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Extended Abstract / Draft Paper

Developing Heritage – Developing Countries: UNESCO and the making of national heritage institutions in African countries from 1950 on

In the context of decolonisation and the new international order forming in the 1960s, African political leaders and intellectuals constructed national identities for the territories they claimed or aspired to represent. Political elites of postcolonial African states acted as representatives of sovereign, independent nation states and, through this, actualised the discourse of a particular African identity and history. Various projects emerged to rewrite African history as Africa's own history. In relation to this discourse, the re-appropriation and emancipation of national heritage-making was important — having a national heritage meant having a national identity and belonging to the community of sovereign nation states. UNESCO served most prominently as a framework to promote the importance of history and heritage as a strategy for empowerment and fostering the nascent national identities of the new member states in the era of decolonisation. Aside from the historiographical project of the *General History of Africa*, there were several other programmes relevant for the construction of national histories in African countries. Especially through programmes of the cultural division to identify national cultural and natural heritage the organisation provided development-aid for nation-building. After 1950, UNESCO was involved in the build-up of national cultural heritage institutions in several African states, meaning heritage-making and history-writing were installed as a state domain.

Based on records from the UNESCO archive and the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration, I will explain UNESCO's cultural and natural heritage politics in African countries during the 60s and 70s, and show the involvement of international experts, of creating heritage-institutions and heritage-bureaucracy in African states, modelled on Western concepts of "heritage" and "conservation" as universal principles. A number of UNESCO consultancy missions, upon request by African states, were concerned with evaluating the status quo of museums, archives and heritage conservation. The consultants also developed plans for setting up new or enlarging existing institutions, and often returned on follow-up missions for concrete projects to set up those institutions or care for their inventory.

I took a look at the period between 1963 and 1980 and found mission reports for consultancies to at least 27 African countries in the UNESCO archives, with 20 missions for museums, 24 missions for archival support and 5 missions for regional projects such as training centres. For this paper, I will analyse selected projects outlined in these reports and contextualise them within the history of a growing internationally active community of Western-trained conservators and curators and the history and heritage politics of African nation states.

UNESCO's role in promoting the identity discourses that underwrote the construction of national narratives in African countries, in this paper, will be analysed in light of its role as an institution that built-up and facilitated knowledge production internationally, and the institutional and conceptual legacies of this knowledge production.

Already in 1960, in the wake of a programmatic shift towards the urgent needs of African member states or associated states of UNESCO, the organisation's General Conference decided to engage and provide additional support for cultural development

of the newly independent African States, notably the study and preservation of their respective cultures.[1] In 1963, this was followed by a resolution to enlarge the support, stating more specifically that a collaboration with existing institutions should be fostered, in the area of historical research, documentation of oral traditions, and a presentation of all forms of national culture.[2]

In recent years, the debates on the restitution of African heritage objects has arrived at the centre stage of cultural diplomacy, bringing to light the large quantities of African cultural goods which were acquired without appropriate consent in a colonial context, be it as part of looting through military forces or as objects collected during research expeditions, to be studied and displayed in European museums and laboratories. A key argument in current debates has been that the capacities of African national heritage institutions are not sufficient to conserve cultural goods.

The restitution of "dispersed cultural heritage"[3] to African countries was brought up by African actors in UNESCO for the first time in 1974.[4] This question helped to further the issue of enabling postcolonial nations to a better technical and institutional standard for conservation. Interestingly enough, when the first missions visited African museums, existing museums were met with appreciation by the Western experts: "The best of the African museums can be considered the equal of good museums [...] elsewhere throughout the world. Their standards of research and display are high."[5], stated the editorial of the 1963 issue of UNESCO's *museum international* journal. The experts working for UNESCO's cultural programme were of the opinion that museums had a bigger relevance in many African countries compared to other countries in the 1960s, and pointed out that the national budgets spend were larger, relatively speaking. The editorial diagnosed a "rediscovered pride" and a sense of immanent "cultural loss" behind this relevance and urgency for conservation by African governments.[6]

From the European museum-experts' point of view, African museums were also a most promising testing ground for new ways to bridge the gap between the gap that may result from the disparage between the background of the curators' interpretation and the visitors' educational background – or the lack thereof. Over the course of two conferences one hosted in 1962 by the international committee on museums (ICOM), on museums in developing countries, and one hosted in 1964 by UNESCO and the Nigerian government on the role of the museum in contemporary Africa, the position of UNESCO and the expert organisations under its umbrella, ICOM, ICOMOS and ICCROM was shaped out more clearly as a paternalistic one.

