

HISTORY AND MEMORY, HISTORY AS MEMORY

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Abstract

Starting with the late 1980's and early 1990's, the field of Western historiography was pervaded by studies on the history of memory against the background of mentalities, the birth of the history of present time and the struggle of oral history to promote itself (time of roots, genealogies, commemorations); it was also the time for a growing interest in an alternative history of Africa built upon memories. Museums felt empowered to interrogate current histories, while the older ones revisited the very concepts upon which they had been previously built. Memories felt compelled to question history – and to rectify it. Certain researchers felt obliged to bring forth the memorial constructions. While in Europe memories were invited to permanently defy history, in Africa their task was, from the beginning, that of investing history with truth. Very scarce were here the invitations to relativism. Memories in Africa brought with them a familiar past that was allegedly colonized and suppressed. Furthermore, waking up dormant memories from before the recent, Western colonial past was part of the identity building process in Africa: such narratives justified the individual via his/her ancestors, ethnic group peers and generations. On top of that, local intellectuals built on the national and continental identity. Based on the common roots, the emerging African discourse blamed recent history for the rupture with the *long durée*.

Celebration and commemoration are still the barometers of existing, different types of memories (individual, communities, official). The controversial heritage of juxtaposed memories requires a separate interpretation. The Kermel Square in downtown Dakar, Senegal, is such an example. The walls of the main building and the surrounding building of colonial French architecture are overlapped with imprints of the more recent national memory, and the latter is the sworn enemy of the former. Each nation-state has its own heroes and places of memory, while few remember when the stories associated with them were born. We are now left with just their compulsory, ceremonial re-visitations

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On the 26th of July 2007, at the *Cheikh Anta Diop* University of Dakar, France's President Nicolas Sarkozy, elected to this supreme office only two months before and on his first official state visit to the African continent, delivered a speech which was soon to trigger reactions of indignation among African intellectuals and to provoke responses with a pronounced polemic character. Looked upon as «offensive and unacceptable», the Dakar speech whose author is Henri Guaino, special counsellor to the President,¹ brought to the forefront a rhetoric which is the result of a cultural inheritance dominated by colonial imagery representing an Africa incapable of assuming its own destiny and fighting an evil which it was largely responsible for.² The chosen place for delivering the speech held high symbolic value and thus played an important role in the scientific, political and ideological construction articulated in the ensuing period. The university of Dakar, the largest in West Africa, bears the name of a symbol of post-colonial African identity discourse, a place of memory for both the national state of Senegal and for the united Africa³. The entire opus of Cheikh Anta Diop was constructed as a plea in favour of the longevity of African cultures and an argumentative response from various scientific fields to the European theories formulated in the 19th century regarding spaces «without history», considered different solely because no written documents produced in chancelleries could bear witness to their past. The works of the Senegalese professor and researcher offered in the second half of the past century argues in favour of the necessity of rewriting Africa's history, or, to put it more ambitiously – the world's history, the history of science and the history of the arts. The justification for the imperative need of writing African history from an African perspective, beyond the necessity

¹ In various public statements, Henri Guaino claimed authorship for the statements presented in the university of Dakar speech from the 26th of July 2007. <http://info.France3fr./France/34916821-fr.php>

² Afro-pessimist literature is largely responsible for this type of rhetoric. Among the volumes published at the beginning of the year 2000 and which has given rise to serious polemics, we mention Stephen Smith, *Négrologie: Pour-quoi l'Afrique meurt*, Paris, Calmann- Lévy, 2003.

