

**Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel B09: Decolonizing African heritage inside and outside the African continent**

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**How to 'decolonize' a collaboration? The cultural heritage projects of the National Museum of Mali and the National Museum of Ethnology**

Abstract: The National Museum of Mali and the National Museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands have been working together for almost three decades on several projects related to the preservation of cultural heritage in Mali. Both institutions have legacies rooted in colonialism. During the 1990s, institutional criticism began to shift the priorities in the collaboration between the museums towards more dialogue, cross-disciplinary research and equivalent cooperation. How did this affect the way these two museums worked together, fostered new understandings of collections and collecting, developed new models of partnership, and reached out to different audiences in Mali and in the Netherlands? I will critically discuss the attempt of all parties to 'decolonize' this Malian-Dutch collaboration, its curatorial practices and the way in which the projects communicated with stakeholders. It will show that this was not a straightforward development, but an ongoing process in which justice and methods grew through the long-term practice. By sharing collections, by embracing greater accountability, and acknowledging their colonial legacies, the museums made concrete steps towards better museum policies that went beyond a mere inclusive cooperation and more to a partnership. By not only looking at boundaries and limitations, but also emphasizing possibilities and opportunities, it changed our museum practice and had far-reaching implications on how these museums managed, interpreted and presented their joint efforts, then and in the future.

Keywords: Cultural heritage projects, Mali, decolonization



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## How to 'decolonize' a collaboration? The cultural heritage projects of the National Museum of Mali and the National Museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands

### Introduction

This paper discusses the long-term collaboration between the National Museum of Mali (NMM) and the National Museum of Ethnology (RMV) in the Netherlands on several heritage related projects. Hereby, I hope to reduce the lack of understanding between the worlds of social and academic critique, and professional practice. There is no colonial link between the Netherlands and Mali and most contacts date from after independence. But decolonizing is also about equality, sharing power and authority. This paper uses these projects to look at power relations, curatorial practices and collection formation. Based on these 'decolonizing' criteria I explore how 'decolonized' this collaboration was and look at lessons learned. It will show that not everything from the past is *a priori* outdated.

Historically, research has been carried out by Dutch researchers in Mali since 1964, mainly in the Dogon region and the Inner Delta of the Niger. This attracted researchers from the Universities of Utrecht, Eindhoven, Groningen and Leiden who worked in the fields of archaeology, anthropology and architecture.<sup>1</sup> The collaboration between the NMM in Mali and the RMV the Netherlands started in 1991 with the restitution of the Tellem collection to the NMM. In 1994 the RMV in the Netherlands was one of the two venues in Europe that hosted the famous exhibition *Vallées du Niger*, a partnership with museums in France and six African countries alongside the river Niger. This strengthened the alliance between the NMM and the RMV and resulted in a joined exhibition on the city of Djenné that featured in both countries.

In this exhibition, the legacy of Djenné's former grandeur and its world famous monumental mud-brick architecture was shown. This monumental architecture and the ancient fabric of the city are outstanding examples of a significant historic period. For this reason, in 1988, both the city and the surrounding archaeological sites were made a UNESCO World Heritage Monument. After the exhibition, in 1995, a joint Malian-Dutch mission went to Djenné to assess the vernacular architecture. It became clear that between 1984 and 1995 almost 55% of the monumental buildings had disappeared and that most of the other houses were in a very poor condition. Not the fragile nature of the material, but the economic recession as a result of years of drought, preventing the inhabitants from maintaining their houses. Also emigration and social transformations reformed the traditional house structure. The Malian government realised that something had to be done.

In 1994, during a workshop on the prevention of illicit trafficking of cultural goods, organised by ICOM in Bamako, *L'appel de Bamako* was launched. Museum professionals, police and customs did an appeal to end the illegal trade in cultural heritage from the African continent. In Mali this problem centred around the trade in earthenware statues from illegally excavated archaeological sites. In a collaborated project between the Institute of Human Sciences in Bamako and the Groningen University, *Projet Togué*, it had become clear that in 1991 of 834 archaeological sites in the Inner Delta of the Niger 45% showed signs of looting, 17% showed extensive illegal extraction pits and in 2% of the sites 70% of the surface was destroyed<sup>2</sup>. Due to the destruction of the archaeological heritage, the possibility of reconstructing the history of the region was threatened, and the people were in danger of being robbed of their roots. Around the same time the Malian government established Cultural Missions in their UNESCO World Heritage sites to involve the local community in the protection of the sites. But this was not enough.

