



AFRICAN RENAISSANCE MONUMENT

Dakar, Senegal

14.7222, - 17.4950



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Executive Summary

The African Renaissance Monument is a 50-meter tall statue in Dakar, Senegal, erected in 2010 as the project of then-President Abdoulaye Wade. It serves to commemorate the 'African Renaissance,' a political ideology that heralds a goal of growth and prosperity for the African continent in the 21st century. However, the statue has drawn criticism for its high cost (\$27million), which meant that state assets were offered to North Korean contractors, and for its artistic depiction, which faith leaders decried as 'un-Islamic' and 'Idolatrous.' This case study explores the complicated dynamics underlying one of Africa's most controversial monuments.

Introduction

The African Renaissance Monument is Africa's tallest statue, standing at almost 50 meters tall - taller than both the iconic Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro and the Statue of Liberty in New York City.¹ While it is intended as a representation of the battle for post-colonial African identity, it has courted controversy for its proximity to authoritarianism and corruption. The extortionate cost, involvement of North Korean architects and physical design of the statue, has led it to be condemned as both un-Islamic and sexist, raising questions over who exactly the monument is for and what role it plays in the so-called 'African Renaissance.' However, supporters of the monument claim that the statue represents a much-needed step towards the realisation of an African identity and place in the world, proudly dominating a physical skyline much like the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty and Christ the Redeemers, while others have contended that the monument has failed to make its desired impact on national identity or African pride.

Background

Understanding African Renaissance

The concept of 'African Renaissance' refers to a popular Pan-African philosophical and political ideology centred on the role of Africa in a globalised world from the start of the 21st century. It is used to describe the continent moving onwards from the colonial period of struggle against oppression to a new era of 're-birth' within the global scene.² The concept was inspired largely by the work of two Senegalese intellectuals, Cheikh Anta Diop and Léopold Sédar Senghor,³ who, during the 1930s in Paris, developed the literary framework of 'negritude' to define the Black world, a cultural and identity-based concept rather than a political one.⁴ The concept of African Renaissance is paradigmatic, it shows how politicians appropriate, in a more or less explicit manner, the past. It allows us to understand how political concepts circulate, change and take directions contrary to their original meaning.⁵

Former South African President Thabo Mbeki further popularised the concept of African Renaissance in his famous 1999 'I am an African' speech on the occasion of the adoption of the new South African constitution. The speech outlines the key tenets of the African Renaissance, namely the need to search for an authentic African identity as a key goal for Africa's new millennium. The African Renaissance is styled as the ideological successor to the Pan-Africanism of liberation movements and leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere. However, the critical role of Mbeki in promoting and popularising this concept has proved controversial, as many critics have contended that the concept encompassed only South Africa's unique battle to un-do the conception of its country as the property of white, Western 'civilisation,' and an attempt by South Africa to win 'corporate capital' by reframing Pan-African aims in favour of the neoliberal,

¹ Beetle Holloway, "Monument de la Renaissance Africaine": The Bizarre Story of the Tallest Statue in Africa," *Culture Trip*, June 27, 2018.

² Dani Nabudere, "The African Renaissance in the Age of Globalisation," *African Journal of Political Science / Revue Africaine de Science Politique* 6, no. 2 (2001): 11-28.

³ Martin Mourre, "La Renaissance africaine, des idées à la pierre," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227 (2017), 724.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 722.

⁵ Martin Mourre, "La Renaissance africaine, des idées à la pierre," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227 (2017), 720.

capitalist global market.⁶

Despite these criticisms, the ideology proved popular continentally and found particular resonance in the West African nation of Senegal. Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade (2000-2012) was a firm supporter of these ideological goals. He mobilised the writings of Kwame Nkrumah, first president of Ghana who was widely considered as one of the leading figures in Pan-Africanism.⁷ When Wade came to power in 2000, he used the concept of African Renaissance as a foundational source for national unity but also to solidify his own international stature.⁸ In reflection of his belief in this concept in 2002, he commissioned a statue that would embody these ideals and commemorate 50 years of Senegalese independence and herald a new dawn for Africa's relationship with the world and itself. Wade further stressed that the monument to be named 'African Renaissance' was not solely intended for Senegal nor for the Senegalese people, but was rather a 'symbol and representation of all the peoples of Africa.'⁹