³ Cheikh M'Backé Diop, *Cheikh Anta Diop. L'homme et l'oeuvre*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 2003.

of re-establishing truth, was argued also through the Africans' need to turn the pages of their recent history in order to enter a new temporal dimension, the one of the *African Renaissance*.⁴ The themes⁵ tackled by Cheikh Anta Diop opened up a plethora of research axes still insufficiently explored in scientific circles, but which have been revisited and bestowed with new senses in the first decades of the 21st century, and offered many of the arguments that the new African cultural identity construction could be based on⁶, the basis of a pan-African political vision argued in an increasingly coherent manner. The aforementioned theories are also brought up every time the future of the African continent is discussed and historical continuity is employed as an argument from an optimistic perspective. His ideas about a federal state built on cultural foundations reinforced by historical, economic and sociological arguments are more present than ever in the political pleas in favour of a viable African federation. President Sarkozy made no reference in his speech to the African personality whom the community has brought homage to by conferring his name to the largest university in West Africa. «The omission» was highlighted in the «lectures» offered by the academic milieu and was considered significant for the «incredible ignorance of the French president and his counsellors or for a deliberate choice doubled by a vengeful spitefulness».⁷

Various volumes containing texts authored by specialists in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, political science and linguistics

⁴ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Quand pourra-t-on parler de la Renaissance Africaine?*, in "Millieux vivants", nr.36, novembre 1948, pp.57-65.

⁵ For further details see François-Xavier Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, Paris, Karthala, 1996.

⁶ The concept of *African cultural identity* was defined by Cheikh Anta Diop in his book *Nation nègre et culture* (1954) as being, ideally, a construction based on three essential factors – history, language and psychology.

⁷ „L'ignorance incroyable du président français et de ses conseillers, ou plutôt d'une volonté délibérée, accompagnée d'une sorte de méprise revancharde, de ne pas citer le nom de celui – Cheikh Anta Diop- qui après un long et victorieux combat contre „les falsifications de l'histoire” a reçu la consécration qu'il méritait en obtenant post mortem des intellectuels et des responsables sénégalais la décision de transformer « l'Université de Dakar » en « Université Cheikh Anta Diop »,; Elikia M'Bokolo, *Ce que sont ces étranges „amis de l'Afrique”*, Préface in Adama Ba Konaré, *op.cit.*, pp.14-15.

from universities and research institutes in Africa and Europe, coordinated by top personalities in the academic field, were published all throughout the year 2008.⁸ The tackled topics repeated themselves, while still being treated in different manners, and the arguments brought up were increasingly sophisticated with each new paper being published. Some quotes extracted from the president's speech, each time the same ones, constituted the starting point of analyses, while simultaneously reminding the scientific community everywhere and the public opinion interested in issues related to the African continent, of subjects still perceived as sensitive through the lens of their actuality, even though they had been taken up countless times in the decades following the declarations of independence: « Africa's tragedy is that the African man has not yet gained sufficient access to history » ; « colonization is not solely responsible for all of Africa's difficulties; « Africa's problem is that it has become a myth that everyone reconstructs for the sake of their own personal cause».⁹

⁸ Some examples: Jean-Pierre Chrétien (dir.), *L'Afrique de Sarkozy. Un déni d'histoire*, Paris, Karthala, 2008 ;

Makhily Gassama (dir.), *L'Afrique répond à Sarkozy*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2008 ; Adama Ba Konaré (dir.), *Petit précis de remise à niveau sur l'histoire africaine à l'usage du président Sarkozy*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.

⁹ «Le drame de l'Afrique, c'est que l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire. Le paysan africain, qui depuis des millénaires, vit avec les saisons, dont l'idéal de vie est d'être en harmonie avec la nature, ne connaît que l'éternel recommencement du temps rythmé par la répétition des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles. Dans cette imaginaire où tout recommence toujours, il n'y a de place ni pour l'aventure humaine, ni pour l'idée de progrès. Dans cet univers où la nature commande tout, l'homme échappe à l'angoisse de l'histoire qui tenaille l'homme moderne mais l'homme reste immobile au milieu d'un ordre immuable où tout semble être écrit d'avance. Jamais l'homme ne s'élance vers l'avenir. Jamais il ne lui vient l'idée de sortir de la répétition pour s'inventer un destin. ...La colonisation n'est pas responsable de toutes les difficultés de l'Afrique. Elle n'est pas responsable des guerres sanglantes que se font les Africains entre eux. Elle n'est pas responsable des génocides. Elle n'est pas responsable des dictateurs, elle n'est pas responsable du fanatisme, elle n'est pas responsable de la corruption, de la prévarication. Elle n'est pas responsable des gaspillages et de la pollution. ...Le problème de l'Afrique, c'est qu'elle est devenue un mythe que chacun reconstruit pour les besoins de sa cause... La réalité de l'Afrique, c'est une démographie trop forte pour une croissance économique trop faible...la réalité de l'Afrique, c'est le développement qui ne va pas assez vite, c'est l'agriculture qui ne produit pas assez, c'est