In addition to the measures taken by the Malian government, the RMV and the Dutch government responded to the call for support to stop the destruction of Mali's cultural heritage. Together with the Malian government and with technical and financial support of the Netherlands, two important heritage related development projects were created. First, the Ministry of Culture of Mali and the Cultural Mission in Djenné started, in close co-operation with the RMV in the Netherlands, a restoration project

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<sup>1</sup> Bedaux & van der Waals 1994, 11

<sup>2</sup> Dembelé, Schmidt & van der Waals 1994, 231

in Djenné that ran from 1997 till 2013. Second, the NMM, and the Institute of Human Sciences in Bamako, in close cooperation with the RMV in the Netherlands, initiated a set of projects focused on the protection of the cultural heritage of the Dogon and the protection of the archaeological heritage in the Inner Delta of the Niger. The latter included an international excavation at Dia and different sensitization projects in the region that ran from 1998 till 2003. I was, as part of the RMV, closely involved in both projects.

## Method

Is it fair to evaluate heritage related projects, that were set up in the second half of the 1990s, according to criteria related to the current decolonization debate? Not really. Is it useful to evaluate these projects against the current decolonization standard? Yes of course.

Both the NMM in Mali, founded in 1953, and the RMV in the Netherlands, founded in 1837, are legacies of colonialism. Their definition of cultural heritage and their institutional environment, UNESCO and AFRICOM, use Western-oriented value systems. Although it was the Malian government that took the initiative to inscribe the city of Djenné and the Dogon region on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, this was only possible if they met this institution's criteria. Does this mean that the collaboration was by definition unequal and the achieved results no longer met today's standards? To explore whether these projects would be defined as 'colonial', I want to consider more closely three criteria: power relations, curatorial practices and collection formation.

### *Power relations*

The fact that the Malian government asked for support in protecting its cultural heritage may imply that the balance of power in the projects is unequal. However, much depends on the organizational structure, where the money is spent and who is seen as an expert.

The proposals for the Malian-Dutch heritage related projects were written and approved by a Malian-Dutch coalition of all participating institutions. The projects were carried out by the Malian Ministry of Culture and various Malian cultural institutes, and coordinated by RMV in the Netherlands. The projects were mainly funded by the Dutch government: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch Embassy in Bamako. This does not mean that the Malian government did not contribute financially, although the latter's contribution in the beginning mainly consisted of institutional support. In the restoration project, over the years, the financial share of the Malian government increased and it did not solely consist of the participation of Malian staff.

During the restoration project, as the years passed, the participation of the Dutch decreased and the Malian participation increased with regard to both financing, participation and execution. In Mali, the Cultural Mission in Djenné monitored the project and the work was executed by local masons. Directly and indirectly, some 200 local people were involved which stimulated the local economy. This implied that the vast majority of the project budget was spent in Mali and the results achieved by the project benefited the local population. Annual meetings were organized in Djenné to give the local stakeholders a say in the progress of the project. From 2008 to 2013 the Dutch involvement in the project was reduced to one coordinator instead of the usual four. The Malian participation of the Chef de mission, masons and architects, increased. They were fully responsible for the selection, budgeting, documentation and execution of the work. The Malian government also started a fund to subsidise part of the maintenance activities for local homeowners that needed extra support.

The role of the local masons, the experts who were responsible for the existence of the mud-brick architecture in Djenné, was crucial. The *barey ton*, a guild-like structure in which the masons are organised, has existed for centuries. Each homeowner has a long-established relationship with a specific mason's family. This traditional structure was, as much as possible, respected in the restoration project and hired to execute the work. The restoration project hereby not only focused on the preservation of the material, but also of the immaterial, cultural heritage. This also ensured that traditional construction techniques and local knowledge systems were preserved. In the end, the masons would be responsible for the maintenance of the houses long after the project was finished.

As for the excavation, the sites Dia-Shoma and Dia-Mara were chosen during an investigative inventory tour organised by the Cultural Mission in Djenné and in consultation with Malian and international partners. It was important to be able to excavate a sizeable archaeological site, which was known to have played an important regional role and which would be complementary to existing knowledge, before most of the sites were destroyed by illicit looters. The results of the excavation would shed light on the urbanisation of the region. The students that participated in the excavation came from the Universities of Bamako, Leiden, London, Paris, Brussels and Wisconsin-Madison. The rest of the staff was recruited locally. The excavation project was supervised and partly executed by the Institute of Human Sciences and all the finds of the excavation were entrusted to the NMM in Bamako. To host all this material a new collection depot was constructed.

