The growth of artistic nationalism in Senegal

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ABSTRACT. In the 1960s, Senegal’s first national leaders narrowly defined how artists should practise nationalism through their work, particularly in the weaving craft, and enforced this definition through selective state patronage. This ideological and stylistic control echoed state control over economic markets. As subsequent administrations have restructured the economy, leading to a powerful informal business sector, so have independent contemporary weavers redefined artistic nationalism. Using ethnographic and archival interviews, this article examines nationalism in Senegalese weaving, placing the perspectives of contemporary weavers alongside those of two arts administrators who helped to develop state-sponsored programmes in the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that contemporary weavers find inspiration from Senegalese nationalism of the mid-twentieth century, yet have modified it to encompass individual expression. Because definitions of artistic nationalism in Senegal have shifted, it remains a significant ideology within the national arts scene.

KEY WORDS: art; artistic nationalism; Senegal; weaving

Introduction

Artistic nationalism has been one of the primary ideological influences within Senegal’s arts communities since the nation’s independence from France in 1960. The idea that artists can express their nationalism through their craft grew out of differing perspectives on state involvement in the arts, particularly in weaving. Some national leaders sought a cohesive national artistic vision, a challenge for any region with arts traditions that corresponded with its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Other leaders encouraged this diversity as a part of their vision for the new state. Through ethnographic and archival interviews with two arts administrators from this first generation of national leaders, Papa Ibra Tall and Ibrahima Mané, I examine artistic nationalism as it was developed through state programmes focused on weaving in the first decades of Senegal’s independence. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with weavers conducted between 2003 and 2009, and published interviews with contemporary weavers, I argue that many find expressions of artistic nationalism to remain significant yet in ways that diverge from its original definition.
Over the decades that they have been involved with national arts projects, both Tall and Mané have developed a precise way of describing artistic nationalism. In partnership with several other national arts leaders, Tall helped found a state-sponsored tapestry factory in the 1960s, the Manufacture Sénégalaise des Arts Décoratifs (MSAD). The home of this factory is Thiès, a small city 70 kilometres east of the capital, Dakar. The MSAD’s style of weaving was intended to transcend rather than grow out of regional weaving traditions associated with ethnicities. Tall equates modernity of a nation with modernity of artistic style. The tapestries’ style reflects modernist movements of the mid-twentieth century, with flat colour shapes forming scenes such as landscapes, historical battles and abstracted images of people and spirits. The techniques used require little blending between these colour forms, with a reliance on form rather than line. A relatively small group of weavers at the MSAD continue to work within the strict framework of this style, creating tapestries used for state gifts for visiting dignitaries, and for official functions. Through informal mentorships with MSAD weavers, a network of weavers in Thiès has grown to practise these same styles and techniques, yet operate small workshops privately. They use these aspects of the nationalist style, yet combine them with other influences for greater individual expression and access to diverse markets.

Representing another aspect of artistic nationalism, Ibrahima Mané helped direct a state-sponsored project to support the already-existing artisan sector. Mané’s narrative places national arts projects in the context of the nation’s ethnic arts heritages, rather than separating ethnic and national interests. He also emphasises the importance of finding new means of artistic expression, while still conversing with ethnic heritages. Weaving in ethnicity-based traditions, as described here, remains a far more regionally practised genre of the craft, as opposed to the nationalist style that has remained popular for only a small number of weavers in Thiès. However, these weavers have reflected Mané’s broader interpretation of artistic nationalism; through their weaving practices and discourse about weaving, they have broadened Tall’s limiting definition of the tapestries’ nationalist style. Mané’s perspective on artistic nationalism resonates with Smith’s (1999) description of historical ethnosymbolism: recognising that nationalism’s power derives from reinterpretations of a nation’s ethnic heritages and symbols. In other words, the arts are integral to Senegal’s plural identities as well as to its national identity.