Africa's history, the history of African civilizations, multiple identities, pan-Africanism, afro-centrist and afro-pessimistic perspectives, from historical to cultural and geo-political ones, generated debates of an impressive academic force drawing attention to the diverse perspectives of relating to the problems that African states still struggle with and to the role that an emerging continent will play in the globalized world of the 21st century. Many years after this speech was delivered, French officials and political figures, collaborators or rivals, saw themselves forced to apologize to « all Africans » for the offensive utterances of their president.¹⁰ Five years later, Francois Hollande, in spite of declaring that he did not intend to deliver speeches in Dakar in order to erase the memory of his predecessor's words, situates himself on a radically different position by means of one single phrase: « Africans have taken hold of their own destiny and this movement will not end ».¹¹ On the 28th of November 2017, another French president, Emanuel Macron, also on a first visit to sub-Saharan African countries, addressing youngsters, at the university of Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso, proved through subliminal hints that the « lessons » delivered ten years earlier to one of his predecessors had been thoroughly internalized.¹² Inviting the establishment of a durable

le manque de routes, c'est le manque d'écoles, c'est le manques d'hôpitaux. La réalité de l'Afrique, c'est celle d'un grand continent qui a tout pour réussir et qui ne réussit pas parce qu'elle n'arrive pas à se libérer de ses mythes. » <http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/root/bank/print/79184.htm>.

¹⁰ „Quelqu'un est venu ici vous dire que „l'Homme africain n'est pas entré dans l'histoire". Pardon, pardon pour ces paroles humiliantes et qui n'auraient jamais dû être prononcées et – je vous le dis en confidence–qui n'engagent ni la France, ni les Français" Ségolène Royal declared on the 6th of April 2009 before the militants of the Socialist Senegalese Party gathered in Dakar. www.liberation.fr. 2009/04/07.

In an interview for the RFI radio station, in the aftermath of President Sarkozy's speech at the University of Dakar, Rama Yade claimed that „ Sarkozy n'est pas un Africain. Moi je pense que non seulement l'homme africain est entré dans l'histoire mais qu'il a même été le premier à y entrer. Parce que j'en connais la culture", <https://www.france-tvinfo.fr>.

¹¹ https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/hollande-et-sarkozy-deux-versions-du-discours-de-dakar_1173898.html.

¹² „ Néanmoins, si je ne veux pas m'improviser historien tout particulièrement dans l'université qui a pris le nom d'un des plus grands historiens du continent [Joseph Ki-Zerbo], je veux m'exprimer ici au pays des hommes intègres parce que je sais qu'on

partnership between Europe and Africa through France's mediation, Emanuel Macron, from the position of a young president, «liberated from colonial memory» took the risk of suggesting that the young generation turn «the colonial page of history» accepting it as a period during which « crimes were undeniable, but so were great achievements and happy histories.»¹³