The African Renaissance Monument was thus conceived and constructed at a time when African political ideology was in something of a transformation. Its goal - to define Africa on equal terms with the globalised world and further the emergence of a proudly African spirit - was very much a product of the popular African political thought of the time. However, despite its intention as a symbol of this African re-birth and of a renewed African defined identity and national pride, remarkably few African people were involved in its creation: it was designed by a Romanian architect,¹⁰ and constructed by a North Korean construction firm.¹¹ The monument took eight years to complete, and was finally unveiled in 2010.¹²

Unveiling the Monument to African Renaissance

The inauguration on April 3, 2010, coincided with the 30th edition of the World Festival of Black Art (FESMAN) inaugurated by the first Senegalese President, Senghor, in 1966.¹³ It was further attended by 20 African heads of state, the President of the Commission of the African Union, Jean Ping,¹⁴ two representatives from North Korea and a French delegation.¹⁵ Speaking at the ceremony, Wade underscored that the monument was 'for all of Africa,' stating: 'It brings to life our common destiny... Africa has arrived in the 21st century standing tall and more ready than ever to take its destiny into its hands.'¹⁶ He further proclaimed that the monument represents 'the past, present and future of Africa,' and furthered the world's 'fight against racism.'¹⁷ Despite the high-profile nature of the statues inauguration, the event was perhaps more focused on the

⁶ Dani Nabudere, "The African Renaissance in the Age of Globalisation," *African Journal of Political Science / Revue Africaine de Science Politique* 6, no. 2 (2001), 17.

⁷ Martin Mourre, "La Renaissance africaine, des idées à la pierre," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227 (2017), 720-721.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 720.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dani Nabudere, "The African Renaissance in the Age of Globalisation," *African Journal of Political Science / Revue Africaine de Science Politique* 6, no. 2 (2001), 18.

¹¹ Atlas Obscura, "African Renaissance Monument," *Atlas Obscura*, no date.

¹² Mark John, "Senegal unveils "African Renaissance" statue," *Reuters*, April 4, 2010.

¹³ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 188.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Senegal Online, "Monument de la Renaissance Africaine," *Senegal Online*, no date.

¹⁶ Mark John, "Senegal unveils "African Renaissance" statue," *Reuters*, April 4, 2010.

¹⁷ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 9.

persona of then president Wade and his ideology, as opposed to only the statue. The ceremony did not end as it would traditionally with the Senegalese National Anthem but instead with the Anthem to the African Renaissance, which was composed by Wade himself.¹⁸ In addition, the National Theatre Company was supposed to perform *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* (The Tragedy of King Christopher) by Aimé Césaire - a play about the political foolishness of a postcolonial dictator. As Wade deemed it to be too long, the play was interrupted mid-way through in order to continue with the ceremony.¹⁹

Much like the grandeur of the opening ceremony, the statue itself is not merely monolithic in function but serves as a large exhibition space. To reach the giant statue, a visitor has to walk up ten gray marble stairs that lead to the main square of the monument.²⁰ Inside the monument there is a Hall of Kings with a two-seat throne, a gift from Angola displayed and framed by two horns, and sculptures of African-American figures.²¹ On the ground floor visitors can view a slideshow describing the history of the construction of the monument, as well as a fresco tracing the history of Africa and some of its main figures. On the third floor, there is a small temporary exhibition room. In 2021, it displayed artworks donated by the embassies of Cuba, Venezuela, former Czechoslovakia and many African countries.²² The monument also hosts permanent exhibitions with the work of African artists Kalidou Kassé and an exhibition about the Senegalese basketball player Pape Badiane.²³ On the fourth floor, there is a VIP lounge decorated by Senegalese designer Aïssa Dione Tissus. On the top floor, the 15th, visitors reach the head of the statue and can enjoy a panoramic view of Dakar and the peninsula before heading down.²⁴



Figure 1: 'View of the Monument from Above' Image by Jeff Ataway via Flickr CC BY 2.0

According to the monuments administrator, Racine Senghor, it is a very solid monument, 'very well made and which can last at least 1,200 years.'²⁵ However, only five years after its initial

¹⁸ Philippe Bernard, "Au Sénégal, l'exaspération sociale menace le président," *Le Monde Afrique*, April 5, 2010.

¹⁹ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 188.

²⁰ Ousmane Laye Diop, "Le monument de la Renaissance pren des rides," *Enquêteplus*, September 22, 2015.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Amadou Gueye, "Le monument de la Renaissance est rouvert," *Au-senegal.com*, November 26, 2020.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Au Senegal, "Monument de la Renaissance Africaine," *Au-Senegal.com*, no date.