Following Falola’s (2001) discussion of African cultural nationalism, artistic nationalism is an intellectual tradition and Tall and Mané are intellectual elites within this tradition. While contemporary practising weavers do not have the political recognition of Tall or other artistic leaders that shaped Senegal’s cultural institutions, they have adopted this intellectual tradition. Their discourse on weaving references political and artistic histories, along with consciously individualised explanations of their work. However, their discursive and stylistic divergence from original anti-colonial definitions of 1960s artistic nationalism has as much to do with economics as with...
ideology. No longer under state patronage, weavers who work in private, often household-based workshops are financially obligated to be more flexible in their work. These shifts in the arts sector mirror changes in colonial and later postcolonial state administrative control over economic markets and agricultural production in Senegal. Both Tall and Mané helped to direct these changes through their leadership in state arts institutions.

Anti-colonial ideologies and independence

Tall is an elder arts administrator, part of Senegal’s 1960s nationalist arts movement. He pivots all parts of his life story around Senegal’s independence from France. When I asked Tall about his early education, he started by saying that he was born into a colonised population. In his life’s narrative, this experience shaped his early opportunities and his awakening to anti-colonial ideologies; he formed his life’s work around these convictions. A promising student, Tall attended a colonial-era French school in Dakar. Only two secondary schools of the time in Senegal, the lycées in Dakar and St Louis, taught a curriculum that transferred easily to the French educational system. The emphasis on French culture in the curriculum extended from grade school through higher education. If French-speaking West African or Afro-Caribbean students sought a secondary education through the French colonial system and a university education in France or Belgium, they were required to learn a canon of works by European intellectuals without mention of other regions’ cultural histories.

These limitations for students of African and Afro-Caribbean descent within French colonial educational institutions were the catalysts for the negritude movement. Starting in the 1930s, the founders of negritude – Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, Birago Diop and the first president of Senegal (1960–81), Léopold Sédar Senghor – developed their ideas about anti-colonialism and celebrating African and Afro-Caribbean cultures. A poet, Senghor thought that the arts could best convey negritude and anti-colonial messages. Falola (2001) discusses negritude as one of several movements that helped define African cultural nationalism. West African elites shaped anti-colonial political nationalism; they also shaped the cultural institutions that would identify each independent nation. Negritude became particularly important for Senghor’s policies for state support of the arts.

Senghor’s version of negritude emphasised the collective strength of ‘African culture’ (Senghor 1967: 48). However, he drew criticism with these universal claims (see Snipe 1998). Associating psychological traits with collectivities, he wrote that Greeks are rational and Africans are emotional: ‘I have often attempted the psychological portrait of Black Africans, which I founded in emotion’ (Senghor 1967: 62). For this ‘psychological portrait’ of African culture, he described magic and intuition in art – an idea that he and Pablo Picasso claimed as a mutual influence – to describe the intuitive
qualities he said ‘African art’ exemplified (Kasfir 1999). Senghor did write of rich diversity within societies that spurred the artistic expression he celebrated. However, his critics said that his totalising picture of a singular African culture rather played into French colonialist assumptions of African inferiority.

During the last decades of colonisation, Senegal’s nationalist leaders recruited local elites for the competing political parties (see Boone 2003); they also sponsored young people. After Tall completed his Baccalaureate under the French educational system in Dakar, he left for France in 1955 with Senghor’s patronage. Senghor’s financial and mentoring support would continue as he helped Tall shape his career in the arts and arts administration. Senghor used patronage as an investment, expecting artists and intellectuals to either distinguish themselves abroad to call attention to Senegal, or to return to strengthen Senegal’s state programmes. Tall was no exception, and came to absorb these expectations into his personal goals and expectations for those whom he influenced. In Paris, he gained technical skills in the beaux arts. During this time, he lived near a salon where tapestries were exhibited and he started to pursue tapestry as a means of expression.\(^1\) Even though he received professional training in a French naturalist style of painting – a style that relies on representational images, natural light and deep multipoint perspective – he was not satisfied with this work. His search for a new style of visual expression coincided with his explorations of anti-colonial writings and his research into techniques of tapestry weaving. Through these writings, and particularly those of his mentor, Senghor, Tall started to consider naturalism as not an innocuous style but an aesthetic imposition by an imperial state.