Beyond their offensive character, the anger they brought about, the chain reactions of African intellectuals and the apologies presented by political figures, president Sarkozy's claims offered historians the occasion of measuring the extent of stereotypes which had made their way into analyses of the African continent's past. Much has been written about pre-colonial cultural areas and political formations, about the trauma suffered by Africa's peoples during the times of slavery and colonialism, about guilt and responsibilities, about the new challenges the continent must

ne parle pas qu'au Burkina Faso, ni même uniquement à l'Afrique de l'Ouest, ni même uniquement en Afrique francophone ; parce que ces barrières qu'on a longtemps mises dans nos représentations, dans nos lectures politiques, dans nos analyses, ce ne sont plus les barrières de l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui, de la vôtre. Aussi je me refuse à toujours revenir sur les mêmes représentations d'hier. Il y a eu des combats, il y a eu des fautes et des crimes, il y a eu des grandes choses et des histoires heureuses. Mais j'ai une conviction profonde, notre responsabilité n'est pas de nous y enfermer, notre responsabilité n'est pas de rester dans ce passé et de vivre l'aventure pleine et entière de cette génération.,, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/29/le-discours-de-ouaga-dougou-d-emmanuel-macron_522245_3212.

¹³ „Je suis d'une génération où on ne vient pas dire à l'Afrique ce qu'elle doit faire, quelles sont les règles de l'Etat de droit mais où partout on encouragera celles et ceux qui en Afrique veulent prendre leurs responsabilités, veulent faire souffler le vent de la liberté et de l'émancipation comme vous l'avez fait ici.

Et je suis d'une génération qui observe, que partout sur le continent africain, la jeunesse africaine réclame avec impatience de participer à la construction du destin de son pays et de la mondialisation. Je suis d'une génération de Français pour qui l'Afrique n'est ni un encombrant passé, ni un voisin parmi d'autres. La France entretient avec l'Afrique un lien historique indéfectible, pétri de souffrance, de déchirements, mais aussi si souvent de fraternité et d'entraide.

L'Afrique est gravée dans la mémoire française, dans la culture, dans l'Histoire, dans l'identité de la France et c'est là une force et une fierté que je veux cultiver, que je veux porter comme un atout de la France, pour la France et pour l'Afrique dans notre rapport au monde.,, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/29/le-discours-de-ouagadougou-d-emmanuel-macron_522245_3212.

face, but mostly about Africa's right of having its history acknowledged, about memory and about the common African and Western heritage. At the beginning of the 21st century, a brief overview of the most recent papers proves that academic writing of African history has reached a point of maturity. Disputes regarding the hierarchy of sources have been long surpassed, only the complexity of research methods could still spark controversies. The Western vision of the different periods in Africa's history is however the one that African historians still struggle with, in spite of the fact that a series of objectives and methodological options have become elements of connection between them and Africanists from European and American research centres. The works published in response to president Sarkozy's claims made at the University of Dakar in 2007 are ample proof in this respect.

The work of those engaged in writing Africa's history proves however to be difficult, being caught up between the demands of politics, of the memory of communities and ethnic groups, and facing difficulties in identifying sources able to cover all historical periods and in articulating personal methodologies for investigating the various types of sources which have come into recent use alongside the traditional ones. A history as an alternative to Western perspectives, one closer to the truth of past facts because of its being the result of an inside view of traditional societies, of the colonial period, of state constructions, cultural and economic areas, has gradually gained a foothold in academic milieus along with the birth of nation states. Historians grouped around the schools at Dakar (Senegal), Ibadan (Nigeria) and Dar es Salam (Tanzania), which have grown into prestigious autonomous centres of education and research at the end of the 20th century, have imposed a historiography indebted to new identity constructs by means of alumni, who have become primary and secondary school teachers and have taught the generations born after the declaration of independence from an entirely new perspective. Starting with the '80s and '90s, when the Western historiographic space was pervaded by the historical studies of memory, against the backdrop of the evolution of the history of mentalities and the birth of the history of the present, but also the difficulties of oral history in imposing itself (*the temporality of roots, the trend of genealogy, the mania*