In summary, Mali set the priorities, most of the money was spent in Mali and local experts were used as much as possible.

### *Curatorial practices*

The project made use of the curatorial practices current at the time. This meant UNESCO's view on cultural heritage, a museum practice guided by ICOM and AFRICOM, and museums and national culture institutions were the main stakeholders in the project. All partners, including the Malian ones, were still largely rooted in a colonial legacy and embedded in western value systems. Therefore, the focus lay on the grandeur of Mali's history, monumental remains and the preservation of the past. But if these western standards had not been decisive, would Mali have chosen a different heritage focus? And with a different Malian focus would it have been more difficult to find foreign funding?

The results were presented in exhibitions in Mali and the Netherlands, in PhD's and scientific publications and through presentations. Capacity was created in Malian cultural institutions and museums, and with students, masons and local participants. But also with the Dutch counterparts and with the other international parties. So the definition of the stakeholders and the way the results were presented to them was quite traditional. But these traditional curatorial practices were not exclusive, there was room for experimentation. Although the form was still an exhibition, it was besides museums, also presented in classrooms, local venues and universities. In collaboration with the National Theatre of Mali, a play was written on the illegal trade in archaeological heritage, which was staged in market squares in the Inner Delta, the region hardest hit by illegal treasure hunting. The play was accompanied by a travelling exhibition consisting of ten paintings that expressed the message visually. The play was eventually shown on national television in combination with a documentary about the international excavation in Dia. Within the scope of the project a flyer was produced showing a walking tour through the city of Djenné along the monumental buildings that provided social, cultural and historical information.

As Djenné had been registered as a UNESCO World Monument, the project was bound by the restrictions and principles of restoration. Before any intervention, careful recording and research was necessary. The documentation consisted of existing plans, photographs, drawings and detailed description of the work to be carried out. The principle was to retain as much of the original parts of any monument as possible but within the scope of the masons' expertise. But only allowing tangible documentation (almost exclusively from western sources) meant local sources of information, like oral sources, were less included. When tangible and intangible information did not support each other, the project was inclined to favour the tangible. During the course of the project this changed and we tried to also incorporate oral information into the documentation and the restoration plan of the buildings.

From 1998 till 2004, the restoration project in Djenné focused primarily on monumental architecture. These were mainly monumental houses from rich families. During the annual meetings with the stakeholders they mentioned that other structures, less extraordinary buildings, within the urban context needed preserving too. Participation in the project was voluntary, but not without commitment. After the restoration, the regular maintenance had to be continued by the residents themselves. After 2004, a more urban planning approach was chosen. Seven city squares were selected and all buildings surrounding the squares were restored. Besides monumental mud-brick architecture, also less monumental buildings were also included. This enriched the diversity of restored architecture types and also less fortunate people could profit from the restoration project. In exceptional cases,

especially in the case of widowed or extremely impoverished families, the Malian government was willing to bear part of the maintenance responsibility.

The fact that Djenné was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Monument and the Malian law protecting all classified monuments, meant that in principle no alterations could be made to any of the some 1.850 houses. This created a situation in which the social structure of a traditional architectural culture came into conflict with this inflexible and very rigid set of rules. Djenné, as a living city, was caught in its own armour of architectural tradition. Therefore, the restoration project proposed in 2013 not to classify all of Djenné's buildings, but only those which were significant for its architectural image. The selected houses could form a frame of reference for the urban structure around them. They retained the atmosphere of the city based on its typical structure of narrow streets and small squares and the monumental mud-brick houses with decorated façades, plastered by hand. Protecting a well-defined cultural heritage would not hamper the future development of the rest of the city. But the rest of the city should be a protected townscape in which mud would be used as the building material. To what extent this suggestion has been adopted and used is the choice and the responsibility of the Malian government.

From 2004 onward, it was the wish of the Malian government to also use the expertise gained during the restoration work in Djenné elsewhere. National policy was increasingly aimed at protecting the heritage that fell outside the UNESCO monuments under national legislation. The project decided to expand its focus to saho's, boys' houses, in the immediate vicinity of Djenné. These often beautifully decorated, traditional buildings depict and accentuate the identity and uniqueness of the boys' groups. Despite the fact that the objectives of the project were primarily aimed at the preservation of architectural heritage, the orientation towards the boys' houses meant that this unique cultural tradition could also be supported. In three villages a total of 11 saho's have been resurrected in their former glory. After restoration, the saho's were immediately taken into use and in 2013 included in the National Monument List of Mali which gave them the status of architectural heritage on a national level.

