploration, infusing their work with their renewed energy. In his later *The Cry* (1987), N'Diaye again turns to abstract and stylized forms, but these come from internal expression rather than being copied from a model. Infused with feeling, this work exudes emotive qualities, evocatively describing a complex condition: African identity. While the previous *The Cry* (1976) was more physically realistic in terms of proportion, delineated features, and shading, this later one feels much more alive. The second work feels truer to the essence of the Senegalese spirit because the main recognizable qualities in it are emotional ones, illustrating that passion, not symbols, define identity. The earlier model exudes a cry from the past, resonating as hollow through the passage of time; this later study asserts its scream into the present, augmenting its force through its immediacy and emotional authenticity.

Senghor got too wrapped up in visual clues meant to trigger pride in Senegalese identity to permit real consideration of it. There exist infinite ways to depict this enthusiasm and to confine artists to a certain visual code limited their expressive capability. In his later work, N'Diaye abandons his previous teachings, both those of the fine arts schools and of Senghor, and produces a work that seems to come directly from his soul. More introspective than studied, it represents an honest expression of his intrinsic *âme nègre*. His work "no longer belong[s] to any particular tradition. Instead [it] transcend[s] comparison by going directly to the heart of all traditions, expressing the

rebellion of mankind.”<sup>99</sup> His later work does not exactly recall the Luba pot or Nigerian statuettes, nor does it directly stem from any tradition; instead the artist now forges ahead to explore his own creative expression.

While conveying human qualities, the face remains mask-like in form. In its abstraction it maintains anonymity, a quality that connects both to traditional roots of African culture and to the artist’s current condition. Masking rituals were an important custom in early African societies, and many are still practiced today. The mask, in Senghor’s era, was one of the symbols associated with this pan-African identity. Stretching through space and time, this broad symbol connected many Africans across the continent and eras.

While not invoking masks for ritual purposes in this work, N’Diaye references their abstract facial features to pose questions of identity. In traditional practice, a mask hides the wearer’s identity, a frozen expression of whoever he pretends to be. As previously discussed, the expression of the subject of *The Cry* (1987) is far from frozen. By infusing his work with passion and emotion, N’Diaye casts off the façade element of the mask and retains only its stylistic qualities, in this way referencing tradition in his work while also altering it to fit contemporary needs. The artist also draws in the anonymous quality of masks to his work, though in a seemingly contradictory manner. Where a mask obscures the wearer’s identity, this work expresses the artist’s sentiments about his condition of being African. However, due to the abstraction of features, the face rendered could belong to anyone (though more specifically to any African); in this way

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<sup>99</sup> "Iba N'Diaye - Biography and Paintings." *The Art History Archive - Art Resources for Students and Academics*. The Art History Archive. Web. 8 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/contemporary/Iba-N-Diaye.html>>.

its identity remains anonymous while describing a condition that is widely relatable in Senegal: a frustrated cry against injustice, uncertainty, and political and creative oppression. It conveys an intense urgency to succumb to its bestial scream, to finally assert its presence in modernity.

Lacking clarity of composition, the work reflects the frustration felt by many as they struggled to be free – free from racism, free from colonialism, free from the weight of their roots. N’Diaye’s tangle of brushstrokes and collision of facial features conveys the chaos and turbulence felt by his subject, a being clearly unsettled by his environment and struggling to make sense of his place both within his society and in the modern world. His cry feels existential, along the lines of Munch’s *The Scream*, a carnal expression of man versus the world, and also man versus himself. The works in the series “are not commentaries on a given situation, but rather, are emotive transpositions of the artist’s feelings about life.”<sup>100</sup> His cry responds to the injustices facing his continent; the African voice, silenced for so long, finally leaps of the canvas. Affecting multiple senses, it is seen, heard, felt, fully understood through art. The work exemplifies the exact purpose for which Senghor wished to use art, to evoke mass emotion.

This development toward interpretive expression manifests itself in N’Diaye’s work thematically and stylistically. The second image more critically analyzes the shallow motif presented by the first. Rather than a literal, technically accurate, depiction of a traditional work, this work morphs the form into a face far more grotesque, but also more evocative. Though the previous image utilized detailed careful shading techniques clearly practiced in the European schools of fine art, the second actually conveys more

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<sup>100</sup> “Iba N’Diaye.”

depth than the first, both emotionally and spatially. N'Diaye's short, brusque brushstrokes outline a dark dynamism in his portrait, the subtle tonal variation in his muted black-navy palette revealing violent shadows and highlights. His rough rendering of form communicates a rawness not found in his previous study, unbridled emotion thrusting itself off the canvas. Contrary to his prior neat, ordered cross-hatching, N'Diaye's frantic, loose style in the later *Cry* brings life to the frozen expression of the clay pot depicted in the first. The expressive face of the subject looks as though it emerged with a life of its own from the frenzied, unordered mess of brushstrokes the artist layers on the canvas. The earlier version reflects a more reserved, controlled style, retracting from the emotion implied in the title. In that work, the artist demonstrates his mastery of technical skills, a control over his medium, but the piece does not speak of his creativity. The later image shows an intentional yet complete loss of control over technique; it looks almost as though the face emerged from the canvas through its own free will, a product more of creative passion than calculated, precise reflection. This image, with its cruder unrestrained style, conveys the intense moment of release of the African soul, finally freed from its history through the creative response of this artist.

Imbued with a sense of the country and its land, the works of Iba N'Diaye offer evidence of the use of "traditional" symbols in art as inspiration to create intrinsically Senegalese compositions. They also exemplify the transition from direct representation of symbols under Senghor, to a more reflective articulation of identity under Diouf. The artist's later works reflect a better understanding of how to harness and the figurative power of Senghorian emblems and to then rephrase them into an interpretation of meaningful expression.

## **Chapter IV:**

### **Abdou Diouf: The Realignment of Art and Politics, 1981-2000**

In 1981, Senghor succeeded his rule to Abdou Diouf, his Prime Minister during his presidency. Like his predecessor, Diouf was born in Senegal and grew up entirely under colonial rule. Attending primary and secondary school in the colonial capital of Saint-Louis, he later went on to study law at the Université Cheikh-Anta-Diop in Dakar, then at the Sorbonne in Paris. After his graduation from the Sorbonne in 1959 he moved back to Senegal where he began his political career as Governor of the Sine-Saloum Region from 1960 to 1962. In 1962 he began working for Senghor's government, serving under the president until the end of his term. He first acted as Director of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Foreign affairs, but a year later his position changed to Director of the Cabinet of the President. In 1964 he began a new post as Secretary-General of the Presidency, a position he held until 1968 when he became the Minister of Planning and Industry. Senghor considered Diouf to be his protégé, one of the people he trusted most in his administration. Illustrating this allegiance, he appointed Diouf Prime Minister of Senegal in 1970, and finally, in 1981, peacefully resigned his presidency to him.

The induction of the second president ushered in a new era to Senegal and its artists, signaling the start of the next chapter in the country's history. Under Senghor, Senegal's political history and its art history were one in the same, written together as he built his administrative policies around artistic ideologies. When leadership of the country changed hands in 1981, these two elements of the country's cultural genealogy

began to develop in new directions. The new president ran the country differently than his predecessor. While Senghor filled the role of “artist-statesman,” the idealistic poet who actively avoided political roles for much of his life, Diouf had always held an interest in acting as a statesman, politician, or governmental official. Politically focused, he lacked the artistic background of the first president, and therefore the emphasis on the role of arts waned during the second leader’s rule. The second president’s strengths lay in other areas, and it was on these that he capitalized instead of the arts.

A Muslim president in a country predominantly affiliated with Islamic religious practices, Diouf perhaps identified more closely with the people of his country than his predecessor, a Catholic Francophile. He instated Wolof, one of the more commonly spoken indigenous dialects, as a Senegalese national language, indicating that the vernacular of the country’s ethnic groups were in no way inferior to French. The previous administration, while emphasizing pan-African symbols and promoting national heritage, had also retained close ties to France and French culture due to its still discernible proximity to the colonial era. By contrast, “the Diouf government [became] more sensitive to the need to incorporate indigenous languages and cultures into official cultural policy.”<sup>101</sup> While Senghor placed an emphasis on symbols of tradition within an ever-widening international and global framework, Diouf turned the focus back within the country itself, not referencing its origins but attending to present day concerns.

Senghor aligned his politics with *ouverture*, focusing on opening Senegal to the rest of the world by bringing it up to Western standards of modernity, while Diouf seemed to affiliate more strongly with *racinement*, a return to the roots of his people. He

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<sup>101</sup> Snipe, 114.



concentrated to a greater extent on the interior problems and challenges that Senegal faced, rather than the country's outer façade. The second president did not try to forge an entirely new future, nor did he attempt to renegotiate the meaning of the past; instead he refocused cultural policy on the implementation of longstanding elements of Senegalese heritage, ones neither created nor erased by the colonial period. Like Senghor, Diouf felt it important to retain emblems of tradition in the country's present. Unlike the first president, however, he did not use these motifs as political devices to create an identity, but believed in them as a natural part of everyday life (for example, he had his own personal griot as a member of his administration).<sup>102</sup> Senghor used his symbols of *Africanité* as tools to build a new nation, a new identity, a new people; Diouf was then able to apply them in his administration to reinforce these foundations in modernity – perhaps a more genuine application of them.

While both presidents embraced traditional symbols of Senegalese culture, they implemented them in different ways in their respective administrations. Senghor saw them as artistic motifs with political power, using them to align national mindset with the ideologies he hoped would guide his nation and to bring arts and politics to the same level of importance. Diouf separated these two realms, concentrating his political endeavors on areas such as economics or technology. Appreciated the arts as an essential part of cultural heritage but not necessarily as a foundation on which to build the country. The two presidents also had opposing approaches to dealing with national affairs. Senghor, in considering both domestic and international issues, had a nearly single-minded focus on culture. Diouf concerned himself more with fiscal reform and

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<sup>102</sup> Snipe, 64.

technological progress. For Senghor, growth as a country meant cultural growth, harvesting a rich, multidimensional national identity that was at once intrinsically Senegalese and also receptive to an international audience. His successor approached successful national growth from a different perspective, placing an importance on less ideological, more grounded policies.

Art during Senghor's time had a different purpose than during Diouf's reign. At the beginning of the country's rise to independence, art acted as a means through which to foster and broadly project a sense of nationalism. It was used as an apparatus with which to represent shared sentiment, to prove Senegal's legitimacy as a fully functioning modern society with a cultural heritage as rich as that of any European nation. For Diouf, this legacy had already been validated, Senegalese identity well established and integrated among his people. International audiences recognized the talents of Senegalese artists, validating Senghor's promotional efforts. As the country entered the second chapter of its history, the individual symbols depicted in artists' work mattered less than the symbolism of art itself as a cultural achievement of a new nation.

During Diouf's rule, governmental policy regarding the visual arts shifted; artistic endeavors retained their value as culturally relevant, but were not a priority as they were under Senghor. Governmental patronage of the arts waned as the president focused on other state issues. In tighter financial times, the arts and their institutions, as well as individual artists, did not receive the same level of support as they had under Senghor. Having no personal investment in the arts, Diouf was not particularly interested in hosting cultural events, especially during a time of a deteriorating economy, one which had largely been ignored by Senghor. Diouf's priorities lay in establishing strong fiscal

policies rather than cultural ones. Senghor's era in Senegal represented a time of high visibility and cultural leadership in the arts throughout Africa. The country's reputation as ambassador of African culture, both internationally and within the continent, diminished in the late 1980s. This decline in arts leadership manifested itself in the closing of several culture institutions, including the Musée Dynamique, a museum devoted to the promotion of Black arts, as well as the of the 1988 Pan African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESPAC).<sup>103</sup> Senghor's legacy endured, however, through "a public culture... that respects artistry and links it profoundly to understandings of self and group identity."<sup>104</sup> Even though the government did not give as much support to artists in the 1980s as during the first president's rule, artistic culture remained very much alive and prospering due to Senghor's insistence on its importance in the 1960s.

The government took a more pluralistic approach to cultural policy in this decade, no longer following the ideologies of a single individual. Cultural policy opened more, retaining its emphasis on tradition, but also recognizing the importance of diversity, linked less to the past than to modern society. Senghor established his policies with the end goal of fostering national identity. Twenty years into the country's history, this had been accomplished; the purpose of cultural policy under Diouf lay more in marketability, attracting an international audience willing to provide funds where the government no longer could. This focus on practical matters of funding represented a grounding of Senghor's idealistic goals for his country.

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<sup>103</sup> Snipe, 67.

<sup>104</sup> Harney, Elizabeth. "Viyé Diba: Profound Beauty." *African Arts* 33.2 (2000): 80-81. JSTOR. Web. 3 Apr. 2011. 80-81.

## Rethinking the Use of Culture as Political Capital

Though state patronage of artistic ventures dwindled in the 1980s, the decade was not entirely void of cultural projects. In 1983 Diouf inaugurated La Galerie nationale d'Art contemporain, a gallery dedicated to contemporary Senegalese art, in Dakar. The gallery acted as a space of uniquely Senegalese expression, showing work from both local and visiting artists while maintaining an emphasis on national heritage.<sup>105</sup> Senegal also hosted the first Biennial de Dakar in 1990, a festival celebrating Senegalese literature and culture. In 1992 the program expanded to include visual arts; in 1996 the committee running the event changed its name to "Dak'art – Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain" and exhibited contemporary art for the first time. These celebrations drew international audiences into Senegal, establishing Dakar as a "city of culture."<sup>106</sup> They also reflected the president's fiscal goal to build "a more successful distribution and commercialization of contemporary art in Africa."<sup>107</sup>

Under Diouf's reign, Senegal also participated in Africa95, one of the first widely viewed international exhibitions of contemporary African artwork. Though primarily held in the United Kingdom, part of the festival took place in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Named "Tenq," the event was a "two-week long visual arts encounter" that explored different means of artistic communication in Senegal.<sup>108</sup> Though produced with government

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<sup>105</sup> "Galerie Nationale D'Art Contemporain." *Culture & Patrimoine*. Ministère De La Culture Et Des Loisirs, 23 Sept. 2009. Web. 6 Apr. 2011.

<sup>106</sup> Deliss, Clémentine. "Dak'Art 92: Where Internationalism Falls Apart." *African Arts* 26.3 (1993): 18+. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Feb. 2011. 18.

<sup>107</sup> Deliss, 1993, 18.

<sup>108</sup> Deliss, Clémentine. "Returning the Curve: Africa95, Tenq, and 'Seven Stories'" *African Arts* 29.3 (1996): 36-47. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Nov. 2010. 37.

funding, the exhibition was entirely organized and run by the artists themselves, illustrating their new initiative in promoting their own work. This new organizational role for artists put aesthetic power and creative direction into their own hands, separate from state control. While the rest of Africa95 acted as valuable publicity of African artists overseas, the section in Saint-Louis anchored Senegalese art firmly in Africa itself. To hold it in Saint-Louis, a city with such a strong historical foundation, represented a commemoration of the country's culture and heritage. Tenq also served as a stage on which the second generation of African artists could debut their work.

While Diouf's administration did not play as active a role in the arts as Senghor's had, artists and their work continued to flourish nevertheless. Through Senghor's insistence that "art could provide a source for cultural dialogue," it became an ingrained part of everyday life in Senegal, something that persisted even in the absence of the president's supporting hand.<sup>109</sup> He taught his countrymen not only how to be Senegalese but also how to creatively express their identity as members of a national community. The first president's encouragement and patronage acted as training wheels for Senegalese artists working in the 1960s and 1970s. Installing itself in the country after two decades of independent rule, Diouf's administration was able to remove this safety net and back away from such heavy-handed involvement. Rather than directing his people on how to express their sense of self or preaching specific cultural ideologies, the second president allowed them to steer their own self-discovery. No longer obligated to project a communal sense of being, artists were free to explore manifestations of the Senegalese spirit within themselves, to analyze and express how this broader affiliation to

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<sup>109</sup> Deliss, 1993, 18.

their country revealed itself within their lives as individuals. Twenty years into the country's independence, artists finally found themselves independent as well.

By the mid 1990s Senegal was at a political and artistic crossroad. The 1960s through 1980s represented a time of development, growth, and creative exploration, a time to discover and establish the values present at the core of Senegalese identity. Under the guidance of Senghor, the country and its people had time to truly foster their culture, resulting in a firmly established national sense of self. After thirty of independence, Senegal was no longer searching for its identity, but instead had a more solid definition of its culture and spirit. Through better understanding their identity as citizens, the Senegalese people began to have a voice in the growth and direction of their country. They became more actively involved in political and artistic dialogues, shaping “cultural politics through their involvement and participation with the mass media, artistic events, and festivals.”<sup>110</sup> While the government did not fund any new cultural events, the already established galleries, centers and museums continued to prosper.