of commemoration), when memorial practices have become more diverse and when, out of a desire to preserve everything, the new sources were represented by life stories, the forgotten testimonies of anonymous storytellers, of the excluded and marginalized, the interest for an alternative history of Africa, built with the help of memory, has increased. Various museums were founded, and the old ones revised the core concepts they were based on. Memory found itself in the position of questioning history and even of setting it straight. Researchers have evinced a special interest in the modes in which the result of memorial constructs or historical elaboration can be revealed without ambiguities, in the process of transmission within transmission.¹⁴ While in Europe memories were encouraged to constantly interrogate history, thereby splitting, invading and even blowing up its field of investigation by questioning global rhetoric, making points of view appear relative in the name of authenticity and identities, in Africa memories were the ones being interrogated from the very beginning in order to infuse history with truth. The attempts at relativization or „surveillance“ still remain frail. The appeal to memory has meant the adherence to a past considered to have been ever-present and familiar in spite of the colonizers' efforts to sink it into oblivion and the certainty that this past guarantees the future. Moreover, the awakening of memory equaled to the redefinition of identity. The layers of memory, which cement group identity by means of their narratives, imply the justification of the individual through ancestors and of the ethnic group through the succession of generations built through the discourse recited over and over again, for perpetual recollection. To these layers intellectuals and political figures have added new ones – the one of national identity, and beyond it, the one of continental identity. At the basis of the construct lies the discourse of common origins, a recuperative one, invested with the power of repairing a reality for the obvious fracturing of which recent history, and not long-term memory, is almost always held responsible. Celebration and commemoration are still barometers for the disputes between various

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2000.

types of memory (individual memories, group memories, community memories, officially imposed memories)¹⁵.

The preoccupations with the re-establishment of the place of memory¹⁶ are ascribed to the complex trajectory of identity transformations and re-definitions¹⁷. Every nation state has its own heroes and its own places of memory. Kankan Mousa (1307-1332) the sovereign of the Mali empire, Jenné-Jeno (the ancient site of the present-day city of Djenné), or the park of monuments and statues in Bamako, are such examples for the history of the Mali national state.¹⁸ The events of the 28th of September and the 2nd of October 1958, situated and analysed between the memorial construct and the necessity of political legitimacy, became key elements in unravelling the mechanisms through which that NO spoken by Guinea became a key place of memory place in articulating national identity.¹⁹

Timbuktu, the city situated on the map in the northern part of the republic of Mali, functions as a place of memory both for the national state and for Africa and Europe. The city is a symbol of African cultural values, of the history of humanity, but also of the inaccessibility and of the dreams of perfection, of everything that was forbidden and at the same time within reach for the Western world. Many of the elements that made up the legend constructed in Europe throughout many centuries,

¹⁵ See also: Jean Godefroy Bidima, *L'idée d'héroïsme dans l'histoire (post)coloniale africaine: sommes-nous héroïques?*; Simona Corlan- Ioan, *René Caillié- eroul incontestabil*; Sindani Kiangu, *Leopold II entre la gare de Kinshasa et le Musée Royal de Tervuren: bienfaiteur et fondateur?*; Donatien Dibze Dia Mwembu, *Cadres sociaux et politiques de la mémoire. Les réincarnations du Chef Kamanda ya Kaumbu*, in Simona Corlan Ioan (dir.), *Negru pe Alb/Noir sur Blanc*, the chapter *Socluri în așteptarea statuilor*, București, Institutul Cultural Roman, 2006, pp.193-313.

¹⁶ The concept is used in the sense defined by Pierre Nora (dir.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.

¹⁷ The studies comprised in the volume coordinated by Jean Pierre Chrétien and Jean-Louis Triaud, *Histoire d'Afrique. Les enjeux de mémoire*, Paris, Karthala, 1999, offer a series of important analyses of the construction and becoming of memorial places in Africa.

¹⁸ The former examples are analyzed in two chapters of Doulaye Konaté's book, *Travail de mémoire et construction nationale au Mali*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.

