Book Review

The 'Dugout': A Review of Africa's Struggle For Its Art: History Of A Postcolonial Defeat

By Bénédicte Savoy
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This, in the end, is a book about a certain defeat. Not the defeat that immediately comes to mind when the word is uttered, that of warriors at war; but, the defeat of consistent and powerful efforts to bury calls for "restitution" which emanate from a very uncomfortable truth (of relevance here is Foucault who writes about "regimes of truth" in terms of "colonial apparatus of power") that for long remained buried in sand. The sand kept washing off with drops of rain that were at times torrential, but mostly drizzled. As it washed off, the buried truth gradually became visible triggering efforts to physically dig it out and showcase it for all to see, thus defeating the efforts [yes, efforts] to conceal it six feet under. I say, in the end, and, yes, in the end. This, in a nutshell, best summarises Savoy's *Africa's Struggle For Its Art: History Of A Postcolonial Defeat*. Savoy's narration of the defeat of efforts for "restitution" by African nations serves us well but it serves us better if what she presents us is seen as the defeat of the efforts to thwart the call for "restitution" which, by the way, is happening, but at a snail pace or better still, in pour-over coffee drops. The book has a goal which, as Savoy puts it, is to "reconstruct half a century of resistance by European collecting institutions in the face of legitimate demands for restitution from African countries." This "reconstruction" requires a "long, hard and unflinching look at European museums' disavowal and arrogance towards these demands." With this, Savoy hopes that the book will contribute to the movement for "restitution".

Well, be that as it may, what precisely is the contribution? What has Savoy presented us in this book? What is she saying in the presentation? These two questions are my concern: one is asked in past tense, the other, in present continuous. There is a reason for this which unfolds in the ensuring 'conversion' with Bénédicte Savoy, an art historian of repute at the Technical University Berlin. The 'conversation' is *sociology meeting history*

because the "return our cultural works" movement, if I may be indulged to label it as such, can scarcely be neatly taken out of the social processes of an awareness of the cultural production of African societies sharpened and perhaps shaped by a *certain level* of political consciousness. As we know, the dominant western social world of art and aesthetics relegates African art; yet, the museums of the West hold tightly to these cultural productions that are relegated in the wider scheme of things, just as the colonised were by the colonists, who, at any desired moment, 'utilised' them for aggrandisement and betterment. Why? This is the key question that needs answering. I venture explanation in this 'conversion' with Savoy wrapped in Edward Said's analysis of the binary rhetorics of power that developed as part of the imperialist and orientalist ideologies espoused in the West. In Said's analysis, we see the nature of colonialist thinking during the 'Age of Enlightenment' (see Said 2003 [1978]).

To the point, in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was considered normal and very much unquestionable for culturally produced works from the Global South, which then, were mostly colonies, territories and dominions of imperial powers of European countries to be taken from their sites of production and communities of origin and relocated not only to the cultural capitals of Western Europe, but few leading seats of learning in some of these European countries. As it turned out, London and Paris both became centres for the reception, classification, display and consumption of African, American, Asian and Oceanic artworks and artefacts in ways that were barely considered acts of hegemonic cultural appropriation and theft, but self-righteously considered as safeguarding rightfully owned British and French 'properties 'from overseas territories. As Said notes:

> If you were British or French in the 1860s you saw, and you felt, India and North Africa with a combination of familiarity and distance, but never with a sense of their separate sovereignty. In your narratives, histories, travel tales and explorations your consciousness was represented as the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and peoples (Said 1993: xxiv).

And with regards to peoples of these colonies, they were as a matter of course perceived as the 'Other' and were, as the recently deceased bell hooks put it, "offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palette" (hooks 1992: 39). Satisfying the European appetites for the black female body has in fact been very well documented.

