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MEMORY, PATRIMONIALISATION AND CULTURAL POLICIES IN AFRICA

MEMÓRIA, PATRIMONIALIZAÇÃO E POLÍTICAS CULTURAIS NA ÁFRICA

MEMORIA, PATRIMONIALIZACIÓN Y POLÍTICAS CULTURALES EN ÁFRICA

Viviane de Oliveira Barbosa¹ interviewed professor PhD. Ibrahima Thiaw, one of the greatest specialists in African History and Archaeology nowadays. He was invited to present a study module and a lecture during XVIII International Advanced Research Seminar Factory of Ideas – Heritage, Inequalities and Politics of Culture –, carried out in São Luís, Maranhão, from 18 to 31 March of 2017. Ibrahima Thiaw is a professor at University of Cheikh Anta Diop, in Dakar (Senegal) and director of the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire. His research interest focus primarily on the archaeology of global encounters, the Saharan and Atlantic impact on African societies, slavery, the slave trade, identity and commemorations in the politics of the past.² Since 2001, he works on the World Heritage Site of Gorée Island and was also involved in culture heritage management on several projects in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa including Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and Congo.

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² THIAW, Ibrahima; WAIT, Gerry. Presenting Archaeology and Heritage at a UNESCO World Heritage Site: Gorée Island, Senegal. *Advances in Archaeological Practice*. v. 6, August 2018; THIAW, Ibrahima. The Management of Cultural World Heritage Sites in Africa and Their Contribution to Sustainable Development in the Continent. In: MAKUVAZA, Simon (ed.). *The Management of Cultural World Heritage Sites and Development in Africa: History, nomination processes and representation on the World Heritage List*. Londres: Springer New York Heidelberg Dordrecht, 2014; THIAW, Ibrahima; ARAZI, Noémie. Managing Africa’s Archaeological Heritage. In: MITCHELL P.; Lane P. (eds.). *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; THIAW, Ibrahima; RICHARD, François. Archaeology and the impacts of the Atlantic slave trade. In: MITCHELL P. & Lane P. (eds.). *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; THIAW, Ibrahima. Colonization and the development of archaeology in Senegal. In: VAN DER LINDE, S. J et. al (eds.), *European Archaeology Abroad: Global settings, comparative perspectives*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2013; THIAW, Ibrahima. From the Senegal River to Siin: the archaeology of Sereer migration in northern Senegambia. In: BOSMA, Ulbe et. al (eds.). *Belonging, Membership and Mobility in Global History*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2013; THIAW, Ibrahima. Atlantic Impact on Inland Senegambia: French Penetration and African Initiatives in Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries Gajaaga and Bundu. In: MONROE, J.C.; OGUNDIRAN, A. (eds.). *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa: Archaeological Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012; THIAW, Ibrahima. *Espaces, culture materielle et identités en Senegambie*. Oxford: African Books Collective, 2011.

OT: You have important researches in the fields on History and Archaeology of Africa. Please, tell me more about your academic and research background.

IT: My interests in archaeology, history and anthropology were shaped by my life experience, one that was profoundly marked by the politics of identity, in places I grew up and lived at in different times in my life. I grew up in a village but I guess, I was privileged enough to attend school. I have the greatest respect for public education because my family could not afford private school. Therefore, from primary school in my home village to my Master's degree obtained at the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, public education offered me a chance for social ascension. It was not all easy but at least I got the chance to have an education. I think, it is my academic peregrinations and the contradictions I have seen or experienced throughout that journey that sparked my interests in the field of archaeology and history. From a rural area, my academic career took me to new places where I experienced other cultures, other ways of life, other religions, other languages, race, class, gender and status differences that completely redefined who I am today. It was not just things I learned at school but instead experienced in an everyday basis through interactions with people and places around the world.

Already, when in the 1970s, I was in High School and later as an undergraduate student in the mid- 1980s, debates ignited by Cheikh Anta Diop against colonial anthropology helped me and perhaps many others of my generation develop a certain historical consciousness. It is largely at that time that I become aware of the meaning and power, race, difference and inequality as shaped and reproduced by the very academic institutions that we came to embrace. With time, however, I grew weary of Diop's questionable perspectives which were as essentialist as colonial anthropology. One of our major concerns then becomes to decolonize knowledge such that to get rid of the academic workbench of concepts; theories and practices that we manipulate, and which are a produce of an intellectual tradition that is rooted in imperial and liberal European history and that are generally biased against non-Western cultures. Like Diop, none of us in the academia escape to the power of that global knowledge system. It is with such concern that I engaged in my research terrain over the past 20 years or so including in Southeastern Senegal and Gorée Island.