¹⁹ Céline Pauthier, *Le NON de la Guinée : un lieu de mémoire national* in Odile Goerg, Céline Pauthier, Abdoulaye Diallo, *Le NON de la Guinée (1958). Entre mythe, relecture historique et résonances contemporaines*, Cahier Afrique no. 25, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010.

beginning with the times when the city was a phantasm that changed its place on the map with every new piece of information originating in the tales of Arab tradesmen or European travellers, were taken over and used in order to justify simultaneously the national construct and the more recent pan-African projects. In April 2012, when the jihadist flag was flown in Timbuktu and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the powerful emir of AQMI, assisted in the evening prayer in the city's grand mosque, the entire world came together to save its patrimony. Newspapers published various articles informing the public opinion about the danger the city was facing, in the hope that they would be able to influence Western states to take quick political action. UNESCO reacted by including Timbuktu on the list of global patrimony threatened with disappearance. Back then, *the city of the 33 saints* lost its mausoleums, its libraries were burned, as well as the new headquarters of the Ahmed-Baba Institute offered as a gift by South Africa. Nobody knows exactly how many manuscripts disappeared forever, fallen prey to Islamist rage. What we know for sure is that many were saved by local families who hid them in their homes, as the greatest of treasures, and preserved them from one generation to the next. French and Malian military freed the city from its jihadist occupation at the end of January 2013.²⁰ In January 2016, the Day of the Mali Army was celebrated in Timbuktu, in the *Cheick Sidi Bekaye* garrison, to mark the importance of the victory over terrorism. In the present international context, considering the terrorist threats coming from various parts of the globe, the name of the Malian city is synonymous with the fight for freedom. The movie *Timbuktu* (2014) directed by the Mauritian Abderrahmane Sissoko, won an award at the Cannes festival and which received 7 César awards in 2015, during the festival's 40th edition, became a manifest. The premiere poster bore the inscription *Je suis Charlie* making the movie's message even more obvious: the trials of Timbuktu were the world's trials.

Examples abound. Nobody knows exactly when and how certain images associated with people or places were born, how much of them is fiction and how much truth, how much was raw information passed on

²⁰ Thierry Portes, *La ville de Tombouctou libérée des djihadistes*, « Le Figaro », 28 /01/ 2013, www.lefigaro.fr.

from one generation to the next, and how much personal fabrication varying from one individual to another. What has remained important are meanings, and their revisiting was conceived as synonymous with the regaining of dignity. The Malian historian Doulaye Konaté²¹ submitted some concrete and discursive models to analysis²² considered to have become focal points capable of organizing memories around them, and of giving birth to a common national and continental past and a collective culture with the potential of becoming rooted in the African consciousness.²³ The investigations performed in certain places of memory in Saloum-Senegal by Rokhaya Fall and Abdoulaye Toure opened up new ways of understanding political and economic structures from 19th century Senegambia.²⁴

The controversial patrimony through the juxtaposed memories it preserves within itself requires in this context a special analysis. The Kermel square in the historical centre of Dakar is one such example. The walls of its central hall and the buildings with colonial architecture which surround it preserve the inserted memories of different periods of the colonial era which have overlapped with the imprint of more recent national memory. In this place, in the name of modernity and the city's development, political figures in charge approved real estate projects financed primarily by the city's Lebanese community. In the written

²¹ Doulaye Konaté is an archeologist, professor at the University of Bamako and president of the Association of African Historians.

²² Three examples are analyzed in the work: *Le griot : histoire orale et travail de mémoire dans la société ouest-africaine*, *Le parc des monuments et statues de Bamako : lieux de la mémoire nationale ?*, *Jenné- Jeno : quand la mémoire se saisit d'un site archéologique « occulté » par la tradition orale* in Doulaye Konaté, *op.cit.*, pp.43-112.

²³ The research undertaken by Doulaye Konaté focused on exercising the applicability of the concept of *place of memory* as it was defined by Pierre Nora, both as far as the national, and the pan-african spaces are concerned, starting from the hypothesis that the differences in the nature of dealings between memory and history are not truly significant in the African world as compared to the Western one and that they only impose special methodological precautions in order to avoid the traps of the European model.