²⁵ Amadou Gueye, "Le monument de la Renaissance est rouvert," *Au-senegal.com*, November 26, 2020.

installation, the monument began to suffer from verdigris, the oxidation of copper, due to weather damage. The original metal of the monument is slowly eroding, even though according to Senghor it was originally planned like that so it would reveal its true colour over time. He further stated that there is a planned project to enlarge the monument to increase its reception capacity and turn it into a 'a bigger amusement park for children and a lot of other infrastructures,' as 'the monument is built on a hill and our architects can make beautiful things around the monument.'²⁶

Despite its controversies and general rejection by the Senegalese society, cultural ceremonies, weddings, salons, fairs and many other events continue to take place in the surroundings of the monument. The monument receives between 120,000 and 140,000 visitors per year, including high school students, tourists, professionals, and foreign authorities. The main target are students, brought from schools in Senegal and neighbouring countries, such as The Gambia and Mauritania. Additionally, the administration also organises free tours for Senegalese citizens so they are able to 'understand the usefulness of the monument.'²⁷

At the unveiling of the ceremony, the statue was framed as a response to the perception that African states are 'still struggling to find their feet half a century after independence' and 'need symbols of hope for the future.'²⁸ The physical statue, of a family rising forward, according to Wade, symbolises, 'Africa emerging from the darkness, from five centuries of slavery and two centuries of colonialism.'²⁹ In the first article of the 2003 Decree for the construction of the monument it is stated that:

built on the hill known as Mamelle in Dakar, the Monument for the African Renaissance reflects the will of the Black people, victims of the biggest human tragedies, to reappropriate their destiny by overcoming slavery, colonisation and dictatorships. It symbolises the African that arises from obscurantism, scourges and prejudice towards the light.³⁰

However, from its initial conception to its unveiling, the African Renaissance project has been mired with controversy, including allegations of wasting money, collusion with unsavoury foreign powers and corruption, catapulting the African Renaissance Monument to the position of one of the continent's most controversial monuments.

History of the Contestation

Contestation over the African Renaissance monument can be broken down into three main categories: misuse of state resources, North Korean involvement and the artistic representation of the statue itself. In the light of these controversies, the president launched initiatives to defend his support for the statue such as explanatory meetings with intellectuals and neighbours and the publication of numerous special editions of the State sponsored newspaper *Le Soleil* (The Sun) to inform the population about the importance and usefulness of the monument.³¹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mark John, "Senegal unveils "African Renaissance" statue," *Reuters*, April 4, 2010.

²⁹ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 9.

³⁰ Martin Mourre, "La Renaissance africaine, des idées à la pierre," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227 (2017).

³¹ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 188.

Misuse of State Resources

The cost of the monument soon became deeply controversial given that at the time of its erection Senegal was in a deep economic crisis.³² In 2002, when construction first began on the monument, Senegal had one of the lowest GDP per capita in the world, below Zimbabwe and Mauritania, and 55% of the population lived below the national poverty line.³³ The monument's price tag, however, is estimated to have cost the country 27 million USD, a price that the country simply could not afford, with some terming it a 'multi-million dollar Presidential indulgence.'³⁴ Opposition leader Abdoulaye Bathily was quick to criticise this unnecessary expenditure, stating: 'the economy has collapsed ... the education system is in crisis and yet Abdoulaye Wade is squandering public money... it is creating so much frustration.'³⁵ In 2009, a year before the monument's official unveiling Senegal was categorised as an emerging economy, having an estimated debt of 3 billion USD, leading to questions surrounding the necessity of the monument and its immense expenditure given that during its construction, 'streets in the capital city went unpaved and power cuts were a frequent occurrence.'³⁶

To fund the project, the Senegalese State transferred 27 hectares of public owned land, close to Dakar Airport, to Mbackiyou Faye, a businessman and member of the ruling party with links to the Mouride Brotherhood, a Sufi order. Faye then sold the land under favourable conditions to the *Institution de Prévoyance Retraite du Sénégal* (Institution for Pensions Provisions of Senegal - IPRES).³⁷ Nevertheless, it was not only the funding for the construction of the memorial that became controversial but also the cost of maintaining it and the amount of energy consumed to keep it functioning while the neighbouring quarters suffer from frequent power outages.