OT: What is your current research concern and how are they related to the theme of memory and cultural policies?

IT: My current research interests include the Atlantic slave trade, the archaeology of coloniality and Euro-African interactions over the past five hundred years and, culture heritage management. Obviously, decoloniality, the politics of identity and memory and the future of “tradition” are central to these concerns. I am particularly keen to contribute to change the ways African and non-western cultures in general are portrayed in academic circles past and present. The transformations we advocate for are not mere anthropological reorientations on issues specific to Africa or a change of polarity in major theoretical debates that would shift colonial categories and hierarchies from one end to the other and that might reverse inequalities and other forms of injustice. Instead, they are part of much bigger macrostructural changes concerning the social, political and economic role of social sciences, as I think it should be practiced in the 21st century and beyond. That is a science that seeks to advance knowledge and benefit society as a whole no matter where it is practiced.

OT: How do you observe the memory politics and cultural policies undertaken on the African continent in recent decades?

IT: The memory politics and cultural policies on the African continent continue to suffer largely from the syndrome of colonial science. Legislatures for heritage management are extremely weak and poorly implemented and memory politics are subjected to intense negotiations in which power and funding are determinant. The memory politics have gone a long way over the past sixty years or so in the redefinition of African identity and pride and, the documentation of African self-achievements and contributions to the world including, through shared difficult historical experiences such as slavery and colonization. However, feelings of pride, self-achievement or historical consciousness, as important as they are, neither put food on our table, nor quench our thirst nor heal our ailments. This is why there is urgency for epistemic decolonization and new practices that are better tuned to the multiple African situations, and sensibilities. It is also critical that memory politics and cultural policies on the African continent

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break away from colonial essentialism, and ideas of ‘universal heritage’ to UNESCO whose cosmopolitan sensibility is prone to deafness about difference, race, and inequality.

OT: What role does IFAN (Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire) play in the patrimonialisation of material and immaterial culture in Senegal?

IT: IFAN pioneered research in archaeology, ethnography, history, geology, botany, zoology, entomology, etc., in the former French West-African colonial Empire. As a hub for French research in the West African sub-region, IFAN museums and laboratories were also destinations for material collected throughout that region. Sadly though, there was little or no public outreach. Publications were in French, a language that the majority of Senegalese people did not speak. Local populations had limited means to counter the way they were described or displayed to the rest of the world. However, with the rise of African nationalism in the interwar period, a number of voices began to challenge IFAN colonial views. But this is still a problem today.

OT: The last time I had the chance to take a course with you I remember seeing you presenting some debates about the House of Slaves Museum on Gorée Island (Senegal). Could you tell me a little more about this museum and its implications for the memory of slavery and diaspora?

IT: The role and significance of Gorée Island and its Maison des Esclaves were widely debated over the past decades. Today, I do not appreciate either this was right or wrong but I look at its multiple reverberations in the present. In fact, the Maison des Esclaves in Gorée Island seems to have been a positive outcome for the tourist industry on the Island. The massive arrival of African and African Diaspora tourists in Gorée shows how this debate has shaped the imagination of the various audiences of tourists. Ndiaye’s narrative on Gorée Island’s Maison des Esclaves and its “mythical” “Door of no Return” marked by the violence of capture, captivity, the middle passage and the hardship of life in the American plantations has largely shaped the way the present and future are imagined. Elsewhere, I argued that this narrative has profound effects on the emotional well-being of the visitors of the Maison des Esclaves’ museum as it was not designed for therapeutic concerns. Many African and African-descent people come out the visit

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of the Maison des Esclaves embittered and angered at the Europeans for their enslavement of African, forced exile and inhumane treatment in American plantations. Many Europeans are equally angered for being blamed for a past they did not feel responsible for although they might have involuntarily benefitted from it. Sadly, this narrative is construed on the basis of colonial racial categories that continue to affect our sensibilities in the present.

OT: You participated in the course Factory of Ideas in 2017, held in São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil. How do you rate this experience?

IT: It was a fantastic experience and I rate highly, 90 in a scale of 100. I cannot explain it but there is a powerful energy I feel at each contact with Brazil.