Because the Diouf's administration no longer directly funded individual artists, they were free to create as they pleased, choosing their own themes, style and subject matter independent from state direction. The government did retain some command over artistic expression, of course, as it continued to fund the Senegalese art schools where up-and-coming artists learned technique and style, but in general artists in the 1980s and 1990s had much more expressive freedom than in the first twenty years of independence. On the one hand, this benefited these artists, as it created a more open artistic atmosphere in which they could explore their creative passions, reflecting their own beliefs and

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<sup>110</sup> Snipe, 95.

values rather than those of the state. On the other hand, however, it made economic survival and independence much more challenging for individual artists, as there no longer existed a commercial or governmental institution through which to receive funds. Under Senghor artists had a steady source of income and did not have to worry about monetary stability, however their works were confined to a limited set of symbols and themes. Under Diouf they were free to create as they pleased, yet received no financial support from the government for their work. Art became more of an entrepreneurial pursuit as these conditions forced artists to look beyond the state for patronage and budgetary backing.

Individual support came mainly from wealthy European collectors, which presented African artists with a new set of standards: those themes and styles accepted in an international art market. This frustrated many artists, who felt that, forced to sacrifice quality for lack of funds, the integrity of their work was just as compromised as in the previous era. Excluded from governmental affairs and angered at the closure of many museums and galleries, some felt that their economic welfare had fallen out of their hands. Painter Issa Samb explained the condition of the artist at this time:

It is a fact that the painters are not present at the place where things are decided upon. They no longer support the novelists', the poets', and the scientists' intellectual struggle. Formerly the state's pampered children, they remain in the wake of a political idea and are torn between the image public opinion has of them and the call of artistic genius.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Snipe, 89.

In a post-Senghorian Senegal, the ex-president's *chers enfants* felt orphaned by their new leader. Presented with more freedom of artistic expression, they questioned how to take advantage of it without adequate funding. As they gradually distanced themselves from Senghor, they learned to take advantage of this independence in spite of financial concerns, harnessing the creative power cultivated by their former patron to create works that at once posed original themes and also maintained references to those Senegalese traditions promoted in the 1960s. Though Diouf was not as fiscally supportive as his predecessor, he "created a more liberal atmosphere for the arts in Senegal."<sup>112</sup>

A Dakar-based filmmaker working during this time commented,

When the land was fat and money was rolling, Senegal was known for its artists – all kinds of artists. Now the land is lean and there is no money and artists continue to fight for a stage. The artists are going to continue to produce – some good, some bad. We will have choices and from those choices a Senegalese taste for art will emerge... and we will adjust. In that sense I'm very optimistic about the future of the arts because the arts continue to survive and continue to be shown and promoted in spite of the lack of cultural policy.<sup>113</sup>

This speaks of the intrinsic value of art within Senegalese society; even without the direct support of the government, artists "continue to produce." Senghor used art to reflect and perpetuate a very specific set of values, yet as the country changed and grew, so did its

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<sup>112</sup> Snipe, 94.

<sup>113</sup> Snipe, 109.



ideals, and, therefore, its art. Art is a fluid enterprise; in the hands of talented individuals it can adapt to express literally anything. As Senegal more firmly inhabited its independence, art no longer needed to express only national identity, for it had already been successfully established in the previous era. To create and harvest this national sentiment had been art's singular purpose through Senghor's reign; without this goal and without the funding associated with it, artists at first felt lost. Ultimately, however, they were able to utilize these feelings of confusion to create something entirely new, proving the fundamental persistence of art.

No longer confined by certain symbols and themes, artists began to develop their own, inspired not by a governmental prompt, but by their average, everyday lives. It was from this, not constructed symbols, that "a Senegalese taste for art" emerged. Under Diouf, artists were freed from the responsibility of representing an entire nation, and could now express individuality within their works, a testament to their artistry, talent, and critical thinking. This individuality of course included explorations of national identity, as this remained an important part of who they were as a people, but it also began to reflect personal interests as well. In learning to support themselves, artists learned to find a balance between those values Senghor stressed and their own creative interpretation of them. Their work developed beyond a straightforward presentation of symbols to an in depth consideration of them, of how and why they described the Senegalese condition.

In the 1980s and 1990s, "the routes of visual and critical development" diverged, yet peaked independently from one another.<sup>114</sup> In turning governmental focus away from

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<sup>114</sup> Deliss, 1996, 37.

the arts, Diouf accelerated Senegal's political maturity in other realms, progressing more in areas of economic and technological concern. The arts, freed from any direct governmental involvement, could step back from its political and social contexts, observing and commenting on them rather than driving them. Art and now followed two separate routes, running parallel to each other without merging as they had under Senghor.

National identity, now an innate part of the personality of those born in the independent era, embodied a collective existence, a group of anonymous individuals united in a shared lived experience. Separating themselves from the masses, artists began to explore the "organic tension between one identity and several."<sup>115</sup> Rather than establishing one singular status for all, they began to explore the diverse, occasionally contrasting, range of elements that culminated in Senegalese identity. Senghor characterized his presidency with a need for union: union between his people, between all Africans, between African culture and European culture, all drawn together through art. Twenty years later, in a more stable political and cultural environment, this coalescence existed naturally. His artists explored this convergence by depicting their contemporary lived experiences within Senegal instead of imagined pictures of the past. This included scenes of personal history, heritage, habit. Whereas art in Senghor's time referenced a shared past, second generation artists celebrated shared existence, the ways that everyone's varied identities could come together through the act of living. Michel Leiris,

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<sup>115</sup> Deliss, 1996, 37.

a writer for *France Observateur* and chronicler of the famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti<sup>116</sup> wrote of African artists, “It’s not in applying themselves to the making of an African style but rather in following their personal impulses that they will discover some modes of expression likely to enrich the universal heritage.”<sup>117</sup> A true African style and personality derives itself more genuinely from the individual responses of each artist to their shared environment than from their attempts to convey a blanket identity to describe all Senegalese people at once.

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<sup>116</sup> The Mission Dakar-Djibouti was an ethnographic expedition that traversed West Africa from Senegal to Ethiopia. Commissioned by the French government, the project collected information and artifacts to document lifestyle on the continent.

<sup>117</sup> Polakoff, 73.

## Chapter V:

### Artists and the Search for Meaning in Post-Senghor Senegal

In the early 1980s, the abrupt reduction in state patronage as the government changed hands led to a loss of direction within Senegal's artistic community. At the same time, it led to a reevaluation of the role of artists within the country. It was a time of confusion but also a time of exploration, questioning how the identity that Senghor developed for his people could apply to each of them individually. No longer needed as "political agents," artists were free to pursue their own agendas and themes. After all the cultural and political responsibility Senghor placed on his *chers enfants*, they finally recognized the power they had in shaping Senegalese heritage. They continued to use their leadership potential to make influential works, but now branched out from the *négritude* aesthetic and references to pan-Africanism that they'd been encouraged to produce. Extensively trained in the practice of communication through art, artists in the 1980s and 1990s no longer relied on "traditional" symbols as the focus of their work, but instead used them as a starting point to explore themes with more personal meaning. They branched out into studies of how national identity related to each person as part of an individual, rather than collective, spirit. Art at this time still related to national identity, of course, but it was one within the context of personal history.

The second-generation Senegalese artists emerged from the national art schools, receiving their education within the country as opposed to abroad, as the first generation of artists had. The establishment of cultural institutions in Senegal led to a development

of national style; artists now perfected their craft in schools taught by African professors, conveying themes and forms particular to the continent. Instead of using European techniques to articulate African subjects, Senegalese artists developed unique artistic practices specific to their own culture, forming new traditions from the framework of old ones. Reinterpreting inherited techniques and styles, the second-generation artists made them their own by applying them to contemporary themes, fabricating a new line of artistic heritage. In encouraging his first artists to reference and renew past symbols as motifs of modern national spirit, Senghor forged, and forced, a new artistic tradition. Artists in the 1980s naturally perpetuated this creative momentum, transporting ancient practices into the current era and reinterpreting them to retain validity in modernity as elements of cultural identity.

Second generation artists had a different attitude about art, a fresh approach to their work. Born at the very end of the colonial period or even after, these artists did not fully experience Senegal's transition into independence. Unlike Senghor and his contemporaries, they were not raised under the colonial administration; they lived under complete political independence, the colonial era only a vague memory of their past. For this reason, their work has different priorities than that of earlier artists. They did not need to prove the validity of their craft or culture; that had already been done in the first two decades of independence. Their work also did not have the pressing obligation to convey a sense of identity because recognizable Senegalese qualities had already been communicated through the canvases of the previous generation. Born with an inherent awareness of their Senegalese identity, these artists found that it manifested itself naturally in their art without the intermediary layer of specific symbols. Artists in the

1960s needed to invent and adopt their identity, while those in the 1980s and 1990s grew up with it. Their art does not produce their identity, but materializes as a product of it. In this way it proves a more genuine expression because it is neither forced nor learned, but a reflected on a fundamental part of their being. Second generation artist Viyé Diba summarized this sensation, explaining, “For me, there isn’t such a thing as an African art, or a Senegalese art. My problem isn’t to try to be an African, I am one. The ‘African soul’ is in me and I don’t need to wear it on my sleeve, to make an obsession of it.”<sup>118</sup> Relieved of the frantic preoccupation with self-definition, artists raised under independence could focus their work outside the domain of discovery and instead turn their attention to cultivating the techniques presented to them by their predecessors.

One can criticize Senghor for his single-minded approach to state policy, or his artists for their promotion of symbols they did not truly understand, but their work was necessary as a foundation from which to build a more authentic understanding of identity. Art evolved from a directed attempt at unification to a meditation on lived experience. This was impossible in the earlier era because artists did not have a long enough independent history on which to reflect, so they instead referenced the more removed pre-colonial past. Later artists, in their work, aimed not only to reference, but also to redefine the traditions of their ancestors through a lens of modernity. Rather than evoking the past to bring it back, an action that would revert their society to pre-modern times, they include traditional elements in their work to remind themselves and their fellow countrymen of the continued relevance of heritage in defining contemporary identity. To erase the past completely from their modern sense of self would be to crumble the pillars

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<sup>118</sup> Harney, 1996, 42.

that supported their current culture; instead, artists at this time worked with motifs clearly derived from traditional symbols that also spoke distinctly of present-day circumstances. Internalizing the artistic lineage launched by their predecessors, they consciously moved away from those earlier themes and styles and into interpretive impressions of every day life.

One can again look to the works of independent artists to understand the transition in theme, subject matter, and style that occurred between Senghor's rule in the 1960s and 1970s, to Diouf's rule in the 1980s and 1990s. Two artists in particular, Viyé Diba and Cheikh Ndiaye, eloquently represent the evolution discussed above. Their work offers an unprecedented perspective on tradition in African art. As they and their peers began to break away from the values and techniques of the first generation, they also began to rewrite the conventional discourse on African art, one remaining from the colonial era that pits the traditional against the modern, separating the two as opposing and contradictory forces. In art of this period, tradition and modernity occupy common space on the canvas, fusing together in a picture of contemporary life. This twenty-year epoch in the middle of Senegal's independent history illustrates the lineage connecting the art of Senghor's era to that of today.

### **Viyé Diba**

Born in 1954 Viyé Diba exemplifies the archetype of second-generation artists who applied their artistic education to explorations of modern identity. His mixed media canvases convey an evolution in theme and material while retaining a connection to the

traditions of the first generation of artists, his teachers. Shattering the polarity between old and new, static and dynamic, authentic and innovative, he finds a balance in his work as he tackles questions of contemporary existence. While his earlier works are more expressionist and figurative in nature, his work in the 1990s, such as *Choses au mur* (1998) [Figure 8] or *Echappement II* [Figure 9], displays a more minimalist exploration of space, line, and rhythm. The artist describes this shift in his work as “a deliberate engagement with the legacy of the Ecole de Dakar’s formulations of ‘Africanness’ and with Western collectors’ penchant for the ancient, so-called traditional sculptural forms of the continent.”<sup>119</sup> These works, in their reduction to basic forms, play on Western assumptions of primitivism in African work. He mocks collectors’ obsession with authenticity as defined by the antique, layering paint to create a thick surface referencing the patina prized in ancient pieces. In the middle of his career, the artist spent several months studying works at the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), a cultural center in Dakar dedicated to African antiquities. Like Iba N’Diaye, he familiarized himself with the work of his ancestors, absorbing the roots of the traditions of his predecessors. He then returned to his own work, evolving and abstracting his style to reflect this newly rediscovered artistic past.

Participating in the debate on identity in Senegal, he felt “dissatisfied with solutions presented by a Negritude aesthetic,” calling for a “reassessment of pan-Africanist ‘roots.’”<sup>120</sup> After immersing himself in the original works that inspired Senghor’s symbols of *négritude* and *Africanité*, Diba determined that this aesthetic no longer accurately conveyed modern identity. The convention of *négritude*, while

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<sup>119</sup> Harney, 2000, 80.

<sup>120</sup> Harney, 2000, 80.



appropriate in Senghor's time to harness African pride, did not reflect the complexity of the modern Senegalese citizen. To create art that refers only to pan-Africanist roots without consideration of their application in modernity is to define identity on too broad a backdrop. African societies have developed separately since their shared pre-colonial origins; Senegal today has its own unique culture, one related to but separate from that of the rest of the continent. To work, like the early independent artists, only from the aesthetics of a shared heritage confines identity to one era, one generation, denying it the opportunity to develop.

As identity evolved in Senegal, it gained depth. Diba expresses this with the three-dimensional objects that protrude off his canvases. Reassessing what he learned in school, the artist rejects two-dimensionality in his work, adding shape to the surface of his canvas by affixing to it objects he has found in the streets. This denial of flatness in his art represents the denial of two-dimensionality in his identity. The artist's dissatisfaction with a *négritude* aesthetic lies in his belief that Senegalese identity cannot be categorized by one canon of thought nor enclosed within a single set of symbols. It no longer rests in the hands of tradition but protrudes out into the world with surprising vitality. Like the objects in his art, firmly supported by their flat canvas backs, modern identity is in many ways still attached to the past, however it inserts itself assertively into present-day space and time. His work acts as an abstract pictorial timeline; the flat planes of paint with their fabricated "patina" represent the artistic heritage of the past, referencing both its original form and also the artists who mimicked it, while the three-dimensional objects make the jump into the present, attached (literally) to their roots but pointedly moving beyond them.

In developing this theme, Diba adds another generation to the artistic lineage evident in the aforementioned works of Iba N'Diaye. N'Diaye's *The Cry* (1976) demonstrates a work rendered in a fine arts style, a well-done yet unanimated composition. His later work, *The Cry* (1987), adds a metaphoric dimension to his previous example through its intensely rendered emotion. Diba's work takes this to another level by adding another literal dimension to his canvas through material. His work thoughtfully analyzes, critiques, and ultimately reworks the previous generation's interpretation of identity, antiquated in a context outside its era. The irony here, of course, is that such antiquity is a highly prized quality to collectors of early African art, denoting authenticity. In the context of modern works, however, archaism renders the piece's meaning obsolete, subtracting rather than adding value. Diba plays on the ambiguity of validity through the construction of antiquity in his layered paints. After altering his surface to reflect ideal authenticity in early objects, the patina, he then obscures it with "artifacts" of his own time, recovered from his contemporary environment. In his canvases, he builds upon the traditions of the past, presenting another interpretation better fitting his own generation's place in modernity.

Diba was one of the first artists to use material as a sign of modernism in his pieces, first doing so in the late 1980s.<sup>121</sup> He works with salvaged objects discarded in the streets, a style known commonly as *récupération*. He inserts his work into contemporary time through the inclusion of these components found throughout the city, the fibers of daily life in Dakar. This simultaneously "comment[s] upon the degradation of his vibrant

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<sup>121</sup> Weintraub, Max. "Art Out Of Africa: An Interview with Bill Karg, Founder of the Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York City." *Mantlethought.org*. The Mantle, 23 Nov. 2010. Web. 14 Apr. 2011.

city” and “celebrate[s] the great ingenuity and talent that he and his fellow Dakarois exhibit in difficult economic circumstances.”<sup>122</sup> His use of street materials highlights the defining quality of the emerging urban condition – a chaotic, often dirty but nevertheless vibrant energy that saturates modern identity. Diba’s recycling of discarded objects also celebrates artistic creativity even in the face of economic difficulty. Part of the urban condition lived by artists in the 1980s was finding a solution to monetary problems in order to continue their work. Artistic materials were neither cheap nor easy to acquire, so Diba looked to his surroundings, converging theme and material to creatively convey the attitude of his city. The quality of paint on his canvases, faded and slightly mottled, also reflects this degradation, mimicking the deteriorating walls of the colonial buildings in Dakar. Both support the lively modernity of the streets while quietly, passively eroding.