At a demonstration against the proposed monument, one protestor lamented that the Senegalese people were fed up with poor governance through decisions such as these, 'because they were going hungry and didn't have jobs and houses.'³⁸ It was described by many as a 'lavish expression of presidential ego at the expense of the people.'³⁹ Already in 2010, a citizen collective denounced it as a symbol of political repression and called to 'debunk it at least symbolically.'⁴⁰

Some criticised this use of state resources as a way of strengthening Senegal's ties with the United States - Wade's electoral win in 2000 represented a step away from socialist politics in Senegal, and the US rewarded them strongly for it, gifting the Senegalese government a 540 million USD grant in 2010 for 'good governance.'⁴¹ Despite Wade claiming the statue would draw greater financial benefit from tourism into Senegal, he prompted outrage for suggesting he should personally claim 35% of all revenue generated from ticket sales given that the statue was his

³² Senegal Online, "Monument de la Renaissance Africaine," *Senegal Online*, no date.

³³ World Bank Data, "Senegal," *The World Bank*, 2021.

³⁴ Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, "For Many in Senegal, Statue is a Monumental Failure," *NPR*, January 5, 2010.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 190.

³⁸ Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, "For Many in Senegal, Statue is a Monumental Failure," *NPR*, January 5, 2010.

³⁹ Nyasha Mutizwa, "The Story Behind Senegal's African Renaissance Monument," *Africa News*, 27 February 27, 2020.

⁴⁰ Philippe Bernard, "Au Sénégal, l'exaspération sociale menace le président." *Le Monde Afrique*, April 5, 2010.

⁴¹ Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, "For Many in Senegal, Statue is a Monumental Failure," *NPR*, 5 January 5, 2010.

design.⁴² For some, the president's appropriation of part of the benefits and the unique funding of the monument provide strong evidence of bad governance, especially in a country where the majority of the population lives just above the poverty line.⁴³ Wade - who was 83 at the time of the monument's unveiling - ultimately lost his bid for reelection in 2012.

Compounding the issue and leading to the second area of criticism levelled at the statue, Senegal could not afford to build the statue itself. Determined for the monument to be completed, Wade accepted an approach from the 'Mansudae Overseas Project Group of Companies from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,' a North Korean construction group that agreed to build the monument. Therefore, Wade offered state assets to Mansudae.⁴⁴

North Korean Involvement

North Korea's involvement in Africa is difficult to quantify. Mansudae Overseas Project Group is a division of Mansudae Art Studio, which produces the majority of monuments, statues and memorials in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital. It has a distinctly Soviet style of architecture, grand, exaggerated and focussed on perceptions of strength and virtue. Before the African Renaissance Monument, Mansudae was involved in the construction of several Namibian national monuments, such as Heroes' Acre cemetery in 2002, a new military museum in 2004 and the Namibian State House in 2008. Mansudae has also completed projects in Angola, Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.⁴⁵ Their work appears to specialise in developing postcolonial spaces, to commemorate independence heroes, provide new administrative spaces for governments, and improve postcolonial African nation building. However, despite the differences between each of the projects and countries Mansudae is involved in, the works 'remain formally similar, effectively emulating the Socialist Realist aesthetic of the art and architecture of Pyongyang.'⁴⁶

The African Renaissance Monument is an example of the power Mansudae - and by extension, the North Korean state - may gain through sponsoring projects such as the monument. Though there is little in the public record about the extent of exchange of assets, it is noted that Wade exchanged a 'large portion of state-owned land' (in an unknown location) in exchange for North Korean funding for the African Renaissance monument, worth an estimated 24 million USD.⁴⁷ Some explain this involvement of North Korean architects as a 'legacy of the 1960s', in which North Korea sought to befriend newly independent African States to help solidify their legitimacy as the 'official Korean Nation.'⁴⁸

The irony of the African Renaissance monument being paid for and constructed by North Koreans has not been lost on the monument's critics. When the monument was constructed, Mansudae

⁴² BBC News, "Senegal inaugurates controversial \$27m monument," *BBC News*, 3 April 3, 2010.

⁴³ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 198.

⁴⁴ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 6.

⁴⁵ Meghan Kirkwood, *Postcolonial Architecture Through North Korean Modes: Namibian Commissions of the Mansudae Overseas Project* (University of Kansas, 2011)

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 5.

