

## Essay on the Monument, Art and Religion.

*Le Monument de la renaissance Africaine a suscité une polémique où l'argument politicien des uns l'a souvent disputé à l'obscurantisme des autres. Ces articles en français et en Anglais sont des contributions à ce débat.*

When humans attempt to bridge the gap between their inner visions and their desire to give them tangible reality in the real world for people to share, they often resort to the mediation of a system of signs, hence the use of language and the birth of art: literature, painting, theater and sculpture are but the external manifestations of inner visions. Even religions cannot escape from the tyranny of the material representation of faith through icons, rites and other intricate liturgical expressions of beliefs, notwithstanding their earnest urge for transcendence towards the divine. Churches and synagogues are awash with symbolic representations of faith. Even Islam which loathes any iconic representation of faith has not altogether shaken off the practices erstwhile associated with its distant polytheistic past. When Muslims tour around the Black Stone inside the Kaaba or stone the Devil with little pebbles, the statement they make about One Unique God is still reminiscent of that distant yet embarrassing past.

The materialization of President Abdoulaye Wade's vision of the African Renaissance by a Monument has unduly aroused a flurry of dissenting voices from conservative religious groups in Senegal who are dubiously oblivious of the pagan practices that Senegalese Muslims still delicately and secretly balance with their belated faith in Islam. Not surprisingly, only that ambivalence can accommodate moonlit ritual sacrifices on a deserted beach or lavish libations in backyards at midnight without alienating their faith in one God! However, this skilful balancing act on the one hand, and the vengeful calls for Jihad against free masons and other misbelievers on the other, shirk a pressing social agenda that most Senegalese Muslims have grown inured to as our society is every morning confronted with the disturbing sights of bedraggled armies of

street children roaming cities, in search of a paltry handout. Meanwhile, the low-profiled yet ubiquitous Christian sections of the population bear the burden of this misery through well organized charities such as Caritas, providing room and board for the needy, education, health facilities in urban and rural areas, regardless of religious affiliations. Instead of writing off the Monument in vociferous sermons as a sacrilegious work of Satan, the guardians of the faith would have better fulfilled the promises of Islamic solidarity (Zakat) by setting up trust funds or foundations to attend to the needs of the underprivileged. Applying the modern means and resources of our age is not dichotomous with the Islamic faith.

Other opponents of the Monument have argued against the so-called indecency of the Lady's bare thighs and scant apparel, ignoring the fact that slaves writhing in human waste in the dark hold of a slave ship could not afford the sartorial concerns and stylistic niceties of a cruise ship! Meanwhile, even more conspicuous forms of sexual teasing, unwittingly played out by young Senegalese women in skin tight synthetic fabrics, hardly ever run the gauntlet of public opinion because, in sub-Saharan Africa, hard-working women who bear the brunt of scorching heat, half naked, knee deep in rice fields arouse more men's admiration than their voyeuristic urges. That is also the reason why in many parts of Africa, people naturally take in stride frivolous manifestations of beauty with just a mild rebuke. Therefore, "Honni soit qui mal y pense!"

The history and traditions of human societies are often etched in symbols, statues, and works of art and passed on to future generations by rites and celebrations. In that quest for eternity, none of those iconic representations purports to rival God's divine power. Just as the Statue of Liberty is a sign of welcome and hope in the New World for the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" from tyranny, just as Admiral Nelson's Statue towers high and proud over Trafalgar Square in remembrance of Albion's might over the Great Spanish Armada, so the Monument of the African Renaissance epitomizes liberty surging from the incandescent bowels of a volcano, borne by a lava of pain, heralding as the French writer Zola would have it, "the germination of a new breed",

freed from the bondage of yesterday and the shackles of today. Erected on a mammal-like hilltop, it stands tall, ready to meet the destiny of a whole continent. Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and The Washington Monument extol the epic of America's War of Independence. Egypt's Pyramids bear witness to the ancient glamour of Nubian civilizations with which Cheikh Anta Diop has "genetically and linguistically" identified Africa. In that regard, the historical record should be set straight by nominating the Senegalese scholar, the patron of the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine because no one other than he has rehabilitated our cultural heritage with so many incontrovertible scientific facts.

This prestigious work of art that stands out so boldly in the Senegalese sky line has also been unfairly defiled by the a section of the western media and some of their Senegalese counterparts who have dismissed it as a case of mistaken priority in a so-called debt-ridden and poverty-stricken country. However, such shortsightedness coupled with political adversity should not blur the fact that, thanks to its versatility, the Monument will host many entertainment facilities, conference halls and souvenir shops and therefore has a high potential for added value and job creation. Wherever these monuments exist throughout the world, its talented curators have secured a high return on the initial investment, thanks to skilful merchandising strategies attracting millions of tourists from all over the world. In most strategic investments, returns are reaped in the long term. Today, companies make massive investments in corporate social responsibility programs to cater to the needs of their social environment, being fully aware that the short-term losses of today will turn into long-term gains tomorrow as corporate image is valued, visibility and customer loyalty enhanced.

Considering the cultural and economic interests vested in the Monument, the Senegalese educated elite should not allow the debate to be hijacked by a handful of ranting local Talibans, lest they should burn, tomorrow, the genius of Laobe sculptors on the stake of their sacrilegious art. In the event, they might even be tempted to ban from our lives commodities or appliances that we have always taken for granted such as television or photography. The intellectual elite should not allow the advocates of "afro pessimism" to undermine our urge for cultural and

economic emancipation. It behooves us to stand up to the self-appointed guardians of the faith lest they should ban one day the symbols that embody our history or drag us back down to a world superseded by reason. Let us take this debate as an opportunity for intellectually uplifting reflections on the true meaning of a work of art or any other icon for that matter. In that intellectual quest, the human mind has to free itself from the contingency of earthly symbolic representations and embark on a platonic journey out of the shadowy world of transient appearances, to capture the essence of eternal ideas. If we fail to rise up to this momentous occasion, to parody Shakespeare, this debate on the Monument will be just "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

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