His use of *matériaux de récupération* also prompts a social commentary, calling into question previous artists’ use of imported materials. First-generation artists, working at a time when French presence was still closely felt in Dakar, used European canvases, paints and inks. Now established in their own artistic practices, artists no longer needed to adapt to styles of the West. Diba does still employ conventional canvas and paint, but he also “canvases” his environment, appropriating materials literally from the street. This lends a touch of the city to his work, intrinsic in its very composition. While earlier artists conveyed African visual language through European material, those working in the 1980s and 1990s created compositions of an entirely African nature, in theme as well as physical content.

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<sup>122</sup> Harney, 2000, 81.

Diba's subtle references to the past recall Senghor's wish for the artist's canvas to be used as a tool through which to convey history. The former president prompted this through theme, while this artist elaborates on it by symbolically invoking material. Diba's reinterpretation of an earlier idea demonstrates a more profound reflective process than illustrated in the imitative works of earlier artists. This manner of critical thinking characterized second-generation artists, differentiating them from their predecessors. They did not merely reproduce the symbols presented to them, as does N'Diaye's *The Cry/Head of a Djem Statuette Nigeria*, but reworked them in an analytical manner.

Portraits of modern urban life became a common theme in the second period of Senegalese art history. Dakar, now a bustling international hub for the arts, acted as a symbol of modernity, defined at the end of the twentieth century by urbanity. Artists used the city as a metaphor to describe identity, full of vibrancy, diversity, chaos. Works began to comment on the Senegalese environment; the landscape acted as a natural manifestation of the country's roots, while the new urban setting relocated heritage to the heart of modern life. This interest in depicting place more than portrait was a theme unique to this era. Though explored briefly by Iba N'Diaye in *Sahel* (1977), the more recent illustrations of the urban landscape revealed both a change of scenery, literally displacing the setting from rural nature to city, and an evolution of values from a reverence for authenticity to one for ingenuity. These works effortlessly conjure the African spirit, for they depict the context from which it originated and from which it continues to grow. Artists used the Senegalese landscape to symbolize the evolution of tradition; modern society evolved from the natural land as modern identity evolved from native heritage. Urban architecture was constructed directly atop the natural space once

inhabited by the country's indigenous societies. While the Sahel reflected the African soul in the 1960s, the Senegalese city represented the spirit of the country in the late twentieth century. Artists working in the 1980s were involved in their modern environment as first-generation artists were with the pre-colonial setting, engaging in critical dialogues with it, regarding it as a reflection on the condition of contemporary life. They returned to the Senghorian discourse of the *âme nègre*, now present not only in symbols of tradition but also in everyday life in the city.

Ousmane Sembene, the aforementioned Senegalese filmmaker, said of this period, "If you want to revitalize culture, you must think of a new cultural policy. And that policy cannot be produced in offices, laboratories, or universities. You must go to the melting pot."<sup>123</sup> The city acted as the soul to the country, the place of frenzied energy, life, inspiration, creativity. It was a center of activity and modernity, receiving international influences while remaining decidedly Senegalese. As Sembene pointed out, the revitalization of the soul is not something that can be learned, nor is it something one can be trained to do. The rejuvenation of the Senegalese spirit must be a product of its environment, and that environment in the 1980s and 1990s was Dakar, the "melting pot" of West Africa. Its resurrection from the past fell to the hands of the artists themselves, artistic concerns now outside the spectrum of governmental responsibility. With a lack of cultural initiative under the Diouf administration, artists wrote their own cultural policies, eloquently translated into visual language.

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<sup>123</sup> Snipe, 108.

## **Cheikh Ndiaye**

Born in 1970, Cheikh Ndiaye was one of the artists from the middle period for whom the colonial era was part of the distant past. Having no personal connections to that time, he concentrated his work very much in the present, lacking many of the traditional symbols referenced by other artists. He “deals more explicitly with the city as a space for the construction of an urban culture and identity,”<sup>124</sup> which, in the late twentieth century connoted modern culture and identity, rooted as they were in city life. Senghor’s artists referenced tradition because the idea of an “urban identity” as it stands today did not yet exist. As a result of the efforts of the first two presidents, Senegal’s capital quickly developed, growing into a unique metropolis with an identity all its own. Senghor’s early cultural explorations manifested themselves in the life of the Dakar – its diverse inhabitants, international influences, and particularly Senegalese essence. At the end of the twentieth century, urban culture inserted itself resolutely as the basis of a new manifestation of national identity.

Senghor paradoxically hoped to bring his country into modernity by looking back to a shared past; artists working later in the century recognized that a crucial part of modernity was some degree of globalization, that realistically their society had to accept the presence of other nations within its own. They also recognized that this would not necessarily have a negative impact on their culture, that it was possible to preserve their heritage even in the face of Westernization. Artists paused investigations of their shared

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<sup>124</sup> Grabski, Joanna L. "Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City." *African Arts* 36.4 (2003): 28-39. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Feb. 2011. 35.

pan-African past and began instead to embrace a shared present, accepting influences from sources beyond their own roots. This proved an interesting setting through which to explore themes of identity. In Senghor's era, art emerged from the government both in funding and subject, projecting the values of one chief figure. In Diouf's time, artistic inspiration came from the people, from their experiences. The city made an appropriate setting in which to depict this theme, for it was the canvas on which life composed itself. An average Senegalese individual did not inhabit the presidential palace, but the streets of Dakar, amongst the chaotic dirtiness of everyday activity. The collective identity of the younger post-colonial generation was born in this setting, growing out of the pre-urban roots of the previous generation.

Urban painter Cheikh Ndiaye was aware of the impossibility of defining himself and his peers with the same identity used to describe those living and working the 1960s and 1970s. Identity changes as society evolves, with artists continuously adjusting and expanding their pictorial vocabulary to define their own condition. Two of Ndiaye's works, *I'm True* (1998) [Figure 10] and *Nettitude* (1999) [Figure 11], convey this new visual language through a shift in theme.

Both paintings speak of diversity within a shared existence. The artist once remarked,

I live with a Serer, a Diola, and a Bambara... there is little difference among us. We all have the same reality, we all speak the same language, we don't speak the language of our ancestors... we are all preoccupied with the problems of Dakar... unemployment, deteriorating infrastructures, and the water shortage. What we live

is what unites us. My generation is cut off from ethnicity but we have a different reality, that of daily life in the city.<sup>125</sup>

To this artist, the citation of pre-colonial ethnic roots was no longer relevant as a source of modern identity. In the 1980s and 1990s, a new urban condition actualized out of the colliding cultural traffic in Senegal's cosmopolitan center, uniting the population more than their pan-African past. In *I'm True* [Figure 10], the artist splits the canvas in half, divided by a straight black line down the center. On the left half of the composition, seven disembodied heads float in a yellow and white abstract abyss, the painting's title printed below them. The English title indicates Senegal's new openness to other cultures, revisiting *ouverture* but in a contemporary context. No longer instated for purposes of cultural validation, in the 1980s the principle instead signified the country's receptiveness to cultural exchange. As Ndiaye points out, a wide range of ethnic populations inhabited Senegal, yet the country's diversity in the modern day came not from the indigenous past but from life within the city, connected to other urban metropolises around the world.

The faces in the image, each rendered with unique features, one wearing glasses, another a hat, another with lighter skin, represent the diversity of the artist's peer group. The free-floating faces revolve around disembodied hands, all making a different gesture. Their poses clearly denote some sort of message, though their symbolism is lost on most viewers due to its specificity to the environment and culture within Dakar. Those excluded from the urban community cannot fully grasp the meaning of the work. This communicates the extent to which identity links itself to urbanity in this time. Their facial

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<sup>125</sup> Grabski, 35.



diversity, connoting ethnic diversity, does not retract from each individual's understanding of the signs. As Ndiaye expressed, his generation was cut off from the indigenous roots that once separated the people of Senegal. Too involved in concerns of contemporary life to think about the past, the shared experience of living, surviving, existing in modernity unites these bodiless heads. In their familiarity with urban culture they can understand the message conveyed by the hands, one that remains a secret to a foreign viewer not assimilated into Senegalese city life. Art historian Joanna Grabski, in her analysis of the work, suggests that the heads are "thug like" and the hand gestures "icons, symbols, and logos used in the complex communication system of urban graffiti."<sup>126</sup> While incomprehensible to those outside the urban environment, these symbols could be "recognized by those in the know as proclamations of allegiance, solidarity, and membership."<sup>127</sup> These gestures form a new symbolic alphabet with which Ndiaye writes messages to other city dwellers, designating urbanity as the defining characteristic bringing uniformity the diverse composition of the Senegalese population in the 1980s.

The component of free-floating forms within the composition introduces other important traits of modern identity: its fluidity and detachment from ancestral allegiance. The lack of an identifiable focal point in the composition suggests the artist's belief in identity as an abstract construction of contemporary reality, floating freely through space and time. The diversity in faces, while denying the importance of a shared background, further signifies identity as fluid, indefinable by any one quality. The figures are not simply devoid of race; they are literally decapitated. The heads' detachment from their

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<sup>126</sup> Grabski, 35.

<sup>127</sup> Grabski, 35.

bodies suggests that physical being matters less than the embodiment of contemporary spirit, harnessed here through urban culture. In Ndiaye's work, identity does not manifest itself through the past, but through inhabited space, in this case the city.

The second work by Ndiaye, *Nettitude*, [Figure 11] also explores matters of urban life, connecting them on a global scale. The artist explains,

Art born from urban Africa is an art without ethnic connotation, an art expressing the concerns, anxieties, and hopes of everyday urban life. My painting is also a cry, an attitude in the face of the hardships of everyday reality, facing the unknown, the walls surrounding us, obstructing us. It is the expression of an Africa that suddenly is discovering itself easily influenced and capable of influencing. My painting claims a right to citizenship, a passport to the world.<sup>128</sup>

Ndiaye's urban art severs ties to the ethnic past, lacking symbols relating to pan-African tradition. It connotes an identity rooted not in ancient history, but in metropolitan modernity. Rather than exploring shared heritage, Ndiaye invents a new one in urbanity, uniting contemporary citizens through the challenges faced in everyday life. This comments on the problem posed by modernity in Senegal – how to modernize without losing the elements of their own culture that make it unique, decidedly and intentionally non-Western.

Ndiaye seems to let go, to some degree, of those symbols that many other artists so tightly hold on to in order to preserve their heritage. He chooses not to include motifs

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<sup>128</sup> Grabski, 39.

of *Africanité* or *négritude*, playing on this evolution of theme in his title. *Nettitude*, a word made up by the artist, manipulates *négritude*, a reference to the ideology fueling identity politics in the early years of independence. The artist replaces the prefix “nègre,” meaning a person of the black race, with “net,” an adjective meaning distinct or clear. Through this word play and elimination of traditional symbols, Ndiaye secures his own identity distinctly in urbanity. Senghor promoted symbols of *négritude* in order to define a common spirit within his people. Ndiaye replaces Senghor’s motifs with signals of modernity: mobile communication, hip-hop culture, and urban life, defining a new home for the Senegalese spirit in the city center.

In reference to the text at the bottom of the canvas, “http www @,” the “net” prefix in the title could also be a play on the word “internet,” new technology for Senegal in the 1990s that allowed the country to connect on a global level like never before. The internet acts as a means of unification between societies around the earth. It facilitates the flow of information, making cross-cultural dialogue nearly instantaneous. Even in its earliest forms, the internet infinitely increased the speed and extent of communication. Perhaps it was this high-speed influx of technology to which Ndiaye referred when he expressed “an Africa that suddenly is discovering itself easily influenced and capable of influencing.”<sup>129</sup> His text at the bottom of the page is the most outright symbol of modernity in the work. It represents a new form of trade in Senegal, one that exchanged not goods but ideas and information. Unlike the one-way flow of triangular trade throughout the colonies, this one expands in every direction at once, without regard for

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<sup>129</sup> Grabski, 39.

geographical or cultural boundaries. In this new trade relationship, Senegal both gave and received.

Ndiaye's work suggests an openness in Senegalese identity not present in previous themes tied to *enracinement*. It extends beyond Senegal in its assessment of the constructed self, actively reaching out to other countries within Africa and beyond. This openness overcomes the fear instilled during colonialism of cultural assimilation, proving that Senegalese culture in the 1980s was firmly enough established in its own right to slowly re-permit the integration of other global influences into its urban society. The work testifies to the independence of the Senegalese spirit in this decade, now strong enough to face other cultures without getting absorbed by them. It speaks of the validity of the country's current condition, acknowledging that other countries could benefit from their global interactions with Senegal, that the cultural exchange was no longer one sided. In referencing the internet and connectivity, Ndiaye asserts his country's presence in modernity in a worldwide setting.

Ndiaye also comments on diversifying national allegiance in his allusion to the internet. As a means of cross-cultural communication, the symbols of the web address at the bottom of the composition imply that identity is no longer rooted in one heritage but develops as a product of many, possible through the interconnectedness of online communities. His reversion of *négritude* turns away from that which is intrinsically and specifically African. His faceless subjects reveal no specific nationality or race. They do not align with any singular identity, disinterested in political or geographical allegiance. Instead, they prioritize loyalty to urban culture, a community which, like the internet, connects to many cosmopolitan centers worldwide. The introduction of modern

technology in Dakar signified that the city was developmentally on the same level as other international metropolises such as Paris or New York. Senegalese citizens in Dakar faced the same “concerns, anxieties, and hopes of everyday urban life” as those living in Western cities. The urban condition became, in the 1980s, a factor in the international development of the country as well as a defining element of identity.

The artist’s assertion that his work “claims a right to citizenship, a passport to the world,” reveals the tension inherent in this new development in Senegalese identity.<sup>130</sup> Faceless and unidentifiable, the figures in the work represent global citizens, able to cross boundaries between nations, cultures, and identities while always relating to the shared condition of city life. Ndiaye uses color to connect them back to Senegal; the tones of red, yellow and green layered on the upper half of the work are the same ones found on the Senegalese flag. Citizens of the city more than the nation, the subjects at once install themselves firmly in Senegal, while also lifting themselves out of the boundaries of tradition by stepping out of the confines of the past and into urban (techno)modernity.

## **Conclusion**

The work of Diba and Ndiaye, when compared to that of Iba N’Diaye in the 1960s and 1970s, illustrates the evolution of art in the decades following Senghor’s presidency, in terms of style, theme, and function. Changing social and political circumstances within the country led to a shift in artists’ creative process as well as a reevaluation of those symbols accepted without critical reflection by the first generation.

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<sup>130</sup> Grabski, 39.

Two major cultural phenomena affecting the arts in this era were the decrease in governmental patronage and the rise of urban culture. Artwork created in the 1980s and 1990s was a direct product of this new social environment, reflecting a more complex assessment of the values found at the foundation of the country's autonomy. Second generation artists presented a fresh perspective on Senegalese identity, emerging more organically from within the country twenty years into independence.

The disorientation at the onset of Diouf's rule due to decreased governmental involvement ultimately led to a burst of creative energy that encouraged artists to explore more deeply themes in which they had personal investment. Moving beyond the pragmatic themes imposed by Senghor, they enjoyed the freedom to pursue their own artistic interests. Working under a more settled political and social landscape in the second era of Senegal's history, these artists found themselves unburdened of the responsibility to form an entirely new sense of being through their work; instead, they had the equally weighty, though perhaps more intellectually stimulating, responsibility to affirm and elaborate on the rudimentary framework of Senegalese identity established in the first era. Diba and Ndiaye exemplify two artists beginning to express more intimate takes on the Senegalese spirit – ones that reinterpret the collective identity presented by Senghor through the lens of more personal lived experiences in the country. Both painters visually communicate through their work the condition of the individual within Senegal rather than the condition of Senegal itself.

Senghor's suggested motifs were useful in describing the state of the country as it entered its independence in the middle of the last century. Valuable in the unification of Senegal and its people, they presented themselves as effective instruments of

coalescence. These symbols served as unifiers across a number of realms – they facilitated the alignment of politics and art; they drew together the diverse ethnic groups dispersed throughout the country; they connected the citizens to the origins of their newly autonomous nation; and, perhaps most importantly, they bridged a gap in time, drawing the ancient past into the modern era, reversing the assimilation of the colonial period, and carrying hundreds of years of cultural heritage into the present. The effectiveness of these symbols in fostering a strong sense of identity in the 1960s allowed new artistic creativity to step in and take over in the 1980s. Diouf’s artists were far more self-directed than Senghor’s; the lack of governmental supervision required artists to be more reflective. Artists demanded of themselves a more in-depth analysis of their own work, arousing a critique of their condition rather than a mere acceptance of it. This more critical, though not necessarily negative, approach to art under Diouf’s administration resulted not in dissent but in a cultural coalescence expressing the culmination of Senegal’s history, heritage, and cultural identity up to that point. Themes in contemporary art began to diverge into two directions: through Diba, the re-presentation of the traditional in a new modern context, and through Ndiaye, the introduction of urbanity into Senegalese identity.