⁴⁸ Rhys Griffiths, "African Renaissance Monument," *History Today* 66, no. 101 (2016)

brought 150 North Korean workers, employing just 50 local Senegalese workers for the job.⁴⁹ The land that was exchanged was promptly sold by the North Korean government, and there is no public record of who eventually ended up in control of that land, or how much they paid.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the statue was termed by many as 'anything but a symbol of African renaissance.'⁵¹

Artistic Representation

Maybe due to the different influences of its several designers, the statue is a hybrid of iconographic references. Undoubtedly in a Socialist Realist style, it also has the mark of its Romanian and North Korean designers. The body of the man evokes Vera Mukhina statue *L'Ouvrier et la Kolkhoziennne* (Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman) from 1937, but it also resembles the European topos of the 'powerful musculature of the African man.'⁵² The man's cap is reminiscent of the one worn by Kwame Nkrumah, a pan-African hero, while the child's expression resembles the *Madonna With the Christ Child* of the European Renaissance, the woman's clothing further ensembles the figure in Delacroix's painting *Liberty Guiding the People* from 1830.⁵³ For some authors, the figure of the woman also resembles the slightly erotic postcards that metropolitan males used to buy in the colonies, or the image of the African motherhood in local sculptures sold to Western tourists.⁵⁴



Figure 2: "Close up of the Figures" Image by Jeff Attaway via Flickr CC BY 2.0

The statue's representation itself leaves little to the imagination. It depicts a strong, bare-chested man holding a naked infant to the sky while leading a near-naked woman, breast exposed in forward momentum (Figure 2). The rather risqué elements of the statue did not find support, given that, as of 2016, Senegal has a 95.9% Muslim majority⁵⁵ (though Wade himself is a Christian), and the statue was widely condemned as fundamentally un-Islamic. Wade wanted to lengthen the woman's loincloth but according to the architect the expense of this would be immense and it was thus not viable with the funding available.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ethan Zuckerman, "Abdoulaye Wade: Monumental Ambition," *Ethan Zuckerman*, April 5, 2010.

⁵⁰ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 5.

⁵¹ Nyasha Mutizwa, "The Story Behind Senegal's African Renaissance Monument," *Africa News*, 27 February 27, 2020.

⁵² Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 190.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁵ Index Mundi, "Senegal Religions," *Index Mundi*, November 27, 2020.

⁵⁶ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporaine," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 190.

The monument has also been criticised for having 'startlingly sexist overtones,'⁵⁷ with a strong man clearly lifting the woman and child as head of the family. Not only is the scant cladding of the woman upsetting to the country's Islamic faith leaders, but the sheer size and stature of the monument also places it higher than the city's tallest Minaret, which some interpret as representing the man 'being able to reach higher than God.'⁵⁸ Upon its unveiling, one Imam issued a *fatwa* stating the statue was 'idolatrous,' and that anyone who attended the monument's inauguration would be punished by God.⁵⁹ The Collective of Islam Associations of Senegal (CAIS) denounced the statue as a sign of Wade's submission to Western ways, and as a sign of freemasonry. For them, the monument was symbolic of the national and international Masonic community, which they consider to be a 'doubtful secret society, non-religious and satanic.'⁶⁰

Wade sought to deflect criticism from the Muslim community by comparing the monument to statues of Jesus in churches, this however only served to generate outrage on behalf of Senegal's Christian communities. The Archbishop of Dakar Theodore Sarr responded to this comment by stating: 'We were shaken and humiliated by the comparison which the head of state made between the monument to African renaissance and representations found in our churches.'⁶¹ Wade's interventions caused not only anger from both sides but threatened Senegal's tolerant atmosphere between its Muslim majority and Christian minority. The style - of Soviet Russia rather than Afro-Islamic - combined with the seeming lack of any African input, means the sheer physical monument itself did little to embrace its namesake of 'African Renaissance.' The lack of consultation with other African countries, which it claims to embody, made people question the real goal behind its construction, as Aïssa Tall, spokesperson for the Socialist Party, pointed out: 'Does this statue represent the African Countries or the glory of Wade?'⁶²

However, despite its criticism for its supporters, the monument symbolises the fight of the Black people, carried by millions in the world. It marks Senegal as a place of memory for the African Resistance,⁶³ and it can be considered as part of the great monuments of the world such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Statue of Liberty in New York or the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro.⁶⁴ Furthermore, many intellectuals have approved of the monument. The historian Mamadou Diouf, considered it 'not beautiful' maybe even 'very ugly',⁶⁵ but said that he was not opposed to it as presidents have the right to build monuments. Souleymane Bachir Diagne believes that 'a country or a region should have symbols, mobilising slogans,' and the African Renaissance needs representation too.⁶⁶ The Guinean historian Djibri Tamsir Niane believes that

⁵⁷ Atlas Obscura, "African Renaissance Monument," *Atlas Obscura*, no date.