²⁴ Rokhaya Fall Sokhna et Abdoulaye Touré, *Les lieux des mémoire: des sources historiques encore peu exploitées au Sénégal*, in Ibrahima Thioub (dir.), *Patrimoine et sources historiques en Afrique*, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, pp. 105-113.

justifications, the necessity of forgetting periods of trauma (that is to say, the colonial period) was hailed as the only remedy capable of healing a young nation. Even though changing the colonial architecture in the central area of Dakar was an endeavour supported during the period of the city's modernization by president Wade, it was one of the problems that triggered the most widespread controversies in spite of the fact that well-grounded legislation existed regarding the preservation of patrimony. The independent Senegal was an example in Africa for its policy of protecting patrimony. The law of 1971 which regulated the status of historical monuments and archaeological sites was the normative tool which allowed for the conservation of various coherent ensembles some of which were included by UNESCO on its list of world heritage sites (the Gorée island, Saint –Louis, the megaliths of Senegambia). By means of the 2001-1065 decree from December 2001 the inventorying of a large number of sites was enabled along with the declaration of some of them as pertaining to national patrimony. In the 80s, when the obvious memories of the colonial period – names of streets and public institutions or statues placed in key spots in the city – gradually disappeared, the *Kermel* square was granted the status of national patrimony.

The *Kermel* square project was born alongside the one for the improvement of the city of Dakar, in its beginnings the home of the Lebou fishers' community, later on turned into a French possession through the act signed by Leopold Protet, commander of the navy division of the Western Coast of Africa, on a May 25th 1857. In 1863, the administrative council of the colony established, along with the names of the future streets and squares of the city the name of the square next to the port, Quermel, after the frigate captain Eustache Louis Jean Quermel, former commander of the Gorée island. The first stone of the foundation of the central edifice was laid in 1908 by Millies-Lacroix, the minister of the Colonies, on another location and with a slightly changed name through a semantic modification – *Kermel* – following a project that respected the principles of the era's colonial architecture. The commercial hall was completed in 1910 and gradually became the heart of the location that it would transform, turning it into one of reference in the life of the French Western African capital and later of the Republic of Senegal, and even

eclipsed through its daily rhythms the great Independence Square whose function would remain one of circulation and only occasionally of hosting ceremonies dedicated to the national day. At the end of the 80s, the central hall was in an advanced state of degradation and specialists in restauration suggested it be removed. In June 1993, the district's inhabitants and lovers of the city's patrimony – architects, historians and artists – sensing the danger hovering above the entire *Kermel* space (comprising also areas of the immediate neighbourhood, also dating back to the colonial period, the train station, the port and part of the buildings of the historical centre – the Platou district) formed an association (*Association des Riverains de Kermel*) the objective of which was to preserve the area.

On the 23rd of September 1993, a fire destroyed a large part of the central hall of the square, a fact generally perceived this time as a national disaster. At that point, «patrimony culture» made a resounding comeback to the Fortress where nothing could be any longer as it had been before.²⁵ The hall was rebuilt identically through the financial contribution of Luxemburg and by means of European Development Funds, but the entire *Kermel* site did not benefit from restoration projects and gradually degraded to the point of total decay. The state of the buildings neighbouring on the hall, the threat they represented for security and public hygiene, were the arguments real estate developers came up with and which were presented to political decision makers, in the beginning of the 2000s, the first urban rehabilitation projects including also *Kermel* square. President Abdoulaye Wade decided to change the face of the capital city and became a supporter of the real estate projects which also focused on the area in the immediate proximity of the *Kermel* square hall. Two modern office buildings were to take the place of patrimony buildings demolished without authorization, an old butcher's shop *Trois petis cochons* and a restaurant *Le Sarraut*, both of which were mentioned in local tourist guides. As preoccupations for maintaining patrimony had already materialized through the coagulation of citizen and entrepreneur forces in associations which addressed the authorities responsible for