Leaving early aesthetic models behind, both Diba and Ndiaye forged new visual canons on their canvases that captured the modern condition of life in the rapidly expanding country. As post-colonial Senegal developed economically, its urban centers grew and everyday life within the country began to focus less on a shared African past than on a collective international future. The focus of Diouf’s regime lay in economic growth and technological advancement. The references made to such progress through

Diba's use of space and Ndiaye's new urban symbols stand as proof that even without the heavy-handed direction of the government, Senegalese art still aligned itself naturally with politics. State policy and decrees continued to drive life in Senegal through the 1980s and 1990s as artists kept producing work that expressed the liveliness of their nation; in this way art and politics inevitably remained related, though not as directly as under Senghor's rule.

The themes and questions present in the work of second-generation artists demonstrate refinement and maturation in artistic thought. Armed with the visual lexicon devised in the preceding era, these artists felt impervious to cultural decimation. They no longer faced the risk of losing their own traditions to European conventions because they now held the tools to define their own heritage. The first generation of artists had already firmly established Senegal as a center of rich artistic heritage within West Africa; the second generation was now left to forge their own artistic mission. Diba's mockery of the "traditional" in African art and Ndiaye's blatant technological references signal a refocusing of artistic themes and a retooling of visual language to better express modern life at the end of the twentieth century. The importance of cultural heritage did not wane as this revolution took place; the past still very much informed the artistic present, but it inserted itself in new and subtler ways. As the first generation paved the way for the second to elaborate upon and complicate the autochthonous themes of post-colonial identity, the second generation introduced new themes of urban life and technology that the third generation would go on to explore in greater depth.



## Chapter VI:

### Abdoulaye Wade: Art and Politics in the Twenty-First Century

The start of the third chapter in Senegal's independent history coincides with another timely milestone: the dawn of a new millennium. Thrusting itself into the twenty-first century through technology, trade and tradition, Senegal stands today as a vibrant, culturally rich country known for its compassionate people and burgeoning contemporary art scene. The dynamic spirit resonating throughout the nation today clearly derives itself from the ideologies introduced by Senghor at the start of independence, namely the concern with culture and appreciation for artistic endeavors. Active in the present thanks to the legacy of their predecessors, contemporary artists in Senegal continue to manifest their own interpretations of national identity into their work, adding the mark of the twenty-first century to the continuous evolution of the country's rich heritage.

In 2000, Abdou Diouf lost the presidential election to Abdoulaye Wade, the third and current president of Senegal. Born in 1926, he both studied and taught law in France at the Lycée Condorset before returning to Senegal to teach at the University of Dakar. His political career began in 1974 when he founded the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais* (P.D.S.), Senegal's democratic party. Running for president four times before his election in 2000, Wade ended 40 years of leadership by the Socialist party.<sup>131</sup>

In recent years, Wade has made a number of controversial decisions with regard to cultural policy, leading many within the country to accuse him of "mismanagement"

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<sup>131</sup> Quist-Arcton, Ofeibe. "For Many in Senegal, Statue Is A Monumental Failure." *Npr.org*. National Public Radio, 5 Jan. 2010. Web. 14 Apr. 2011.

and “nepotism.”<sup>132</sup> One example of this is his commission of the African Renaissance Monument, a 160ft-tall bronze statue depicting a man, woman and child, rising off the top of the Collines des Marmelles, hills just outside of Dakar [Figure 12]. Preparation for the monument’s installation began in 2006, its actual construction starting in 2008. Finally unveiled in early 2010, it commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Senegal’s independence from France. Wade directed the \$27 million project, working with Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby to aid with issues of design, and a North Korean company for construction. From this collaboration, Wade hoped to construct a monument that would usher in a new era – an African Renaissance. The president’s project nearly parallels Senghor’s system of state patronage. Both leaders commissioned works supposedly meant to evoke the spirit of a new époque in both the country and continent.

This project signifies a return to Senghorian cultural politics in Wade’s rule, something many in the country feel apprehensive about. Like the first president, Senegal’s current leader hopes to awaken pan-African sentiments and national pride, to unify his own people and the diverse cultures co-existing within the African continent. Wade returns to Senghor’s symbols of *Africanité* and *négritude*, invoking them in his own cultural prerogative: a contemporary African renaissance. Celebrating 50 years of Senegal’s independence, the monument symbolizes the country’s liberation from, in Wades words, “ignorance, intolerance and racism, to retrieve its place on this land, which belongs to all races, in light, air and freedom.”<sup>133</sup> These sentiments recall post-colonial

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<sup>132</sup> Quist-Arcton.

<sup>133</sup> Stearns, Scott. "Senegal Set to Inaugurate Towering Monument of African Renaissance." *Voanews.com*. Voice of America, 3 Apr. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

discourses of pan-African pride, Senghorian ideologies regarding identity as a means of expressing and validating Senegalese culture.

Regardless of public opinion, for Wade, the monument “brings to life our common destiny. Africa has arrived in the twenty-first century standing tall and more ready than ever to take destiny into its hands.”<sup>134</sup> Just as Senghor once used his artists to project Senegal into its independence by fostering pride in national identity, Wade uses this monument as a symbol to thrust the continent in to the twenty-first century – into modernity. It represents Senegal’s asserting itself into contemporary time, rising out of its past on a peak high above the city. Senghor referenced a shared past to construct identity within his nation as it entered independence. Fifty years later, at a time when Senegal now has a “history” of its own as an independent nation state, Wade alludes to a shared future, a “common destiny” for all African people represented through this monument. The spectacle of its presentation publicly reasserts the country’s role as a leader in the arts, though many would argue that the garish statue in no way reflects the tradition of Senegal’s rich artistic heritage. Regardless of public opinion or criticism, Wade’s initiative in this cultural project conveys a return to the policies of Senghor: direct governmental involvement in the arts with the goal of widely promoting national and pan-African identity.

In examining identity politics under Wade, one detects a discrepancy between the citizens and the government. Given the severe criticism surrounding the African Renaissance monument, it is clear that the image publicly presented by the president does not match the one his people adhere to. Senghorian identity politics emphasized unity

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<sup>134</sup> Walker, Peter. "Senegalese President Unveils £17m African Renaissance Statue." *Guardian.co.uk*. The Guardian, 4 Apr. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

among his citizens, and for the most part he succeeded in accomplishing this. His artists produced works displaying themes of communal spirit, which aided in his people's adoption of this identity. While his original ideologies have evolved over the decades, at the initiation of the country's independence he established a solid sense of self among his people, one that both rooted them firmly in their history but also connected them to the other diverse cultures on their own continent and in Europe. In the twenty-first century, Wade attempts to return to this communal mindset, but over the fifty years of the country's independence, society has changed; the people no longer need the government to direct their sense of self. As exhibited in the works of Diba and Ndiaye, the more Senegal moves away from its colonial past, the more the people establish their own unique identity – born from their everyday lives instead of from governmental policies. Today, cultural policy no longer needs to define identity; instead identity comes forth from the people themselves, from their cities, their homes, their personal traditions, all joining together in a vibrant expression of continued heritage.

Wade, in his attempts to lead an African renaissance, never seems to consider that perhaps the Senegalese soul does not need reawakening. In 50 years of the nation's history, the vivacity ingrained in the country has never dwindled. The Senegalese people do not need their president to incite a rebirth of their spirit; this is something artists have been doing for decades. Involving them directly in his politics, Senghor assigned these creators the role of forging identity, of bearing and nurturing the Senegalese soul. A renaissance is not an event that suddenly takes place to commemorate fifty years of independent history. Instead, it is a continuous happening that progresses throughout time. An intrinsic and defining part of the Senegalese spirit is its resilience, rising out

from the shadow of the colonial period, developing its own line of heritage, asserting itself in modernity. To harvest this life force is the role artists in the country have filled for years; they do not need their president to suddenly take back the reins.

Wade's actions in erecting this monument of African spirit go against the will of his people, and therefore contradicts its very purpose. One protestor expressed her frustration, saying she considers the statue to be un-Islamic, unflattering, going against African aesthetic.<sup>135</sup> She further explained,

Really, this is not a good example for Africa – especially the way they're dressed. The father, you can see his body. The child is completely naked. There's too much nudity. The woman should be wearing something more proper, to show how Africans really dress.<sup>136</sup>

The symbol he chose to represent the soul of his continent does not accurately reflect the years of evolution it has undergone through the hands of Senegalese artists. He literally takes this responsibility away from his own people by commissioning North Korea to build the monument. From the insistence of the first president, an important part of Senegalese identity is its artistic heritage. To involve another country in this creative process is unprecedented and goes against the principles of Senegal's cultural traditions. Allowing a foreign presence to physically create this supposed symbol of their identity

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<sup>135</sup> Further criticisms of the statue point out its decidedly un-Islamic aesthetic, offending many Muslims within the country. Islamic law prohibits the representation of human figures in art, and many feel that the statue is idolatrous in nature. The fact that these are nearly nude only worsens its effect.

<sup>136</sup> Quist-Arcton.

does not speak eloquently of the country's collaborative relationship with other cultures, but instead hearkens back to the colonial era's politics of assimilation. Wade's tactless handling of the construction of this monument completely counteracts its message of the African independent spirit. It does not attest to the decades of thought, reflection, and commitment exhibited by the country's artists to the cultivation of their heritage. The antiquated symbol of half-nude, native-looking figures does not reflect the vitality of contemporaneousness of the African presence. Wade's choosing of this motif and his execution of the project reflect major flaws in his government's cultural policies and revealing his misunderstanding of modern Senegalese identity. This much criticized symbol, visible from nearly anywhere in Dakar, does not accurately reflect the manner in which Senegalese people choose to represent themselves in the twenty-first century. It acts a proof that in the current era, creative expressions of cultural personality are best left in the hands of those most familiar with it: artists.

### **The Art of Today**

Senegalese artists of the post-independent era can be separated into three generations: those working the 1960s through 1970s, recipients of Senghor's governmental patronage, those working in the 1980s and 1990s, the first graduates of the in-country art schools, and finally those artists emerging now, products of the twenty-first century. Today, the average life expectancy of a Senegalese person is about 60 years, with 97.2% of the country's population between the ages of 0 and 64.<sup>137</sup> This indicates

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<sup>137</sup> "People: Senegal."

that in 2011 the majority of the residents of Senegal were born after the country's independence. The artists working in the twenty-first century have grown up in a reality entirely separate from their predecessors, even the immediately anteceding generation. Having missed the period of reorganization and ambiguity following colonialism, they live in a time marked by the rise and growth of the metropolis and the introduction of new technology; they embrace modernity in a way that did not come as naturally to previous generations, but understand their cultural heritage through the legacy of their predecessors. Throughout over fifty years of work, one quality unique to Senegalese art is its insistently site-specific nature. A tribute to the success of Senghor's cultural policies, the art of the country does not need to depict any one theme in order to evoke the spirit of the country. The pride artists invest in their nation freely reveals itself in their work, whether it speaks of traditional myths, difficult history, or dynamic contemporary condition.

Contemporary art produced in Senegal today places its artists into three categories: those who continue to summon Senghorian values relating tradition to modernity, those who invoke remnants of the colonial past to urge others to preserve this important part of the nation's cultural memory, and finally those situated firmly in the present day who use their skills to depict astute observations of daily life in their community.

Those falling in the first category aim to maintain a link to previous traditions – artistic, cultural and historical. Two generations removed from artists working in the 1960s, these artists continue to take inspiration from the themes and subjects presented

during that time. They themselves also look back to the indigenous artistic traditions upon which art in the 1960s based itself. Relating their country's past to its current artistic practices, they remind their countrymen of the relevance of their origins in the development of who they are today. They allow for a fuller comprehension of the symbolism present in other contemporary works by visually recreating the myths that inspired them. References to these stories of the past reveal themselves in interpretive forms in many artists' compositions, and one must understand these roots in order to fully understand contemporary art and the identity it projects. In this way, the past will always remain part of the present, even as Senegal moves forward into an increasingly urbanized and globalized society.

### **El Hadji Keita**

The work of El Hadji Keita roots itself firmly in these margins of tradition. He creates pieces that look back to ancient Senegalese myths, giving them new life in the present day through sculpture and related performances. Working primarily in wood and iron, the sculptor also draws in the materials of his environment, dabbling in *récupération*. His sculptures visually interpret stories describing the origins of Saint-Louis, his birthplace and home. Though the city is most well known for its colonial history, his work relates back to the pre-colonial past, the foundations of Senegalese society before the arrival of Europeans to the region. The folklore he recounts depicts the earliest parts of Senegalese heritage, elements of its history that have been passed on orally for hundreds of years. They arouse the earliest and purest part of the Senegalese spirit, before



it could even be called “Senegalese,” before the occupation of colonial forces, before the tainting of African culture with European influence.

Keita’s piece *Gooryalla* (2010) [Figure 13] relates to an ancient story from Ndar, the Wolof name for Saint-Louis, before the island became the capital of the colonial empire in 1659. This life-sized wood and iron sculpture of a man refers back to the artist’s ethnic roots, the Wolof people, some of the first inhabitants of the river region surrounding Saint-Louis. On an island most distinctly known for its connection to the colonial period, this contemporary artist chooses to reach even further into the past. The subject of the sculpture is clearly a Wolof man, recognizable through key symbols of his culture: his spear, the cloth wrapped around his waist, and the charms (or *grisgris*) draped across his chest and held in his left hand. These items, though perhaps not widely understood or recognized in today’s world, hold cultural importance within the Wolof ethnic group. The *grisgris*, found with many ancient statuettes in the region, act as protective charms, and many people of Wolof descent continue to wear them as protection today. *Gooryalla*’s charms include the skull of a dog (which the figure supposedly fought and killed, keeping this bone to augment his own power), a *calebasse* (a gourd with many uses in Senegalese culture) and various other shells and stones. Each piece has some significance relating uniquely to Senegal. According to the artist, this figure is a guardian, all of the symbols relaying his power.<sup>138</sup> The character plays a role in a specific story, but in the context of the twenty-first century, it acts as a guardian of Wolof heritage, preserving its beliefs. Keita’s work serves as a reminder that the Wolof still exist in Senegal today, their presence widely felt in the use of their language as a

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<sup>138</sup> "El Hadji Keita." Personal interview. 3 June 2010.

means of national communication. The piece connotes pride in their origins while proving that ancient culture is prevalent and very much relevant today.

In returning to the pre-colonial past to define the foundation of his culture, Keita's sculptures pay homage to Senghor and his value of *Africanité* and *négritude*. The sculptor, though of a generation far removed from this past, understands the relevance in exploring one's roots in order to appreciate one's place in contemporary time. His work looks back to the earliest recorded stories of the origins of his culture, persisting today due to the oral traditions of his ancestors. The continued manifestation of these myths in modern life proves Senghor's continuing cultural legacy, attesting to the first president's role as griot of his time. He successfully cultivated a visual language still used today that has the flexible eloquence to describe conditions of the past, present, and future. Rather than erasing oral tradition, it complements it, adding another layer of sensory understanding, exemplifying the alteration of an ancient tradition to revitalize it in modernity. Language grows constantly, adapting as time moves forward, expanding as required to describe unprecedented circumstances. The beauty of spoken and written words lies in their fluidity, their interpretive ability to have multiple meanings at once; visual language hold this same quality. As Senegalese art progresses, artists such as Keita and his peers add to the pictorial vocabulary started in Senghor's time, modifying and reinterpreting its symbols to suit their own artistic needs.

With *Gooryalla*, Keita revitalizes the symbolic lexicon of the ancient past, the one referenced by Senghor in his promotion of pan-African identity. One can easily recognize the aesthetic influence of early statues and masks in the artist's imagined portrayal of the mythical figure. Because the stories arise from oral tradition, the physical attributes of

their characters have been described only verbally. Keita uses the visual vocabulary he knows, starting with the styles and symbols created by Senghor's artists, to translate this vision into corporeal form. Using the familiar to describe the unknown, the sculptor expands the artistic dictionary of symbolic language. His figure's face, though entirely different in expressive quality, shares some of the same features of N'Diaye's *The Cry* (1987), specifically a broad, flat nose and large mouth. These seem to be common facial traits in West African art, likely derived from early masks and statues. In this way, Keita's work acts as a development of both recent and ancient artistic traditions, uniting the past and present.