⁵⁸ Justin Ritter, "A National Symbol or a National Frustration: Academic, Artistic and Political Perspectives of the African Renaissance Monument," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, no. 1200 (2011): 7.

⁵⁹ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporain," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 199-200.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ BBC News, "Senegal President Wade Apologises for Christ Comments," *BBC News*, December 31, 2009.

⁶² Tanguy Berthemet, "Le Sénégal grave son indépendance dans le bronze." *Le Figaro*, April 3, 2010.

⁶³ Martin Mourre, "La Renaissance africaine, des idées à la pierre," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 227 (2017), 719.

⁶⁴ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporain," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 191.

⁶⁵ Samory, "Mamadou diouf: "Le Monument de la renaissance africaine n'est pas beau, je le trouve vilain,"" *Xalima.com*, September 25, 2010.

⁶⁶ Ferdinand De Jong and Vincent Foucher, "La tragédie du Roi Abdoulaye? Néomodernisme et renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporain," *Karthala* no. 118 (2010), 197.

the monument is a 'strong symbol' and notes that it 'responds to an African concern to liberate itself by depicting the African man who frees himself from his chains and standing tall after independence.'⁶⁷

Decision-Making Processes

From the monument's conception to its financing and its construction, the voices of one particular group have been ostensibly absent from deliberation: the Senegalese people themselves. Decision making has occurred at an elite level, mostly through the directive of Wade himself. The decision to sell state land to Mansudae in order to fund the project was given as a directive from Wade without a vote in the National Assembly,⁶⁸ and as a result, there is little record of deliberation. Though there were numerous protests against the monument at its unveiling, against every controversial element of the construction process, these protests had little effect.

However, ten years of standing in Dakar, however, have softened some people's opinions of the monument. The Deputy Administrator of the monument, Georges Denis Diatta, told Africa News in 2020 that the statue had improved tourism into Senegal dramatically, '[tourists] come to understand the symbolism and the renaissance message that stems from it.'⁶⁹ One Cameroonian tourist told the BBC in 2016, 'the proportion of the artwork done... it is of an African man, powerful, strong... to portray the whole of Africa.'⁷⁰ A Brazilian tourist commented, 'it is really beautiful... you can't develop a country if you don't give... culture if you don't give art.'⁷¹ The monument's official photographer has stated that 'art is not just for today, or for tomorrow, it is for the future, the lifetime of this monument is twelve hundred years, we cannot speak about the value of this monument, but our great-grandsons will.'⁷² Academic Ethan Zuckerman wrote in 2010 that Senegal 'deserves' monuments, 'and someday, a massive statue will look iconic, not out of place.'⁷³ However, 'in the interim, it's not hard to understand how the African Renaissance Monument could make people angry, not proud.'⁷⁴

Summary and Conclusions

The African Renaissance Monument presents a key case that highlights the complexities of re-balancing postcolonial public space, and the pitfalls of leaving such commemoration to the individual whims of politicians. While the original idea - erecting a monument to pan-Africanism that can rival the great architectural wonders of the West and cement Africa's place on a world stage - leaves little to be criticised, the execution showed where these projects can quickly become mired in controversy. Further, it highlights how commemorative landscapes can create opportunities for foreign intervention, and contractors such as North Korea's Mansudae, who can offer relatively cheap and quick solutions, are able to exercise soft power. The result of a lack of proper consultation with local residents, anger over the cost, and the depiction of Africans through

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Adam Nossiter, "African States Weigh 50 Years of Independence," *New York Times*, June 4, 2010.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ BBC News, "Inside Africa's Tallest Statue - in Senegal," *BBC News*, April 12, 2016.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ethan Zuckerman, "Abdoulaye Wade: Monumental Ambition," *Ethan Zuckerman*, April 5, 2010.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

a Soviet-Socialist, rather than Afro-Islamic, lens, meant many feel the monument is a 'national frustration.'⁷⁵ However, with time and distance from the original scandals, and with Wade now 95 and far away from Senegalese politics, the monument may yet mean something to future generations. What meaning they might extract, however, remains to be seen.

Research contributed by Cameron Scheijde, Jadé Botha and Paula O'Donohoe

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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