Similar to his narrative about his early schooling – as a negation of intellectual expectations – Tall described French colonialism as a negation of culture: ‘At the base was the negation of culture ... So, colonialism’s justification, it was that we were a primitive people.’\(^2\) Much of Tall’s narrative could be considered reactionary against this ideological ‘negation’. Tall related to me the pride he and Senghor shared in the face of colonial policies, quoting him: ‘Senghor said: ‘I will take the word black in the gutter to make an object of gold.’”\(^3\) By using Senghor’s voice in Tall’s personal history, Tall aligned his own voice and political ideologies with those same factors that made Senghor iconic, even mythical, to many people.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, internal support of African nationalist leaders, including Senghor, grew in strength. The Union Française constitution, signed on 27 October 1946, granted local authority to its population, and authority to form distinct states (Labouret 1952). It was not until Charles de Gaulle’s leadership over the Fifth Republic (starting in 1958) that the French strategy of decolonisation solidified with its aim of imprinting a region with French influence. Following Senghor’s mentorship and his own developing nationalism, Tall was particularly concerned about this influence within the arts.\(^4\) However, the French colonial administration was more concerned with its economic command over French West Africa.
Boone (1995) argues that French colonial rule, similar to other colonial regimes, was shaped by the realities of local economies, and it took advantage of already-established commerce. Indeed, as Boone (1990) describes, the colonial administration worked through local elites who managed agricultural and industrial production; it also contracted with independent coastal traders.

Senegal’s post-independence state control over local agricultural producers and businesses, following the colonial administration’s lead, provides the larger context for its ideological and economic control over the artisanal sector. In the first decades of independence, Senegal’s state economy continued to rely on its decentralised control of groundnut production, as it had both before and during French occupation. This monopoly of resources was common among postcolonial regimes and echoed colonial economic control that utilised pre-existing local structures (Boone 2003; Mozaffar 2002). State control of rural agriculture built up local elites’ access to state institutions and resources, yet these elites’ access to local power also weakened private businesses because they were forced to rely on state patronage (Boone 1995; Schmidt 2009). For example, they could not adjust individually to local or global prices, or form relationships to global markets, but instead were forced to rely on the state as an intermediary and regulator of these relationships and markets. Additional obstacles – including land degradation, repeated droughts, and French withdrawal of price subsidies in 1967 – contributed to economic crises in the first decades of independence. The result of these crises, and the state’s enforced combined political and economic system, was that Senegal’s political stability increased while its population suffered economically (Barker 1977; Cruise O’Brien 1971).

Similar to other West African state leaders of the mid twentieth century, Senghor sought financial control over the arts as well as agriculture and local businesses. This was a monopoly of funding for the arts, to exist parallel to the monopoly of business resources, and reflected state arts funding of other newly independent West African nations. While state funding of agriculture reinforced state power, selective state funding was a strategy to define and reinforce the image of state power. As Smith (1996) argues, nationalism is a strategically created political ideology yet it is created from, and must be in relationship with, culturally plural regions – particularly with regard to ethnic pluralism. As much as Senghor and other leaders sought to define the state through selective representations, their definition of the nation and how to represent it would become increasingly plural after their administrations.

In a comparative example, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president (1957–66), used abstracted ethnicity-specific arts to represent a cohesive nation. As Hess (2001) and Schramm (2000) describe, these arts were chosen, sponsored and displayed specifically as national arts. Other regionally and ethnically specific arts and cultural displays, such as dance, were pointedly suppressed from representing the nation as a whole. In a dissimilar choice to achieve similar strategic goals, Senghor’s administration chose an art form – tapestries – that differed in style and production techniques from traditional,
ethnicity-specific arts, particularly weaving. It privileged this nationalist tapestry style to represent the nation, at the expense of not sponsoring established regional arts. Both Nkrumah and Senghor sought an artistic vision that diverged sharply from British and French traditional arts, as Tall explained earlier. However, they did this through financial control that funded one art form because they perceived a threat to cohesive nationalism in their nation’s long-established diversity of arts. In a discussion of ethnic conflict, Mazrui (1995) comments that national governments can see ethnically plural societies as a threat because the political process does not seem to be able to accommodate such diversity. Responding to this perceived threat, both Senghor and Nkrumah sponsored arts that they hoped would encompass ethnic pluralism and emphasise national unity.