The performative aspect of Keita's work, in which he places his sculptures in a primordial natural environment and interpretively reenacts the stories they reference, acts as a visual adaptation of the oral tradition of story telling. He enriches his culture's folklore by personifying spoken history. Through his cultural policies and insistence on the importance of art, Senghor established a visual history within his country in the 1960s; now, in the twenty-first century, Keita reverses time, traveling back to the past and inserting this newer tradition of visual history alongside orally transmitted myths. His sculptures and performances materialize the past, exemplifying cultural lineage passed on through pictorial, rather than verbal, means. Early African art objects generally had functional purpose in their time, many of them used in performative rituals. The artists who referenced these symbols in the 1960s did so in a purely aesthetic way, a visual trigger to remind Senegalese people of their origins. Keita's dramatization of his pieces transports them through time beyond mere aestheticism, a commentary on the fluidity of history and its non-linear nature. His performances, in which he covers himself with mud

and interacts with his sculptures on the banks of the river, augment the evocation of another era in his work. The exposition could take place in nearly any period of history, returning the present to the past while also escorting the past into the present. Every element of his work – its display, material and subject – alludes to the ancient past. Unlike many of his peers, Keita does not attempt to reinterpret these themes, nor to reinvent them in modernity. Instead, he presents them as a reminder of the origins of society, the most fundamentally Senegalese part of their identity.

In addition to celebrating Senegal's pre-colonial heritage, Keita also references the coming of white Europeans to the region. His work *Métissage* (2010), also fabricated of iron and wood, explores the traces of colonialism still present in his country.<sup>139</sup> The sculpture depicts a boy whose abstract body leads down to one large foot. In an interview from 2010, the artist explains that the boy has the foot of his father, but his own head.<sup>140</sup> The title, meaning miscegenation, and theme of the work reference the *familles métisses*, a class of mixed race families present throughout Senegal but particularly established in the heritage of Saint-Louis.<sup>141</sup> During the colonial era, the Frenchmen stationed in Senegal often took up an African wife, starting new families in the colony; at the end of colonization, the colonial officers returned to Europe, leaving these children behind. Keita's sculpture visually conveys the history of this mixed race of people who grew up in Senegal, fully immersed in independent Senegalese culture, but who retained familial and visual vestiges of the colonial époque. Employing wood of varied light and dark

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<sup>139</sup> No image; *Métissage* is a wood and iron sculpture done by El Hadji Keita in 2010. Its form is the body of a boy, approximately 24 inches in height. The body is not detailed, but a basic human form, average until the torso, which leads to one single leg balanced on one foot. The wood used in the sculpture is marbled light and dark.

<sup>140</sup> "El Hadji Keita."

<sup>141</sup> *Senegalmetis.com*. Sénégalmétis, 17 Jan. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

tonal qualities, Keita conveys the mixed skin tones of the *métisse* race, children of a black African mother and white European father. The entire sculpture balances on the large foot, signifying that the identity of the *métisse* finds its base in the heritage of his father, his patrimony, but that his soul, housed in the head and heart, is uniquely his own. Most discourses on identity concentrate on a uniquely African heritage, one conveying the spirit of the country but shared across the continent. Keita's work adds a new element to this dialogue by introducing a deviation in the pan-African tradition. The *métisse* do not find their roots in the ancient or ethnic past, but in the colonial period. They represent traces of European blood in Senegalese identity, a generally ignored or forgotten side of the country's cultural personality. Even in independence, the country has still not entirely moved past the colonial era, for remnants of it continue to manifest themselves in the blood of the *métisses*. Keita's sculpture brings to light the diversity, beyond ethnic roots, that presents itself in Senegal. The origins of modern identity cannot be singularly traced to the ancient past. It instead constructs itself from components of every era, not a collective history but a collection of histories.

### **Abdou Karim Fall**

Part of the contradiction expressed in Senegalese art, the one at the heart of the nation's identity, derives from the state of limbo in which the country found itself at the dawn of its independence. In the 1960s through the 1980s, Senegal was at once in a status of development and decline, rising independently from the debris of the colonial époque. To categorize it solely as a "developing nation," as Western discourse tends to do, would

be to ignore the hundreds of years of colonial rule that led Senegal to become the capital of the French colonial empire. Post-independence, the colonial period degenerated, literally and figuratively, from its apogee in the early twentieth century. By 1960 the French administration had retreated reluctantly, leaving behind its high colonial architecture to decay and erosion at the mercy of time and tropical climate.

Simultaneously, a new era was emerging, beginning under Senghor's patronage and guidance and proceeding under the rule of two succeeding presidents over the nation's fifty-year history. The two directions steering the country at its inception, at once declining from its colonial prosperity while also redeveloping into independent modernity, have remained part of the identity of its people, and present themselves in the art of Abdou Karim Fall.

A mixed media artist, Fall expands on the theme of colonial heritage. His work places him into the category of artists who employ symbols of the colonial era as reminders of the importance of preserving this part of the past from cultural erosion. This young Saint-Louisian artist creates textured canvases referencing the surfaces of the buildings of his native city. Commenting on the deteriorating state of the island's architecture, his works voice the artist's concern with preservation of heritage in Saint-Louis, a place rich in cultural history.

Fall, self-taught, does not include himself in the group of contemporary artists graduating from Dakar's art schools. Unschooled in the tradition of others of his generation, he generates his work entirely from his own intuition and imagination, an expression of what he personally finds moving. The artist works in mixed media *récupérage* – paint, fishing wire, wood, fabric, paper, tree bark, and burlap cloth – all

found in the streets to recreate the texture of his city. His reliefs on canvas literally depict certain locations throughout Saint-Louis, but they also conjure the essence of life on the island through the artist's choice of material. The wire brings to mind the bustling fishing district of Guet Ndar, the wood and fabric the artisan stalls selling tourist items, the bark the lush natural land surrounding the city. Following in the tradition of the previous generation of artists such as Viyé Diba, Fall allows his medium to reinforce naturally the presence of his environment in his work. At the same time, he inserts a human touch as well, reworking these materials on canvas to form the façades of old colonial buildings. In this way, he both thematically and physically illustrates the presence of European influence on Saint-Louis and its art. Fall's works are a commentary on the deterioration and erosion of the architecture of his city, a metaphor for his concern about the degradation of his heritage. By using discarded materials from the streets to render its buildings, he symbolically rebuilds the city from its own remains, a process of cultural regeneration.

His latest works, such as *Balcon en bois* (2010) [Figure 14] and *Fenêtre en ruine* (2010) [Figure 15], come from a June 2010 exhibit in Dakar titled "SAINT-LOUIS, VILLE MAGIQUE: 30 oeuvres inédites sur le patrimoine en ruine." The show featured 30 recent works by the artist of government buildings, wall façades, and well-known landmarks in and around Saint-Louis, leading viewers on a tour of the 350-year-old city, rich in architectural and cultural history. The artist states, "I want to bring more public awareness to the heritage of Saint-Louis," explaining his choice to depict these old

buildings that carry the rich architectural history of the former capital of Senegal.<sup>142</sup>

Saint-Louis is a city that is often overlooked in regards to contemporary art in Senegal. A smaller, slower paced environment than Dakar, its heyday came with the height of the colonial empire as capital and home to the first and largest colonial presence in West Africa. Since the shift of the capital to Dakar in 1958 and the removal of the colonial administration, the city has not seen any real development. Most of the colonial buildings erected in the mid-nineteenth century remain intact, and some are even still used for their original purposes. [Figures 16 and 17] The island, once an active and flourishing metropolis, has only devolved since its days as capital, as the rest of Senegal moves beyond the colonial era, attempting to forget it in its focus on the present. Through his work, Fall insists on the importance in remembering Senegal's role as center of the colonial empire; though a controversial part of the country's past, it remains a defining part of the heritage of modern culture there.

Why does Fall feel it is so imperative to save the architectural integrity of his city? The unique decorative features on the buildings he depicts represent the last visible remains of the colonial period in Senegal. While Senghor played a hugely influential role in the creation of modern, independent Senegal, its pre-independent history had a large part in molding the country's modern condition as well. The colonial administration laid the groundwork for the concept of an organized central government within the country, while the politics of cultural assimilation caused the reawakening of strong national pride and interest in African roots, two of the defining elements of Senegalese identity today.

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<sup>142</sup> Diba, Ahmad M. "Saint-Louis - Abdou Karim Fall Au Chevet Du Patrimoine En Péril." Trans. Hannah Shambroom. *AllAfrica.com*. Agence De Presse Sénégalaise (Dakar), 15 Apr. 2010. Web. 2 June 2010.



The houses, governmental buildings, doors and window frames portrayed in Fall's work all contain visual symbols of the colonial era in the same way that N'Diaye's sketches of early artifacts enrich the visual vocabulary of pan-Africanism. In another comparison to N'Diaye, Fall literally mimics the look of objects from another era, using them in the context of a cry for salvation, infusing them with emotive meaning.

Fall's literal impression of the façades of these buildings indicates his respect for their original architecture. The faces of these houses that line the streets and river stand exactly as they have since their construction in the mid-nineteenth century. Older than any current inhabitant of the city, they have seen so much throughout their history: the apogee and end of the colonial period, the liberation of Senegal from European influence, and fifty years of independence. The buildings today stand as silent witnesses to a period of transition in Senegal's past. These still solid structures tell of the renewal of life that has cycled through them over the course of nearly 200 years, representing the evolution of society within the framework of its history.

Fall's work *Balcon en bois* [Figure 14] illustrates particularly well the artist's representation of colonial architecture on canvas. He explains, "This house is considered the model par excellence of Saint-Louis. Its character resides in the functional double levels – the ground floor used for business and the upper floor for habitation – and in the presence of an ornate wrought iron balcony."<sup>143</sup> This work depicts an example of a well-preserved house with many of the most typical features of colonial architecture. The large windows, second story balcony, limestone façade, and wrought iron railings are some of

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<sup>143</sup> Fall, Abdou Karim. "Balcon En Bois." 2010. MS. Galerie Arte, Saint-Louis, Senegal. Trans. Hannah Shambroom

the most easily recognizable symbols of Saint-Louis, present on buildings throughout the city. These defining characteristics act as motifs in a new visual vocabulary created by Fall to describe this period of Senegal's history. Much in the same way that previous artist's symbols of masks and statuettes recall the country's most ancient history, Fall's new visual language brings the viewer back in time to the colonial époque. While Senghor's symbols promote pan-Africanism, shared culture across the continent, Fall's works speak of a uniquely Senegalese heritage and history, presenting literally the modern foundations of the country: its first colonial buildings. The artist thematically evokes this element of the past, while depicting the buildings in their current, often crumbling, condition, highlighting their relevance as relics of history that remain extremely important in contemporary life.

All of the buildings reproduced by the artist are still in use in Saint-Louis today, as homes, shops, and administrative buildings. The architectural elements in this work, specifically the balcony and windows, relay its association to the past, however Fall's rendering of it, in its original form even in the twenty-first century conveys its continued relevance in modernity. His work, then, acts as a representation of the importance of pulling elements of the colonial past into modern identity. Senegal's architectural heritage, though old and at times deteriorating, still very much exists in contemporary time, forming the framework for modern life in the city.

Fall illustrates that one need not ignore nor overlook this part of the past in order to inhabit modernity; one can incorporate these vestiges of colonialism into everyday life. The colonial memory, however difficult, remains an undeniable and inherent part of Senegal's history, one that should not be ignored in modern culture. Fall, in his work,

calls for the continued preservation of this aspect of his country's heritage, and for its preservation as legitimate component of Senegalese identity.

The house rendered in *Balcon en bois* (2010) shows little signs of the deterioration present in many other examples of colonial architecture, resting today as it always has. Its unchanging façade illustrates that while identity constantly reinvents itself, it should never be erased, remaining instead as a base for what it becomes. While this work depicts a particularly well-preserved example of the city's colonial architecture, *Fenêtre en ruine* (2010) [Figure 15] shows the degradation present in many buildings throughout the city. This work depicts a characteristically colonial-style window, semi-circular and framed in thick stonework, succumbing to the effects of time as the limestone façade erodes away to reveal the brick foundation beneath. For Fall, this deterioration represents the erosion of this part of his people's cultural identity. As Dakar erects new buildings and introduces technology into its bustling cosmopolitan metropolis, the older buildings of Saint-Louis stand forgotten, literally displaced outside this modernity. In unveiling the layers of this building's composition, Fall also unveils layers of Senegalese identity. Like in Keita's *Métissage* (2010), the artist reminds his viewers that the foundations of their contemporary identity do not stem singularly from their pre-colonial roots, that fragments of the colonial past remain relevant in modern culture.

His choice to represent these particular structures further underlines their symbolism; Saint-Louisians today literally reside in, inhabit these buildings, just as they live and inhabit their cultural personalities. Used every day as shops, homes, and seats of government, some of their historical importance gets lost as part of the everyday mundane. The thoughtlessness with which most inhabitants to the city interact with these

buildings highlights the way that their presence has become naturally ingrained into the city, as it has to the identity of those residing in them. To depict them on canvas represents them as works of art themselves. These buildings, persevering for nearly two hundred years in a continually changing society, underscore the longstanding nature of identity in the country – evolving with the passage of time, affected by outside environment, yet very much alive in modernity. Fall's buildings, slightly eroding yet standing strong, act as a visual representation of the endurance of the Senegalese spirit, a reminder to citizens not to turn their backs on their past.

The artist's technique in the creation of his canvases underscores their message. Done in low relief, the work has a far more interesting surface than a flat oil painting. The texture reveals dynamism below the surface of the canvas, relating to the surprising layer of bricks exposed from erosion beneath the limestone surface of the subject. This expresses also that same dynamic quality inherent in the Senegalese spirit, composed of multiple layers overlapping and building upon themselves throughout time. Fall works in a monochromatic palette, an interesting choice given the bright, vibrant hues in which most of the buildings are painted in reality. The absence of color in his composition directs attention to the line and form of the colonial architecture, those elements that speak of tradition and heritage, the real subject of his work. Literal renderings of city scenes, the sepia-toned pieces look almost like old photographs, underlining the historical validity of Fall's work. In monochrome, the buildings take on an understated elegance, reflective of the quiet dignity projected into the city by these aging structures that have seen and faced so much since the colonial era. They relate to the same humble dignity present in Senegalese identity, also enduring and evolving since that time. Fall's delicate

interpretation of the structures with soft lines and subtle shading presents beauty in their erosion, a tragic grace that evokes nostalgia, melancholy. These reflect the sentiments present in Senegalese identity toward the colonial period, an understanding of the sadness of the time, but an acknowledgement of its importance within the cultural heritage of the country.

### **Ndoye Douts**

The work of Abdou Karim Fall stands in sharp contrast to that of Ndoye Douts, a Dakar-based painter who presents brightly colored canvases commenting on the vibrant life of his city. The difference in theme and style between these two artists, working concurrently in time, brings up the variances present in Senegalese identity, a versatile essence that encompasses the diversity of the country's history, culture, and personality. Falls' work eloquently presents living history in the walls of Saint-Louis, constant in their presence throughout time, undeniably Senegalese in their role at the foundation of the country; Douts' work, on the other hand, installs itself distinctly in Dakar, conveying the fast pace of urban life. The two artists, representing different time periods, illustrate the multifaceted nature of contemporary Senegalese identity, formed from a dynamic fusion of the fixed, rich cultural past with the chaos, movement, and color of the present.

Ndoye Douts, an artist living and working in Dakar, recently showed his work at the 2010 FESMAN in an exhibit titled "Conditions urbaines," which presented portraits of city life in Senegal. Dakar, as it has developed since the country's independence, stands today as a bustling international metropolis, a rich and hectic mixture of

Senegalese culture and Western influence. At the center of modern urbanization, the city internalizes globalization more than anywhere else in the country, visible in its international cultural centers, museums, and technological interconnectedness. In his work, Douts implies that modern life in Senegal takes place in the city, in Dakar. His abstract scenes of urban activity, rendered in paint and collage on canvas, convey the disorder of life there. Illustrating the hectic, loud, dirty, bright essence of his city, he simultaneously communicates the commonality and autonomy of the urban condition.