To conclude, the projects were flexible enough to deviate from existing conventions. But the way in which the results were shared was related to the way in which the institutions involved defined their stakeholders. Despite the experiments, it would have been interesting to widen the scope of stakeholders so the results would have been even more accessible.

#### *Collection formation*

Collection formation and the ownership of collections play an important role in the decolonisation process. Because most African objects in museum collections are located outside the African continent, an unequal distribution is a reality. Although this debate is not new, the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy in 2018 changed the international discourse. In 2019, the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands presented the "Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process", a process by which objects/collections can be claimed for return. The Dutch Council of Culture in 2020 gave advice to the Dutch Government on their colonial collections and the recognition of injustice. But the Malian-Dutch collaboration already returned a considerable collection from the Netherlands to Mali in the early-1990s.

Within the Malian-Dutch collaboration the arrangements were clear. All restored houses stayed *in situ* and all the finds from the excavation went to the NMM in Bamako. All the documentation of the projects is preserved in the Cultural Missions and both the National Museums of Mali and the Netherlands. The results were published in collaboration. When it became clear that the facilities of the NMM in Bamako were inadequate, an extra depot space was built in 1999-2000 at the NMM site with additional Dutch funding. The objects collected stayed in Mali, and at the same time the necessary facilities were created to preserve them.

Even agreements made in the past, were re-evaluated. The famous Tellem-collection, with among others the oldest textiles from sub-Saharan Africa excavated in the Dogon area by the former Institute of Human Biology of Utrecht University in the 1960s and 1970s, was part of the collection of the RMV. Although the Tellem collection had legally left Mali with permission, authorisation and according to the

rules at the time, the Malian government wanted these collections to return. The RMV decided to meet this request and the ownership rights of the collection returned to the NMM in Mali in 1991. Half of the collection went back to Mali in 1993, while the other half remained in the RMV, on long-term loan. Now the NMM could show this exceptional collection to its own stakeholders. It guaranteed that the other half, that stayed in the Netherlands was well preserved and while legally remaining the property of Mali.<sup>3</sup>

One of the desires of the NMM in Mali was to create a Dogon collection. Despite the worldwide fame of this Malian culture and the vast and many collections that can be found in foreign museums, these were lacking in Mali. Part of the budget was released and the director of the NMM Samuel Sidibé and Rogier Bedaux of the RMV travelled in 2000 to the Dogon area to collect and purchase around 244 Dogon objects. The objective of the trip was to collect objects that provided an overview of the contemporary material culture of the Dogon. Statues, masks or protected cultural heritage were explicitly excluded. So with Dutch financial support a Dogon collection was created that stayed in Mali. This collection figured in the Dogon exhibition in the MNM in 2004 and in the RMV in 2005.

It can be concluded, that the way in which the projects dealt with collection formation shows a way of how these types of questions can be dealt with.

### **Conclusions**

International museum collaboration can, and should transform to stay relevant in conversations regarding decolonisation. Self-reflection therefore is a must. This case study has explored the power relations, curatorial practices and collection formation as indicator for a decolonised collaboration in cultural heritage projects between Mali and the Netherlands. I indicated that during the course of the projects priorities began to change, common practices were reviewed and adapted, and the balance in the relationship shifted. Most priorities were set by Mali, most of the budget was spent in Mali and almost everything collected, restored or uncovered, stayed in Mali. Both parties profited from the shared knowledge, the newly acquired museum collections and capacity building. The projects showed clear signs of decolonization.

But, the foundation of most of the institutions, the value systems and the focus on preservation and grandeur were traditional/not innovative. Also the curatorial practices stayed mostly unchanged although there was room for experimentation. Therefore, only certain (institutional) stakeholders were reached and catered for. Subsequently, it would be recommendable to define a more diverse field of stakeholders and practices. Whereas this work is not focused on advocating the diversity of stakeholders as the only way of decolonising, it provokes thoughts about how this could be achieved.

Still a lot of decolonising work has to be done, in the Netherlands and in Mali. Unfortunately, the situation in Mali has changed drastically and unfortunately the preservation of cultural heritage is no longer a first priority.

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<sup>3</sup> (Bedaux 1998)

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