So, within the context of 1950s to 1960s decolonisation, one might have expected perceptions of an African 'Other' to decrease in significance, and the resulting associated practices of exhibiting the "exotic" to disappear. On the contrary; what we have is the arts and culture establishments of Western countries' *use* of museums as sites to reinforce colonial power hierarchies, "rhetorics of racism" and systems of exploitation and oppression effectively turning museums

into what Barringer and Flynn describe as "three dimensional imperial archives" for preserving memories of a colonial past (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 11). What then emerged from this has been described as "differentialist racism" where cultural reference points were utilised to justify the continued separation and dissimilar treatment of artworks and (by association) their creators (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 22).

My point, to simplify, is that holding tightly to the "art/artefacts" of Africa is a deliberate act of reminder; a continuous reproduction and reinforcement of 'othering' that ultimately treat any perceived differences as aberrations. This is a practice that has long featured negative categorisations of Africa and Africans as different from assumed Western norms, constructing them as deficient, deviant and inferior. The conscious creation of the 'Other' that drove and still drives the West in relation to Africans and their cultural works, to go back to Said, is evident of an ideology of difference and an apparatus of power which emerged and was reinforced over centuries of Western European exploration, imperialist expansionism and colonial appropriation of territories throughout the Global South peaking, as it was, in the 'Age of Enlightenment' through the espousal of European notions of universalism and supremacy to differentially positioned bodies according to gender and phenotype (see Saldanha 2006). As Stuart Hall observes, issues of race, class and gender were part and parcel of Europe's Enlightenment narratives concerning the history, geography and socio-cultural dynamics of modernity formation:

> The Enlightenment was a very European affair. European society, it assumed, was the most advanced type of society on Earth, European man *(sic)* the pinnacle of human achievement. It treated the West as the result of forces largely *internal* to Europe's history and formation. (Hall 1992: 278)

To be sure, Savoy did not go this far in her narration of the struggle for restitution, though there were echoes of this analysis of European 'world-view' in her book; but the very strong efforts to hold tightly to the cultural works in the museums of the West which she narrated brilliantly could be brought to sharper relief within this wider context – a sort of sociology of power, so to say. The strength of Savoy's masterpiece notwithstanding, this sociology merits detailed discussion than what Savoy presents us. This said, this is a history book, one that not only documents facts, events and issues but provides the discussion around issues, and, agitates for what is presented to the reader. The movement that Bénédicte Savoy hopes the book's documentation will contribute to, movement for restitution, started modestly when in 1965, as she reminds us, the West African (Benin) writer, Paulin Joachim called on Western museums to "liberate the black deities", a historical fact; that movement was and has been ignited several times since then, a historical fact. The recent ignition (President

Emmanuel Macron), caught fire in a bigger fireball: the 'must-fall movements' – "Rhodes Must Fall" student movements in South Africa and the UK; the 'Slaves monument must go' movement in the UK and latterly, the U.S. and some former imperial nations of Europe ('colonial statutes must fall'). Not to tie all these together is itself a "post-colonial defeat" as the sub title of the book suggests.

Savoy's advocacy in this book, as those familiar with her work which she referenced in the book would know, dates back to the call she made with Felwin Sarr, her co-author of a landmark report of a commissioned investigation by President Emmanuel Macron. In the report, they put forward a "new relational ethics" between Western museums and African countries, "increased provenance research, the sharing of colonial archives, and an "acknowledgement" that many "scientific" collecting expeditions had been just as coercive as conquests. Quite a list of proposals, one must say, and, of course most of these have been very much around as they both acknowledged. As a matter of fact, fine-tuned aspects of the proposal are evident in the ongoing attempts by some of these museums to invite leading African artists, mostly in the diaspora, to curate some of these and contemporary art pieces for museum exhibitions, a small but significant step in the wider issue of restitution. Good examples of 'giving room' to African artists in these museums are The King's Mouth (2006) by Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumé, and the immersive exhibition *Jardin d'Amour* [Garden of Love] (2007) co-curated by Yinka Shonibare, the British-Nigerian conceptualist, the French curator Germain Viatte and the anthropologist and curator Bernard Müller who has considerable experience of staging exhibitions at the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB), Françoise Vergès, a political scientist and curator and the historian Pascal Blanchard. Interestingly, the MQB beats its chest by stating that its overarching ambition is to be the place "where cultures converse" as articulated in its mission statement, *"Là où dialoguent les cultures"*.