Two works in particular, *Passage* (2010) [Figure 18] and *Ville nouvelle vie nouvelle* (2010) [Figure 19], both from his most recent FESMAN exhibition, illustrate this dichotomy. Employing the artist's signature style of bright, clashing colors and shapes covering a flat, opaque background, both works elaborate on a theme first presented in the 1980s by second generation artists: the urban condition. Douts builds his works from paint and collage, utilizing, like Diba and Fall, materials collected from his environment, in this case newspaper clippings, wrappers, and cardboard. His disordered and difficult to follow compilation of these elements lends the visual effect of ongoing change, suggestive of the constant motion within the city of traffic, people, and noise. In viewing his works, viewers experience the sensation of landing directly in the center of the city, in the midst of hectic urban life, always in transition. His technique of layering in his art – both from collage and opacity of paint – suggest the multiple layers present in the diverse identity of his fellow city inhabitants. The radiant colors and chaotic centers of his work give them a sense of energy, strength, force, life.

Presenting neither a positive nor negative view of Dakar, he manages to render the oppression of city life in an aesthetically pleasing way. Joëlle le Bussy, the gallery

owner responsible for his show, explains that in Douts' work, "tout ce chaos gigantesque se transforme, comme par miracle, en une oeuvre d'art."<sup>144</sup> The artist reins in the turmoil of the city, creating an expressive visual reaction to the agitation of life there. Affecting multiple senses, his compositions convey the musicality of the metropolis; one can nearly hear the incessant sounds of the streets – the traffic, people shouting, vendors aggressively selling their wares, friends striking up conversations, songs playing over static on the radio. In his abstract cityscapes, Douts aims to reconcile his countrymen with modern urbanity, the staccato ebb and flow of city living. His compositions act as visual memory, preserving in paint the vibrant culture he immerses himself in every day.

Douts' work *Passage* (2010) [Figure 18], depicting a shadowy silhouette on a flat teal backdrop partially covered in a series of numbers, comments directly on the construction of identity within an urban landscape. The numbers, reading "1776 193700011," are those found on the artist's identification card, signifying his Senegalese citizenship. They represent his most literal and civic identity within his country, reduced down to a single line of numbers. This depiction of his citizenship, scrawled across a dark silhouetted form, reveals no sign of the unique culture or heritage of the country, conveying only the alienation of life in the city. This numeric labeling renders the individual insignificant, one of millions. At the same time, the number acts as a clear and direct sign of citizenship, marking its owner as distinctly Senegalese. Its prominence at the very foreground of the image, boldly written in bright blue, implies that in contemporary Dakar, membership to this national community takes precedence over all

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<sup>144</sup> ... In Douts' work, "all the gigantic chaos transforms itself, as by a miracle, into a work of art." Le Bussy, Joëlle. "Regards Citadins, Exposition de Ndoye Douts." 2010. MS. Galerie Arte, Dakar, Senegal. Trans. Hannah Shambroom.

other elements of individual personality. It paradoxically alienates the figure it attaches itself to, rendering him faceless, ageless, nameless, while also uniting him to all other inhabitants of the city who also each have their own identification number. It describes the condition of urban identity: simultaneously autonomous and shared.

Slightly translucent and cut off at the waist, the silhouetted half-human shape dominating the composition captures the ambiguity of being one individual within the circumstances of shared public space. Isolated at the bottom center of the canvas, this figure shows how the concept of individuality has evolved since Senghor's era. In the 1960s, artists used their work to project group identity, united through common symbols. Here, Douts depicts a featureless, blank character, uncommitted to any one recognizable quality. Where identity was once defined by shared background, this figure stands alone against his, facing out toward the world alone, or possibly turning his back to it. The development of Dakar into a modern city, replete with people, pollution, fast paced traffic, mass production, has lead the individual to autonomy, lost in the labyrinth of disorganized streets and dizzying skyscrapers. Douts does not place his silhouette in the midst of a crowded composition, however; instead it stands out, clearly delineated against a comparatively flat background. The surprisingly bright opaque hue of the turquoise plane communicates the vibrancy of life within this urban environment, a place rich in vigor, excitement, spirit. Though isolated, the figure lies atop a collage of paper debris collected from the street, literally permeated with his surroundings. In this way he is at once connected to and separate from his city, both entrenched within its overwhelming presence and cast out as an insignificant individual among many others.



Douts questions, in this work, whether cultural heritage still exists in Senegal's urban centers. Like the identity of those living in it, the city presents contradictions in its adaptation of culture. Dakar, in many ways, acts as a capital hub of Senegalese civilization, bringing together tradition, innovation, national pride and international influence. Home to long established museums, foreign educational centers, and many gallery spaces, the city exudes artistic patrimony from nearly every angle. However, within this overwhelming convergence of cultural information, individuality loses relevance among the masses. The role of the single figure becomes unimportant alongside the influx of impressions surrounding him, reducing down to a mere silhouette. Douts' painting composes itself largely of flat, blank planes, interrupted only by three islands of collaged papers and the prominent stain of the identification number, inserting its presence across the entire width of the canvas. The dark half-human shape embeds itself at the center of all of this, ghostly in its shady translucence. It illustrates the impersonalization of identity within the city, reduced to its most minimal form while still retaining the bare framework of a human shape. Without detail of the body or face, the figure rests anonymous. While Senghor's discourse on identity centered on shared roots and common features, this modern character erases these qualities, connoting disconnect in an urban environment. All ties to his past seem severed as he floats in an ambiguous turquoise sea. Though shaded in uneven black tones, the silhouette has a neat, clearly delineated outline, enclosing the shape of the figure within; the subject, surrounded by street debris, seems trapped within the borders of this urban identity. The African soul, released from the oppression of the colonial era, now finds itself imprisoned in the crowded, yet isolating, modern city.

Douts does not present this autonomy in an entirely negative light, however, indicating the individual's connection to his environment through collage. While the transparency of the silhouette suggests a lack of solidity in urban identity, it also allows the human form to interact with its surroundings. Consumed by the city's overpowering urban culture, the figure rises with spectral transparency from its background of newspaper headlines and urban debris. At its base, beneath the thin layer of black paint, lies a wrapper from a local bakery (the French words patterning the paper all relate to types of breads and pastries), suggesting that the individual is a product of his environment. The essence of the city, literally the material from which it composes itself, permeates through the form of the anonymous citizen, more discernable than personal features. Here, Douts suggests that urban identity defines itself through environment more than personal history; city culture surpasses traditional heritage. The composition in its entirety, a convergence of bright colors, dark forms and varied materials, reflects the composition of the metropolitan condition: a collision of contrasting social interactions between isolated individuals, normally strangers, yet somehow paradoxically united in their autonomy within the city.

The artist's use of newspaper headlines in his collage brings to light the progressively globalizing nature of Dakar. The upside down strip integrated into the bottom of the silhouette, though partially obscured, clearly references Paris. This internationalizes the work, recognizing the city's connection to other urban centers. It acknowledges also the commonalities shared between inhabitants of metropolises around the globe. Fellow Dakarois artist Cheikh Ndiaye, one of Douts' predecessors, notes of urban culture:

In cities throughout the world, one identifies the same people with the same preoccupations, expressions, and gestures. There are people in New York who live the same reality and have the same urban problems as people in Dakar. For that reason a guy from New York and a guy from Dakar could recognize themselves in the urban connotation of this expression. It unifies us.<sup>145</sup>

To identify people through sameness at once unites them and underlines their anonymity on a global scale. With these shared “preoccupations, expressions, and gestures,” one individual could be any other; it renders individuality null. Cultural uniqueness gives way to universal urban banality. In Douts’ reality, those pan-African traditions that once defined the Senegalese spirit surrender to widespread forces of globalization, at once uniting the inhabitants of Dakar to other international city dwellers and also severing them from their heritage, uprooting them to a new modern environment where urban identity dominates personal history. Despite the depreciation in strong national culture, there exists comfort in this shared condition. Beyond the immediate alienation of the individual within a claustrophobic metropolitan maze, there prevails the knowledge that others, within one’s own society and in societies across the world, experience the same sensation, creating a global community both united and disconnected in its urbanity.

This shared condition recognizes Dakar’s now undeniable modernity, placing it alongside more established centers such as New York or Paris. To attain the same level of contemporaneity in Dakar as in its Western equivalents was one of the common goals of

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<sup>145</sup> Grabski, 28.

Senghor's and Diouf's administrations. The first president aimed to do so through art and the establishment of culture within his regime, while the second focused more on technological and economic matters. Now in the third era of its independent history, Senegal finds itself in the midst of modernity through the culmination of all of these elements: Dakar, the cosmopolitan city. The heading in the upper right of the composition reads: "La recherche du temps perdu," the search for lost time. It is unclear to what time Douts alludes here. Pre-urban Senegal? A hiatus from the fast paced passage of time in the city? A return to the Senghorian search for pan-African heritage? The line comes from a Proust novel of the same title, alluding to Senegal's continued connection to French society, more pronounced now in the modern city. Regardless of exact reference, the text connotes an internal investigation, the pursuit of an identity lost in the disorder of modernity. It is within this contradictory climate that Douts' figure situates himself, the embodiment of a modern Senegalese citizen facing alone the challenges of city life.

The collaged headlines additionally add a sense of "now" to the work. Literally ripped from a daily newspaper, they add immediacy to the painting by locating it within a very specific timeframe. Its construction out of this particular material places it very much in the present. Douts' work refers to no time period except the present. References to past motifs that symbolized Senegalese identity, the mask-like faces of N'Diaye or the colonial framework of Fall, are notably absent in his work. In his analysis of contemporary Senegalese identity, Douts does not consider the past. In his world, identity derives itself solely from its current condition, admitting no affiliation to its past forms. The Senegalese spirit inserts itself into daily life not through tradition but through the

constant motion, excitement, pandemonium of urban modernity. Previous models of identity formed themselves through attachment to shared heritage, connections to ancestors. Modern identity constructs itself not from interactions and relationships between people and other people, but between people and their urban environment. The city and the citizen are compatriots in this existential struggle, both attempting to relate to modernity, lost without the grounding of their roots. Douts represents this in his work with the lone anonymous figure, identified only by a dehumanizing number, both isolated and consumed by his surroundings, enclosed in ambiguous space not by other people but by the discarded debris of his city.

In another work, *Ville nouvelle vie nouvelle* (2010) [Figure 19], Douts presents a new perspective on urban life, an abstracted mixed media cityscape composed of collage and paint. Introducing a more zoomed out view of Dakar's downtown claustrophobia, the artist paints a solid red canvas broken in its center by a single black line above which lies a cluttered jumble of multicolored brushstrokes, strips of newspaper, and small simple drawings of cars and people. Unlike his previous work, this one depicts not the alienation of life in the city, but the congestion. Without the confrontation of the life-sized silhouette in *Passage*, the viewer finds himself more removed spatially from this image, observing the urban chaos at a distance. From this angle, the haphazard compilation of paint and paper form the vague outline of low-lying buildings, reminiscent of Dakar's skyline. Douts employs human silhouettes as a motif in many of his works; here he invokes the silhouette of his city. The layering in his technique of collage reflects the spatial composition of Dakar itself, the suffocating overlap of building after building, closing in around narrow streets. The separate forms and colors get closer and closer to

each other as they move towards the center of the canvas, encroaching on each other's space like cars in a traffic jam. Terrible traffic is one of the defining features of transit within Dakar, further referenced in the work through the child-like drawings of cars.

Clearly not a literal rendering of the city's façade, the work conveys urban atmosphere through color, shape, and form. The vibrancy of life present in the metropolis reveals itself in the bright reds, blues, and purples, both clashing and blending on the canvas. The disorder of the collage reflects that of Dakar's layout. In stepping back from his subject, presenting it at a distance, Douts avoids the oppression negatively associated with the modern city and instead marvels at its chaos with profound fascination. His work embodies urban compression in the literal sense; all of the activity within the composition condenses itself to center of the space. One feels this same squeezed in sensation in walking through the narrow streets of Dakar. Pushed by the force of life there, one gets accosted by activity in every direction, overwhelmed by sounds, sights, and space. Douts' canvas effects this same syncretization of senses, compiling color, shapes, and words in a multi-sensory attack on traditional perception. The compressed mix of paints, drawings, and brushstrokes form the disjointed mass of society, suddenly dropped into the center of downtown amidst hectic traffic, imposing buildings, and the general energy of life.

Douts' composition portrays a double perspective of the city: a colorfully silhouetted skyline, and a cartographic aerial view. The work in its entirety acts as an artistic map of Senegal, with all visual activity concentrated in the center; Dakar, the only major city in the country, acts as the center of cultural activity, the international hub of action while the rest of the landscape is composed of smaller towns and rural areas. The congestion of the city is confined to one strip, breaking the composition in half. This

perfectly reflects the topography of Senegal, large flat plains, here presented as the red background, suddenly interrupted by a developed modern city, composed of diverse cultural elements all packed into one place. The sudden concentration of constructed collage in the middle reflects the manmade development of downtown Dakar, the disruption of flat natural space by the urban center.

This work, unlike many in the series, features no overarching human presence, an absence especially strongly felt when viewing the work alongside his others. Beneath the strip of collage lies a thin black line, appearing to represent a road due to the small sketches of cars atop it. The cars float in space without drivers, highlighting the vacancy of human life. A small singular stick figure to the left marks the only proof of mankind's existence in the city. One critic calls modern Senegalese cities "créations sans créateurs,"<sup>146</sup> expressing the emptiness felt even amongst the density and chaos of the metropolis. While the composition lacks literal representations of humans, their presence inserts itself here through the creations they have left behind: the city itself. This human occupation presents an antithesis to N'Diaye's *Sahel* (1977), where the artist presents no trace of humanity, no impressions of man's touch on the environment. The defining mark modern Senegalese society has left on the landscape of its country is the development of this huge metropolitan area and its resulting debris. Douts' work symbolically represents this through its spatial and material composition, the collaged area signifying the man-made city created out of discarded trash found in the streets. The layers of the collage in paper and paint comment on the manner in which the city has been built up throughout its

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<sup>146</sup> One critic calls modern Senegalese cities "creations without creators..." Sankale, Sylvain. *Ndoyedouts.com*. Ndoye Douts, Artist Platicien, Dakar Senegal, 15 Jan. 2005. Web. 10 Apr. 2011. Trans. Hannah Shambroom.

fifty-year independent history. Another critic comments on the work, “With powerful graphics, [Douts] establishes relationships between the subject and the space that bears it.”<sup>147</sup> As the artist demonstrates in his previous work, modern relationships no longer pass between people and other people, as suggested by the absence of human presence, but between people and their urban environment. In this work, the subject is the city itself, and the space bearing it a map of the rest of the country. Reflective of the manner in which mankind inhabits the space it creates, the painting also comments on the duality of modern identity. Citizens of Senegal today have evolved out of their natural past, their pre-colonial heritage of nomadic ethnic groups living off of the land, and moved into spaces of their own construction – cluttered, claustrophobic, magnificent, energetic cities. In the twenty-first century, identity no longer insists on the past but boldly inhabits the present, possessing it as a creation of its own free will. The personality projected by Douts in his work finds itself at once alienated and gratified by its new urban environment, both a stranger in fabricated terrain, and a natural part of the modern landscape.

## **Conclusion**

As second generation artists redefined their role and work in the middle era of Senegalese history, the third generation continues to do so in the present day. Art in the twenty-first century no longer devotes its aesthetic to urgent attempts at self-definition, the endeavor in which artists in the early independent years immersed themselves and

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<sup>147</sup> Le Meur, Denis. "Mouhamadou Ndoye." *Ndoyedouts.com*. Ndoye Douts, Artist Platicien, Dakar Senegal, Aug. 1999. Web. 10 Apr. 2011.



their work. Senegalese artists, the supposed leaders of an “African renaissance,” actually begin to stray farther from the demands of the state as time passes, concentrating more on personal expressions of common life within the heart of the community, removed from the presidential palace and its official policies. During Wade’s presidency art and politics begin to diverge. Though still inevitably related, they no longer rely on each other to fulfill their respective aims. Politics exist as a separate entity from art; even official cultural policy no longer seems to direct creative content. The state implements its laws and policies without the visual stimulation used in Senghor’s day to foster and construct concepts of citizenship. In return, art sustains itself without the funding or supervision of the government while still managing to articulate sentiments of national identity. That is not to say that art today no longer reflects Senegalese identity; on the contrary, it acts as a far more genuine and personalized expression of it, for it takes shape through freedom of expression, and comes from the unbiased hands of average citizens unencumbered by a political agenda to promote mass sentiments.

Senegalese artists of the twenty-first century were born into and inhabit today an entirely different social environment than their predecessors. First generation artists received formal schooling in Europe, returning to their homeland to support its cultural development. Using the training they received while abroad, they expressed ideas pertaining uniquely to Senegal, creating a fusion of technique and theme. These artists, though trying to separate themselves and their country from the colonial past, remained connected to it through their adoption of European materials and techniques. By contrast, second generation artists learned their craft mostly within the country, graduating from Dakar-based art schools taught by the masters of Senghor’s generation.