²⁵ Hamady Bocoum, *Leçons de Kermel*, in Anca Brătuleanu, Horia Moldovan, Petru Mortu (eds.), *Kermel en devenir. Les cahiers du projet*, Editura Universitară „Ion Mincu”, București, 2010, p.26.

decision making, associations which had gotten involved in singling out and rehabilitating historical buildings, the practical implementation of the project (in spite of President Wade's support) did not prove to be an easy task. Viviane Wade, the first lady, was at that time at the head of an association – the *Foundation for Patrimony* - which had managed to co-opt many local enterprises thereby allowing the financing of the first preservation and rehabilitation efforts of the colonial architectural patrimony of the capital (among them the fabrication and installation of 100 memorial plaques on listed buildings). The main opposition the modernization projects of the historical centre faced, came precisely from the leading members of this foundation. A « media war» ensued, where the main protagonists were the Wade presidential couple, through the institutions which they represented, dividing intellectual, artistic and entrepreneurial milieus of the capital and spicing up the president's second term. Among pro and con arguments, the most frequently brought up were the ones referring to the memory of the colonial era. Who were the people for whom the old colonial architecture of Dakar still held significance? Viviane Wade, a Frenchwoman from an old liberal family, supported through all possible means the restoration projects, thereby often attracting the criticism of intellectuals with afro-centrist ideas for whom objects dating back to the colonial times did not deserve to constitute the object of patrimonial preservation.

In this context, in 2008, Romania's proposal to donate to the city of Dakar a project containing the blueprints of the entire *Kermel* site and the first proposals for the saving and capitalization of the space, was received with great interest.²⁶ A third actor entered the stage: a country without a colonial past, which had trained in its universities a significant part of the staff that ensured the administration of the independent state on grounds of the privileged political relations initiated by the first president of the Republic of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor. In working out the project,

²⁶ The project was conceived by a group of students of the „Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest, under the guidance of professor and archeologist Anca Brătuleanu and with the support of Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project's result were published in 2010 in the Notebooks attached to the volume *Kermel en devenir*, Anca Brătuleanu (dir.), quoted above.

the Romanian specialists were supported by the Presidency, the *Foundation for Patrimony* and the *Association of Kermel Riparians*. Architects and specialists in patrimony encouraged its implementation while at the same time struggling with the guilt of not having been able to complete it on grounds of being too caught up in the dispute over memory. Even though the project was archived, the winner was the passion for patrimony which along with the *Kermel* dispute started to hold a permanent place in the life of the fortress.

Mentalities evolved, and the inhabitants of Dakar ended up re-owning and re-valuing the inbuilt testimonies of their colonial history, which after having made use of them for many years, were filled with new symbolic values. The transformations of the past years in the urban landscape of the capital were performed while also respecting the vestiges of the colonial past. A new ensemble under construction, *the Cultural Park*, comprising the restored Central Station transformed into the *National Contemporary Arts Museum*, alongside the *Black Civilizations Museum* and the new theatre, both new buildings, gifts from China, was built in the immediate vicinity of the *Kermel* district.

Africa has not spared efforts in recent years, with the help of specialized international institutions (UNESCO, UAI-*Union Academique Internationale*), through various programs (*Fontes Historiae Africanae*, *ISESCO*), in the inventorying and the numbering of manuscript resources from the colonial archives, and in the preservation of the architectural patrimony of the colonial period.²⁷ The adoption in 2003, as part of the XXXIIth session of the general Conference of UNESCO, of the Convention for saving immaterial cultural patrimony²⁸, opened up new perspectives for the valuing of South-Saharan African civilizations. It remains to be seen to what extent a common system of normative texts will allow such a tool to gain efficiency.

²⁷ Hamady Bocoum, *Patrimoine et sources historiques: enjeux et perspectives pour l'Afrique* in Ibrahima Thioub (dir.), *Op.cit.* pp.85 – 93.

²⁸ *Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel*, UNESCO, Paris, 2003.