Bénédicte Savoy's book is a scrupulous dismantling of the arrogance of domination evidenced in the justificatory attitude of the governments, parliaments and museums of the West with regards to looted cultural works of the dominated that are being sought back by the previously dominated owners – countries of origin. Savoy is mild-mannered to refer to the struggle for restitution as a "struggle between foreign and interior policy, between diplomacy and museums, between information and disinformation". Fair enough; but, it is much more than this and Savoy surely knows, I suppose. Well, because the book is one focused on post-colonial history, it confines its discussion more to events of that period. And so, in her story, 1972 seems significant in the struggle for restitution. This was five years before the second festival of arts and culture (FESTAC) in Nigeria. One could suggest that the preparation for this continental festival of arts and culture included 'getting back' well known iconic cultural works. Ekpo Eyo, then a young director of antiquities, in 1972, requested the then West German (there was East Germany because of the Cold War) Embassy in Lagos (then capital of Nigeria) to facilitate a "permanent loan (note, a "loan") of Beninese art works. This was passed on

to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (S.P.K.) which, as a matter of historical significance held the world's second-largest collection of bronzes from Benin. Savoy notes that this request was welcomed because some Bundestag members seconded it and that one member said of the request as "modest" which is hardly surprising given the timidity of Ekpo Eyo's request ("permanent loan"). The modesty of the request did not however prevent opposition which Savoy highlighted drawing out the gendered character of the opposition. She writes: "men, almost all of them over fifty years old, including lawyers, a few former National Socialist members, most of them without significant international experience. The "modest" request was booted out by the director of S.P.K., Hans-Georg Wormit, who, as documented by Savoy, voiced the concern that should Germany start giving back requested art works ("presents" as quoted by Savoy) to emerging nations, it would create a domino of requests.

Ekpo Eyo's modest request was a drizzle that began sweeping away the sand that covered the "truth" buried in sand. The *digging* of the dugout in which African art works were kept thus began; a defeat of attempts to get minds off them. Germany began to wither in this effort to wish it away as the wind of restitution continued to blow. On the side of the wind of restitution was the director of Übersee-Museum in Bremen, Herbert Ganslmyr, whose very significant siding with history (the restitution wind) was to cost him dearly. Savoy notes that he was ostracised by the museum establishment in Germany. Savoy's forensic digging of the forces against restitution revealed that there was a "matrix of all blockades". She cited a drafted document by a group of German museum directors and cultural officials gathered in Bonn, a year after the African festival of arts (FESTAC 77 which has as its logo the 16th century ivory pendant mask depicting "Queen Idia" the mother of Beninese King that the British typically held tightly to) which puts forward the argument that Western countries had no legal or moral duty to repatriate art works that were now "owned by humanity as a whole" and suggested changing the word "restitution" to "transfer". In the document was an imposition of onerous conservative requirements on claimants and discouraging the publication of catalogues that might encourage "covetousness". Shockingly, but hardly surprising from a bunch of haughty individuals with a collective sense of superiority, they insisted that "history didn't matter". To top the icing of the arrogant cake, they wrote: "The way in which objects arrived in the collections of Europe and North America was of no consequence."

This is a book that will for long sit on the bookshelf as an enduring history book for reference but will also serve as a tool-kit, not in the manner of 'how-to' types, but an intellectual prop to action and continued efforts to see to the success of restitution. It offers an outstanding account of efforts at restitution and counter-efforts against. It is a knowledgeable insight into the defeat that Savoy was concerned with summed up as "blanket of leaden silence spread over European museums and their colonial past began to sink into oblivion": be that as it may, it was not so much so but a wind of change. Recent developments on this bear this out.

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