Nourished on a regimen of Senegalese teaching methods, their art was naturally infused with the essence of their country. They internalized and reinterpreted the canons set forth by the previous generation, perpetuating them into the next era while maintaining their relevance by altering them to suit new expressive purposes at the end of the century. Receding further still from the aesthetic canon of artists in the 1960s, the third generation of Senegalese artists depict an entirely new visual space on their canvases – one more conscious and aware of their modern environment. This new landscape constructs itself from roads, cars, and crumbling buildings that are paved and lain down over the roots of their ancestors. These artists stand apart from the previous two generations, because they were born and raised entirely within the framework of this environment. Unlike their predecessors, they are attached to the colonial period only through history, not through personal memory. They recognize the importance of preserving national history while remaining firmly grounded in the transnational present.

One unique feature of the Senegalese art scene during this era is the emergence of self-taught artists showing in galleries and museum exhibitions. Vernacular painters, such as Abdou Karim Fall, usher in a new trajectory in the course of Senegalese artistic heritage. Untrained in traditional academic methods of representation, these artists present an entirely original take on portrayals of identity. Unlike many of their contemporaries, newly graduated from art school and armed with a set of tools and well-rehearsed of symbols, the self-taught artists effect genuine innovation, pushing boundaries as they explore for themselves the various manifestations of cultural heritage within their country. These artists are by no means uneducated; if anything their artistic education is even more comprehensive than that of their peers, because they determine

their own curriculum rather than adhering to the limited repertoire presented by professors in the schools. Driven by their own free will, their work appears less susceptible to the direct influence of their predecessors than does the work of the school-bred artists. Through this self-direction, their art achieves a more organic feeling, one originating from reflective ingenuity rather than the regurgitation of techniques presented to them. In many ways, their artistic education returns to the principles of the first generation of Senegalese artists, looking at primary sources (the work of both their ancestors and immediate predecessors) for inspiration instead of encountering these influences through the secondary source of an academic mentor. They diverge from the first generation, however, by digesting and critically evaluating these sources rather than simply citing them directly. Their work provides a genuine expression of that which is important to them individually, offering a new take on identity largely unexplored in the schools.

Despite the energetic emergence of self-taught artists, the Dakar-based art schools continue to flourish, generating talented artists with high quality work. These schools remain an important part of the artistic landscape of Senegal, prompting the continuous production of art despite diminished governmental support. Working in the midst of the city, the artists graduating from the schools build upon the urban aesthetic first explored by second-generation artists such as Cheikh Ndiaye. The schools play a large role in the development of theme and style in the work of artists in the twenty-first century, both through their downtown location and directed curriculum. Learning both technique and art history, students receive an education not only in how to create art but also in better understanding why this creation matters – the artistic lineage upon which is built their

Senegalese identity. This knowledge manifests itself in their work with symbolic references to heritage that reverberate through the lens of their new contemporary environment.

One of the most pertinent characteristics of twenty-first-century Senegalese art is its connection to and reliance on its environment. The works produced in this era provide a thoughtful reflection on the artists' surroundings and how they contribute to the assemblage of identity within the country. Conveying a studied consideration of inhabited space more than a broad collective mindset, art at the debut of the second millennium offers an intriguing perspective on the role of environment in understanding one's heritage, present condition, and projections for the future. By inserting themselves firmly into their modern Senegalese landscape, whether an urban center, a crumbling former colonial capital, or a more natural setting, artists creatively envision the continuous progression of their heritage and identity over time. Artists in the twenty-first century attempt to understand their cultural past by relating it to their position in the present.

At once highly personal and commonly relatable, portraits of their environments effectively and subtly convey the evolution of the Senegalese spirit, from where it originated to where it currently resides, inserting its presence in modernity with such momentum as to thrust it additionally into the future.

Within the third generation there developed a three-pronged approach to the consideration of identity in the present era, each subcategory indicative of a unique facet of Senegalese heritage. The three artists discussed above – Keita, Fall, and Douts - approach their art with the same aim: to express their identity as Senegalese citizens, in whatever way this uniquely applied to each individual artist, while insisting on the

importance of recognizing heritage as a means of understanding the present. The diversity with which this common theme manifests itself in their respective works acts as a testament to the resourceful creativity of artists in the twenty-first century. The first two artists discussed in this chapter, El Hadji Keita and Abdou Karim Fall, both natives of Saint-Louis, evoke vestiges of the past in their work to call attention to elements of their identity they wish to preserve in the modern era. Keita chooses to reference his people's ancestral past, giving it new life in modernity through both his use of traditional symbols and his physical, performative interactions with his symbols. Conversely, Fall ignores the ancient past of Senegal and instead focuses his efforts on the preservation of colonial heritage, a controversial subject for those wishing to forget this part of the country's past in independent modernity. Through his quietly graceful architectural portraits, he reminds his people of the dignity present in this part of their identity, connoting the resilience of the Senegalese soul to persevere through European attempts at cultural assimilation and to now fully inhabit those spaces once representative of the colonial presence in the country. His work elicits a variation on *négritude*; where Senghor reasserted the dignity of the black voice into the word *nègre*, a term once used as a verbal tool of oppression, Fall reappropriates these buildings that once stood as the pride of the French administration. Urging his people to recognize this as an important part of their national heritage, he presents these decaying walls, rather than simply pre-colonial masks or statues, as one of the foundations for his society's modern identity.

Ndoye Douts offers a third approach to the construction of a national identity in his work by questioning the strength of the Senegalese spirit in a new, modern, urban environment, surrounded now by signs of globalization and Western culture rather than

pan-African heritage. He references his people's past, paradoxically, by a lack of traditional symbols on his canvases, connoting the threat of the loss of this part of their heritage within the active anonymity of international urban sprawl. His visual language diverges from traditional objects reproduced on canvas and turns more toward abstract assemblages of material as signs of modernity. While one understands a sense of loss in his dark silhouettes and jumbled collage on his canvases, what stands out most are his bright colors and words – symbols that celebrate contemporary city life regardless of its disassociation with the past. His paintings acknowledge the gradual separation in modern Dakar of present day identity from its link to the past. Rejuvenating the soul with a sharp jolt of chaos, he leads his audience and patrons to the understanding that one can separate oneself from the past without forgetting it, allowing it to inform the present without defining it. His work, more so than that of the other two, indicates a new openness in the twenty-first century in Senegal to the influences of other global societies. As the country promotes its own rich culture through the work of its artists, it mitigates the threat of assimilation. In the twenty-first century, Senegalese art projects a newfound pride and confidence in the country – its people, its culture, its history. Artists of the twenty-first century leave their lasting mark on the cultural history of the country by forging their own visual language rather than relying on a given set of symbols. In this way, they both perpetuate and seamlessly add to Senegalese identity, as diverse, lush, and colorful as the country's landscape.

## **Chapter VII:**

### **Conclusion**

Throughout Senegal's more than fifty-year independent history, art has always closely aligned itself with politics, whether under the direction of the government or through the will of the artists themselves. The relationship between the nation's creative realm and its political trajectory was beneficial in both directions. The extremely visible setting in which politics operated opened contemporary art to the public, allowing people to view and consider it for more than its aesthetic purposes; conversely, art acted as a visual intermediary between the intangible principles driving the nation and the everyday life of the citizen, making complex policies more accessible to those living and working outside the government. Throughout the decades, art progressed from an instrument existing nearly exclusively for the advancement of political ideology to its own vehicle for independent expression, a continuously evolving medium through which to project the emotion, spirit, and soul of Senegal.

Under the cultural policies first introduced by Léopold Senghor, Senegal's art grew into its own sector in the lives of the nation's people. As it distanced itself from the direct oversight of state control, it harnessed its own creative potential, expressing the personal prerogatives of the artists rather than of the president. That is not to say that art in recent years denies political influence. In fact, due to its strong governmental ties at the start of independence, it today continues to express national sentiments, intertwined with more personal concerns. While in retrospect Senghor's management of the arts seems

highly restrictive, at the time the guidance he provided was necessary for the establishment of strong cultural values within the new nation.

The 1960s represented a decade of monumental change in Senegal. Emerging from decades of colonialism, the nation lost touch with much of its original heritage under France's politics of assimilation. Those inhabiting Senegal at the time of its liberation had grown up with these European values, failing to remember their own cultural roots. Faced for the first time with total cultural and political independence, Senegalese citizens met the next chapter in their history with both hope and apprehension. They had no idea what life in their new country would be like nor how to construct their sense of self outside their existence as colonial subjects. As president, Senghor was responsible for enforcing a sense of unity through shared identity in order to overcome these concerns. As the nation separated itself from the colonial past, there arose a need to rediscover ancient symbols of *Africanité* as a starting point for the creation of a uniquely Senegalese identity. The reference to the past that such symbols provoked was not intended to throw the country back into a primitive state, but rather to celebrate a time before the arrival of foreigners – before the colonialist attempt to eradicate local customs and practices. It is difficult to say whether Senghor intended for these symbols to act as a permanent driving force of identity within the nation, however it is clear that he was aware of their necessity in fostering the development of a collective Senegalese soul.

Senghor's *chers enfants* used their work to illustrate the principles defining their nation and in doing so they simultaneously began to shape their compatriot's identity as citizens. Iba N'Diaye's drawings and paintings reveal the spirit of Senegal as it



materialized in the 1960s, re-emerging within the people after being crushed by the colonial era. His work, and the work of his contemporaries, celebrates the valor of African culture, persistent even in the face of adversity.

Senghor's insistence on the primacy of motifs of early African artifacts inserted itself into the subconscious of his people; it proved to them that the French did not succeed in their attempts at cultural assimilation and annihilation of an authentic indigenous identity if, in independence, the country could so seamlessly return to symbols of its pre-colonial origins. In reverting to pre-modern references, artists at this time attempted to evoke the most authentic construction of Senegalese identity, one produced organically without artifice or agenda. It is true that by manipulating these symbols as tools to sway national mindset, they lose some of their effectiveness, however they gain renewed relevance in a modern context. N'Diaye's works speak of the vitality of life on his continent, present in its landscape, its artifacts, its people. His early studies conform exactly to the style and theme to which Senghor directed his artists, while his later pieces depict a matured reflection and development on these ideologies. Through the lens of the twenty-first century, these reproductions of early artifacts appear static, lacking depth, imagination, or emotion. In their own time, however, they achieved the aim that Senghor assigned to the arts: to inspire confidence and pride in his people as members of a unified independent African nation. The consistency of these symbols throughout history, rather than implying a lack of development in African culture, speaks of its resilience, and the enduring power of its force.

According to Senghor, the Senegalese spirit derives from a shared African soul, one embedded into every inhabitant of the continent. The first president urged his artists

to awaken this soul from its dormant state by describing it in their modern art. Closely tying his politics to creative endeavors, he centered his regime on the development of strong cultural policies. By implementing clear artistic ideologies at the very start of Senegal's independent history, he insured that visual self-expression would lie at the heart of his people's national identity. As he called for the reuse of tradition in his artists' work, he himself shaped new traditions. The visual symbols through which he expressed his political principles, while seemingly passive and uninventive today, ultimately acted as the foundations for the next generation of artists, informing their work, giving them creative leverage and facilitating deeper explorations of identity-related themes.

### **The Evolution of Artistic Themes**

The first president's deeply involved role in the creative process of his artists was necessary for the development of Senegal in the 1960s. When his intense patronage became more inhibiting than productive, his artists began exploring more expressive themes, probing deeper into the symbols presented to them to draw out their cultural and emotional substance. Aimé Césaire, the originator of the term "*négritude*," and an acquaintance of Senghor, remarks on his friend's symbolic visual language,

The problem is not to remake the masks, any more than it was for Europeans to remake the cathedrals... the power of renewal is the very sign of the strength of a people, a culture... if the African artist were merely to copy his past, failure

would be the inevitable result. We want an African art which springs from the African's contemporary emotional response.<sup>148</sup>

Césaire points out that the solution to the identity crisis faced by the newly independent country was not to “remake” old symbols, an action that would return the country to its past rather than push it into the future, but to renew them by giving them a second life in a contemporary context. Senghor's cultural policies promoted this, and during his presidency he successfully fostered a national sense of self through his artists. He nearly single-handedly validated African culture in the eyes of the West in an era when it was still widely associated with ignorant stereotypes of the primitive and the Dark Continent.<sup>149</sup> When art was no longer needed to simply validate or create identity, it moved on to a deeper, more analytical focus. As the country matured in its independence, the artists matured as well, more confident in their work, their nation, and their role as Senegalese citizens. This shift exhibits the enduring fluidity of art as it relates to cultural heritage and the politics of representation. Able to adapt itself to express literally anything, art in the second half of the twentieth century remained conscious of its roots while also evolving to suit the social conditions of its day.

Twenty years into Senegal's independence, once the nation more firmly established its place as a creative leader in West Africa, the government loosened its grasp on cultural concerns and returned creative freedom to the artists themselves. This

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<sup>148</sup> Quoted in: Chinweizu. *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite*. New York: Vintage, 1975. Print. 301.

<sup>149</sup> “The Dark Continent” was an expression used in the nineteenth century to describe Africa, as little was known about the continent at that time. The name conveys the sentiments of primitivism and exoticism with which many regarded Africa.

reprioritization of governmental duties under Abdou Diouf allowed painters such as Viyé Diba and Cheikh Ndiaye to reevaluate their work and its purpose. The second president's administration took on more fiscal responsibilities, leaving the task of cultural advancement to its citizens. In the 1980s, art assumed a more genuine, less studied attitude, reflective of identity politics in that decade. The early years of the country's history marked themselves with creation – creation of an independent state, of a different form of government, of a new identity as citizens rather than subjects. Starting from scratch, the development of these abstract concepts derived from the study and adoption of long-established cultural traditions. Two decades later, the country had firmly asserted its presence into the modern world as an influential and culturally rich place. Artists, released from the obligation to define an explicitly national identity, could now freely explore their own personal identity. Art became less ideological and began to embody a more genuine expression of the average lived condition of citizens in the country. This self-directed creativity led to the formation of a lively artistic community within Senegal – one that still exists today.

Art in the 1980s veered toward the abstract and the expressive. Where N'Diaye filled his canvases with predictable and easily recognizable symbols of pan-African heritage, second generation artists turned away from such straightforward representation, acknowledging a new complexity in their sense of being. The conceptual canvases of Viyé Diba and enigmatic urban references of Cheikh Ndiaye are more difficult for viewers to understand, but they convey a deeper reflection on what it meant to be Senegalese at that time. Senghor's symbols of *Africanité* and *négritude* retained their value in modernity through their cultural heritage; the newer symbols proposed by artists

in their work attained their value through their immediate relevance – their spontaneity placing them firmly in the present.

No longer under the singular direction of the government, the work of second-generation artists diverged down several paths. Diba chose to re-evaluate the role of tradition within modernity, poking fun at collectors of so-called authentic African pieces with his “patina-encrusted” canvases. Through an exploration of space and material, the artist ultimately seems to conclude that the preservation of heritage remained important in his day, but that tradition must evolve to remain relevant as more than a mere relic of the past. Through mixed media canvases he illustrates how customary African symbols alter their forms to insert themselves into modernity, remaining a part of Senegalese identity but not its defining element.

Cheikh Ndiaye also reconsiders the validity of tradition in a contemporary setting, though his work opts to reject it. His canvases, replete with urban symbolism, seem to retaliate against cultural nostalgia. Rather than quoting ancient symbols, he references instead hip-hop culture and the internet. This indicates an unprecedented openness in Senegalese culture to the reception of outside influences. Diouf’s focus on technological advancement played a large role in this; under his administration the nation saw the introduction of the World Wide Web, an innovation that instantly linked the country to the rest of the globe. In acknowledging the presence of modern technology in his country, Ndiaye comments on the evolution of Senegalese society into one based in urban centers. He sets his work far from the natural landscape of the Sahel as shown in Iba N’Diaye’s watercolor, placing his figures in constructed geometric planes evocative of a city layout. His denial of natural space follows his rejection of traditional organic forms and

embraces instead modern civic life. The figures he portrays and their distinctive gestures seat the work in such a culturally specific setting as to make its meaning puzzling to those outside the society. In this way, he creates unity within his community, drawn together from a secret knowledge of symbolism that cannot be learned by studying history or previous artworks but instead must be lived, born within the country.