The idea that technical expertise, rather than funds, would enable cultural, social and economic development was characteristic for international development programmes of the 1950s and 1960s, like the US-American Point Four Programme and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Through UNESCO, expertise, training and specialised equipment was funded for museums and conservation laboratories, that often included institutional and administrative set up. Western museum conservators understood this technical assistance as part of their own professional calling, supporting the educational work of African museums and "the tremendous thirst of knowledge shown by the Africans", by providing African people with "concrete, practical examples of the modern techniques that hold such fascination for them". These words, written by

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[1] 11 C/Resolutions, CPG.61/VI.11, Res. 4.12
[2] CPG.63/I.17, p.106
[3] Monreal, Problems, Museum XXXI, 1979
[4] 18th session General Conference resolution
[5] Editorial, Museum International XVI
[6] Ibd.

the Director of the French *Musée de l'homme*, Robert Gessain, to introduce another issue of Museum International dedicated to African museums, in 1965, capture the characteristic features of the cultural development aid through UNESCO, which ensured that Western experts and research institutions would stay the gate-keepers of knowledge and standards. In many ways the conservation efforts in postcolonial African nations built on colonial practices were designed to overwrite rather than integrate existing efforts outside of the elite production of history.

What kind of history and heritage institutions were possible through support organised through UNESCO? What was the ideological underpinning of the technical assistance? Who was able to shape the new institutions?

Case Study: Ethiopia

Between 1960 and 1980, Ethiopia received at least twelve expert missions for the development of administration, legislation, and conservation of natural and cultural heritage. The strong international interest and involvement was connected to a politics of nation-building and establishing a dominant historical narrative of Ethiopian national identity. Ethiopian historians and archaeologists collaborated with foreign research and conservation experts in building up a new national history museum and a national inventory of antiquities that represented the history of certain groups and territories, namely an Amhara-centred history of the Christian highland population as the common national history for the Ethiopian nation-state that emerged after 1941. Other population groups were categorised as ethnicities in a top-down process and presented in an ahistorical setting in the ethnographic museum.

The Ethiopian authorities also aspired to have a UNESCO-funded regional East African training centre for conservation established in Addis Ababa, but the plans were not developed beyond an initial proposal and evaluation mission. All these projects demonstrate how Western conservation expertise and development funding were valuable for the technologies and opportunities they brought on the one hand, but installed a structural knowledge hierarchy and an epistemological framework that served a politicisation of heritage on the other hand.

Case Study: Nigeria

Nigerian collaboration with UNESCO in all matters of its mandate – education, science, and culture – was similar to that in Ethiopia, very engaged and frequent between 1960 and 1980. Like in Ethiopia, the antiquities administration expanded and professionalised its work significantly during this period with the help of UNESCO. Producing a genuine version of Nigerian national history in a Pan-African context, linking up the newly independent nation with a glorious pre-colonial past was an important political project.

Not only were several museums (Benin Museum, Ife Museum) modernised with the help of UNESCO consultants, a bi-lingual regional training centre for museum technicians was installed in Jos as a pilot project. The numerous reports on the courses and exhibitions allow some insight into the young people who were trained to be conservators and curators for new state museums in West-African countries. The Nigerian government installed a student village comprised of traditional style huts to house the trainees of the centre's courses, including a cafeteria built as a replica of one of the palaces of the Oba of Benin. It seems that the European conservators teaching the courses and their African students shared an ideological understanding of the necessity for conserving and

protecting selected cultural heritage, to forge proud national citizens through awareness for an – allegedly – shared history. However, on a more practical levels, expectations on both sides seem to have clashed with what was realistically possible with limited material supply, varied education and cultural backgrounds of students and a very narrow and specialised technical knowledge of the teachers.

I argue to understand and critically reflect the history of Africa-centred African historiography, the institutional histories of national museums cannot be overlooked and UNESCO's involvement is key to these histories.
I suggest to take my analysis here as a starting point how to compare in more detail individual cases, arriving at a more nuanced understanding of both UNESCO's role and that of postcolonial African heritage institutions.

Note: the extent of going deeper in to the case studies or include more case studies into the analysis for this paper is currently limited by travel and archival research restrictions, I'm afraid. I have a lot of material on Ethiopia, and some secondary literature on Nigeria and less so on some of the other countries. I am grateful for recommendations and ideas on how to substantiate the comparative approach of this paper in the current circumstances..