The two prevailing themes in art of this time – the opening of Senegal to other cultures and an exclusivity to Dakar – perfectly illustrate the dichotomy present in identity at this time. The end of the twentieth century represented a transitional period in the nation's history, caught between the fervor and excitement of new independence, and the comfortable stability acquired through forty years of settled autonomous rule. This middle period, a time without clear cultural direction, allowed artists to explore their own interests and concerns. Interestingly, the themes present in art from this era still seemed to run parallel to the country's political agenda. The government's focus on technological and economical progress manifested itself socially in the rise of cities, and within their urban environment a contemporary manifestation of identity developed, one explored by second-generation artists in their work. Ndiaye's exploration of city life signals the debut of a theme that would be explored extensively in the twenty-first century, when urban sprawl began to expand beyond the center of Dakar. Through the inheritance of theme, contemporary Senegalese artists perpetuate and create their own traditions, developed from the symbols first presented to them by their predecessors. First generation artists referenced their past to try to understand their new independent identity; second generation artists re-evaluate this past and insert it in their new environment: the city. This transition of theme and perpetuation of metropolitan symbolism suggests that

perhaps the roots of contemporary Senegalese identity lie in urbanity, one informed by its heritage.

Senegalese artists today continue to enjoy nearly unrestricted creative freedom. President Wade's attempts to incite an African renaissance and the resulting critique he received communicate the continued separation between art and politics in the twenty-first century. Several decades after Senghor's presidency, politics continue to inform and influence the art created in the country, but they no longer drive its production. The Senegalese government today has learned that it cannot force a creative revolution out of its people. In aiming to reignite the African spirit, Wade seems to follow similar cultural values to those associated with Senghor. It is a testament to the progress and maturation of Senegalese artists and their work that these sorts of ideological policies no longer function effectively in the twenty-first century. Artists today refuse to cooperate with the government to effect a rebirth of the Senegalese soul because the constant development and regeneration of identity is something that artists have been doing independently for decades. Cultural upheaval is not a ruling the government can suddenly decide to administer. As the artists know well, the achievement of national and cultural identity in Senegal comes not from revolution, but from evolution, slow but continuous since 1960. Wade's attempts to realign art with politics went mostly ignored by third-generation artists who continued to explore their own themes. That is not to say that art never intersected with politics; it frequently did, however it did so through the will of the creator, not the direction of the government.

Senegalese art today continues to act as a tool of expression, portraying now a re-evaluation of the past as viewed through the lens of a highly developed, internationalized,

stable, independent country. The state of the country and also of its art are testaments to Senghor's legacy, his will for his people to exist in the present, removed from the confines of history in which many critics would have liked to place them in the years immediately following the collapse of the colonial empire. Because the country now firmly roots itself in modernity, artists and civilians have the opportunity to reflect on their past as just that – the past, a part of their history that has allowed them to arrive at this point today but that does not singularly define their culture. Through artistic heritage, tradition remains relevant to contemporary artists, subtly announcing itself in their work with a mask-like face or geometric form, however it is their own creative ingenuity that infuses their work with the most honest articulation of the spirit of Senegal today.

### **Redefining Senghorian Themes in the Twenty-First Century: *Ouverture* and *Enracinement***

In order to comprehensively evaluate the presentation of Senegalese identity by the country's contemporary artists, one must return to the Senghorian principles that form the foundation of Senegal's cultural heritage and drive the construction of modern identity. The first is *ouverture* (openness). For Senghor, this idea focused on the cultural elevation of Senegal to the same level of prestige as European nations. It did not connote thematic openness (for that he looked within the continent), but an adoption of French stylistic technique and material to prove the talent of artists within Senegal equaled those of Europe. If Senegalese artists worked in the same format as their European counterparts, I would facilitate comparison between the two, and the transmission of art



from Africa to the West would be more readily accepted. Senghor used the arts as visual infrastructure to express his more comprehensive motive of bringing his country up to Western standards of modernity in all realms.

In Diouf's era *ouverture* indicated the country's openness to change. The introduction of technology, specifically the internet, was one manifestation of this, allowing for greater communication and cultural diversity within the cities. With the spread of nearly limitless information the country had the ability to connect to others on a worldwide scale, accelerating globalization and the reception of new ideas. Dakar grew into a large international metropolis and artists began to explore issues of urban identity, a theme that would be explored more deeply by third generation artists such as Douts.

By the end of the twentieth century, modern society established itself firmly enough in Senegal to erase the threat of assimilation of European culture, a lingering fear from the colonial *époque*. Senghor's positive relationship with France in the post-colonial years along with his aggressive overseas promotion of art from his continent generated a renewed European enthusiasm for African art at the end of the century. The initial European interest in an African aesthetic, led by Picasso and Braque among others in the early twentieth century, lay in its perceived "primitive" qualities of simplified forms and alleged pristine exoticism. Ironically, these qualities that so intrigued Western artists were present only in their own work, and not in the original pieces they referenced. European artists appreciated the "primitive" in African art only to validate the sophistication of their own emerging modernism. *Ouverture* in the twenty-first century begins to encompass a two-way exchange of ideas. Senegalese artists continue to use the materials and techniques inherited from European art schools in the middle of the

twentieth century; in return, European collectors and critics recognize the value and importance of the contemporary, not only the early, art of the continent – appreciating it for its full cultural value instead of treating it as a relic of the past. This mutual acceptance and respect between Senegal and the West benefits both sides, providing additional perspectives on constructions of identity.

The way in which impressions of *ouverture* have evolved over fifty years, from attempts to prove cultural legitimacy to genuine interest in and interactions with other societies, stands as proof that art always acts as a reflection of its environment. Whether an elegant portrait of distinctly Senegalese scenery like Iba N'Diaye's *Sahel* (1977), or a hauntingly subtle depiction of city architecture like Abdou Karim Fall's *Fenêtre en ruine* (2010), or even an abstract fragmented city silhouette, as in Ndoye Douts' *Ville nouvelle vie nouvelle* (2010) these works convey an intrinsically Senegalese vivacity and passion for life, present in the land of the country and those who inhabit it. Even works that are not literal landscapes convey a sense of the country's environment, and through this, its identity, its spirit. Neither Viyé Diba's *Choses au mur* (1998) nor Cheikh Ndiaye's *I'm True* contain literal references to the subject's geographic surroundings; in fact, the compositional space in general does not present itself in a very clear way. However, due to the artists' symbolic choices (Diba's inclusion of *matériaux de récupération* or Ndiaye's hand signals), the Senegalese environment manifests itself within their work, at once a creator and product of the nation's identity. The landscape in which each artist finds himself, whether rural or urban, ancient or modern, calm or chaotic, inserts its presence into the very being of the individual. Regardless of style, of subject matter, of material, of generation, each artwork analyzed in this thesis speaks uniquely of Senegal itself. The

essence of the country transcribes itself into the soul of the people, and the indigenous artists project this spirit out into the rest of the world through art.

Environment acts as the realm in which *ouverature* and *enracinement* intersect in the twenty-first century. Senghor's concept of *enracinement* (rootedness) changed meaning over the course of Senegal's fifty-year independent history. To the first president, the idea connoted a return to the origins of African, not just Senegalese, culture. He referenced the people's pre-colonial ancestors to achieve this. His *chers enfants* emerged directly out of the colonial era from the politics of assimilation that erased much of their native local culture. At the start of independence, it became necessary to ignore completely this period in order to develop any sort of independent culture of their own. The colonial past was still too close to be invoked in the project of identity building. The return to the roots of a pan-African past encouraged the quest for unity across West Africa, asserting African presence back into the continent where European forces attempted to erase it. In this way, *enracinement* aligned with Senghor's other cultural ideologies of *Africanité* and *négritude*, both of which aimed to recapture symbols of black identity that had been removed by colonial forces during the assimilation period. *Enracinement* in Senghor's time returned the Senegalese people to their natural landscape – the flat, untouched grasslands and deserts that existed before the development of modern life.

By the end of the twentieth century, and continuing into the twenty-first, *enracinement* no longer pitted roots against modernity. Now denying the return to past traditions, both ancient and those established within the country's independent history, the ideology seems to convey instead a rootedness in one's current environment,

whatever form that may take. Senegal's citizens, as the decades progress further and further from colonialism, attach themselves more strongly to their country, absorbing its problems, challenges, and beauty as part of their own personal identities. In the twenty-first century, *enracinement* refers not to the nation's indigenous roots nor to its independent ones; contemporary artists concerned themselves with their origins only with regard to their anchorage of the present. Instead, the concept signified active involvement in one's own environment, very much a part of modern time. Contemporary artists realize the senselessness of rooting oneself in the depth of a distant past while existing in the midst of a society that progresses and cultivates itself from its own contemporary circumstances.

### **Constructions of Identity Today**

The three approaches taken by twenty-first-century artists in their work summarize eloquently the transformations that art, politics and culture have undergone since Senegal's independence in 1960. At the start of the country's autonomous rule, identity was presented to its new citizens as a flat, unchanging reproduction of the past. The materials used to communicate this message, paint on canvas and ink and charcoal on paper, were equally flat, lacking the dynamism of the multi-media canvases appearing later in the century. For the twenty years that Senghor was president, this was the (unintentionally) inert image he projected of his people through his artists – one that contrasts sharply with his goals of invigorating the Senegalese spirit and actively engaging his people with their new country. The very fact that Senegalese art of the

twenty-first century has at least three identifiable themes speaks of the extent to which artists have expanded their creative repertoire. Today, they forge a new artistic language to produce works that summarize the culmination of the traditions of the past and celebrate the diversity of the present. Artists that look to the ancient past, such as Keita, no longer do so in a dull and lifeless way, but activate it by engaging it with its connections to the present. Next, there exists those who, like Fall, refer to a more recent past: the colonial era. Relocating it from the hands of the colonizers into those of his compatriots, his canvases focus not on the era's detrimental legacy but on the irrepressible nature of the Senegalese people and their vivid spirit. Finally, there are the artists like Douts, who focus on the urban condition to represent identity today, expressing in their work the very essence of Senegalese modernity.

The works of first-generation artist Iba N'Diaye and third-generation artist Ndoye Douts provide two interesting examples to illustrate how both identity and the way artists approach it has matured since 1960. N'Diaye's *The Cry* (1976) presents a widely recognizable symbol – a sketch of an ancient object. Easily understood on a visual level, one can also nearly instantly understand his intellectual intent; though not infused with emotive qualities, *The Cry* (1976) illustrates in its basic forms the struggle of the artist's countrymen against external oppression. The simplicity in this message and its presentation was necessary in the early days of independence. Still struggling to come to terms with their own place in a new country, Senegalese citizens would not have had the ability, knowledge, or energy to comprehend the complex symbols presented in works today. N'Diaye's work hands his viewers a *specific*, recognizable symbol from a Luba pot, one that does not require extensive contemplation. Viewers could simply regard,

accept, and adopt it as a reflection of their own personal state without needing to question its validity. The anonymous woman portrayed in the pot screams silently across time, connecting the artist's anguish in the present to an enigmatic cry of distress echoing the past.

Douts' *Passage* (2010), also a portrait of sorts, depicts an entirely different figure as the subject of existential exploration. The dark human form overwhelming his composition reveals no recognizable features or references. The artist creates from feeling, inspiration rather than from a studied sketch. Artists working in the first twenty years of independence did not have a clear idea of who they were as a national community, and therefore needed to mold their construction of identity off of something explicit and concrete. In the twenty-first century, artists no longer need the tangible to define the abstract; widely recognizable visual symbols and clues were no longer necessary to convey their emotions. Douts' image reveals a figure unattached to any single defining reference, the complete opposite of N'Diaye's specificity in referencing the Luba pot. This detachment does not reveal a lack of concern for identity politics, but rather an openness to change and evolution. The artist's evacuation of all signs of the past from his work is not an attempt to ignore tradition, but a conscious choice to focus on the present moment. The archetypal Senegalese man in the twenty-first century holds within himself his entire country's heritage. It encompasses his own cultural genealogy and that of his society. The acknowledgement of this in Douts' piece exemplifies the maturation of artistic thought that has occurred since the 1960s. Twenty-first-century artists, through their art, present a respectful reflection on their shared past and an honest portrayal of the

present; they actively direct the future toward an acknowledgment of the fluidity of their identity, an embracement of its evolution, and an interest in furthering its development.

As Senegalese artists voice in their work, identity is a constantly changing entity, influenced by environment, politics and social condition. The Senegalese identity is particularly exceptional for all its contradictions; constant in its passion, it also continuously changes forms, vibrating and radiating with the energy of the people. If the soul of the citizens lay static, the nation itself would also never develop. While originally the land bore its citizens, literally bringing them to life and nourishing their development, as time progresses into modernity and the country continues to mature, the people in return bear their country – in their souls. One does not need to look to the ancient past in order to find shared roots; these roots are present in each person through their inherent spirit, the true source of life within Senegal. The defining characteristics of this spirit lie in its resilience and creativity; culture, tradition, and heritage constantly regenerate themselves within the nation through the innovative will of its people. Senegalese history perpetuates itself in modernity through the expressive visual language of the nation's artists – adding a complex, nuanced, and sophisticated African voice to the lineage of the world's greatest artistic traditions.

Images Referenced

Figure 1



Alexis N'Sofi, *Untitled* (2010)<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> N'Sofi, Alexis. *Untitled*. 2010. Sous-verre. Galerie Arte, Saint-Louis, Senegal.



Figure 2



Papa Ibra Tall, *Couple Royale* (1964)<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Tall, Papa Ibra. *Couple Royale*. 1964. Dakar, Senegal. *Culture & Patrimoine*. Ministère De La Culture Et Des Loisirs. Web. 28 Feb. 2011.

Figure 3



Iba N'Diaye, *Sahel* (1977)<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> N'Diaye, Iba. *Sahel*. 1977. *The Art History Archive - Art Resources for Students and Academics*. The Art History Archive. Web. 25 Feb. 2011.

Figure 4



Iba N'Diaye, *The Cry/Head of a Djem Statuette Nigeria* (1976)<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> N'Diaye, Iba. *The Cry/Head of a Djem Statuette Nigeria*. 1976. *The Art History Archive - Art Resources for Students and Academics*. The Art History Archive. Web. 25 Feb. 2011.

Figure 5



Nok Terra Cotta Head, Jemma, Nigeria (early 20<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *Head*. National Museum, Senegal. *Thoughts on Nok*. 3rd ed. Vol. 27. African Arts. 80. Print.

Figure 6



Figural Pot, Luba, East Kasai, Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> "Figural Pot (Luba, East Kasai, Democratic Republic of Congo)," Fig. 96. In Masterpieces from Central Africa: The Tervuren Museum, edited by Gustaaf Verswijver, et al. Munich and New York: Prestel, 1996.



Figure 7



Iba N'Diaye, *The Cry* (1987)<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> N'Diaye, Iba. *The Cry*. 1987. *The Art History Archive - Art Resources for Students and Academics*. The Art History Archive. Web. 25 Feb. 2011.

Figure 8



Viyé Diba, *Choses au mur* (1998)<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Diba, Viyé. *Choses Au Mur*. 1998. Biennial De L'Art Africain Contemporain, Dakar, Senegal. *Viyé Diba*. Biennial De L'Art Africain Contemporain. Web. 13 Mar. 2011.

Figure 9



Viyé Diba, *Echappement II*<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Diba, Viyé. *Echappement II*. Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York, New York. *Senegal: Viyé Diba*. Contemporary African Art Gallery. Web. 13 Mar. 2011



Figure 10



Cheikh Ndiaye, *I'm True* (1998)<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ndiaye, Cheikh. *I'm True*. 1998. *Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City*. 4th ed. Vol. 36. African Arts. 39. Print.

Figure 11



Cheikh Ndiaye, *Nettitude* (1999)<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ndiaye, Cheikh. *Nettitude*. 1999. *Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City*. 4th ed. Vol. 36. African Arts. 39. Print

Figure 12



Pierre Goudiaby, *African Renaissance Monument* (2010)<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Goudiaby, Pierre. *African Renaissance Monument*. 2010. Dakar, Senegal. *Monument De La Renaissance Africaine*. Monuraf.com. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.

Figure 13



El Hadji Keita, *Gooryalla* (2010)<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom

Figure 14



Abdou Karim Fall, *Balcon en bois* (2010)<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom

Figure 15



Abdou Karim Fall, *Fenêtre en ruine* (2010)<sup>164</sup>

Figure 16

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<sup>164</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom



Saint-Louis, Senegal (1905)<sup>165</sup>

Figure 17

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<sup>165</sup> *Saint-Louis, Senegal - Rue De Saint-Louis*. 1905. Photograph. Saint-Louis, Senegal. *Souvenirs Du Sénégal*. Dakar, Senegal: Visiafric, 1980. 68. Print.



Saint-Louis, Senegal (2010)<sup>166</sup>

Figure 18

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<sup>166</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom





Ndoye Douts, *Passage* (2010)<sup>167</sup>

Figure 19

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<sup>167</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom



Ndoye Douts, *Ville nouvelle vie nouvelle* (2010)<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Photograph: Hannah Shambroom

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