While local businesses, artists and agricultural producers were forced to rely on this selective state sponsorship under Senghor’s administration, the era of President Abdou Diouf (1981–2000) represented an economic and policy shift because of internal and external pressures. Boone (1990) highlights the 1980s economic crisis – including foreign debt and repetitive Sahelian droughts – that eroded both state and local finances. Foreign (particularly French) control over production and trade weakened as private businesses organised and the informal sector grew, relying on regional rather than international marketplaces. This growth of the informal and private business sectors was a trend throughout Africa in the 1990s, fed by a growing disillusionment with African states (Boone 1998). Alongside these shifts in economic patronage, social networks – especially those established within Sufi orders in Senegal – continue to wield power outside state control (Villalón 2007; Villalón and Kane 1998). These trends, which have continued under President Abdoulaye Wade’s administration (2001–present), did not remove the importance of political patronage by any means yet they did shift control away from the state to the private sector. This change is echoed in state control over the arts.

The establishment of Senegal’s nationalist vision of the arts has mirrored this recent political and economic history. Tight ideological control over the first national arts institutions, including the MSAD in Thiès, has ceded to an independent and informal arts sector. However, nationalist ideologies in the arts have continued within many independent weaving workshops, particularly those in Thiès, which use similar techniques and styles to the MSAD. Starting with national arts institutions established under the Senghor regime, and extending this history to contemporary weavers, I explore weavers’ discursive emphases on nationalism in their craft work, and how they have developed this discourse in varied ways.

Establishing and defining nationalism through the arts

The idea that nationalism can be established through the arts started before independence, via leaders such as Senghor. It continued as West African states
developed their new economies and social institutions. Tall became a leader in three state-run arts institutions at different times: the arts school, the national gallery and the MSAD. Harney (2004), along with contemporary artists within Senegal (including Mané), have commented on the ways Tall’s own artistic style has become a part of a recognised Senegalese national expression. By heading these institutions, he has helped to define artistic nationalism within Senegal. Tall does not discount other weaving styles, particularly those associated with ethnicities. At the same time, unlike Mané’s perspective (described later), they do not enter into his explanations of why the arts, particularly weaving, are nationally significant.

Tall refers to the start of the national arts school as the start of Senegal’s avant-garde arts. While the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts du Sénégal officially opened in 1966, it started as the Maison des Arts in 1960 after Senghor asked both Tall and Iba Ndiaye to return from their art studies in Paris to direct it. Their two branches were Ndiaye’s Section Arts Plastiques (Department of Visual Arts) and Tall’s Atelier de Recherches Plastiques Nègres (Workshop for Research in Black Visual Arts). Ndiaye’s and Tall’s differing philosophies on the arts show that internal disagreements within the nationalist arts efforts were present from the start. In his department, Tall worked with Pierre Lods, who had established the Poto-Poto School of Painting in Brazzaville (in the former French Congo) in the 1950s. Senghor had recruited Lods because of his experience in Brazzaville, and their shared belief in African artists’ inherent creativity (Grabski 2001) – the negritude ideal for which Senghor was most criticised.

Ndiaye headed the Section Arts Plastiques from 1959 to 1967. Ndiaye had attended the Lycée de St Louis, studied architecture at the Beaux Arts de Paris, and then trained in sculpture and painting at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris from 1949 to 1958 (Grabski 2001). He modelled the new art department in Dakar on these educational institutions. Tall characterised Ndiaye’s department as ‘a classical arts section, classical type’. Ndiaye’s explicit embrace of his French education, and of the cultural scene in Paris, contrasted with Tall’s public rejection of the ‘classical’ style he learned during his years as an art student in Paris. Adding to this, Ndiaye’s ambivalence towards negritude echoed many of his contemporaries’ criticisms of this social movement, yet it also made him unpopular with students who had embraced the philosophy. He returned to Paris in 1967, although his influence remains in the students he trained and mentored in Dakar. Harney (2004) also notes the wide recognition that Ndiaye’s own work has received, for its multiple influences and complex uses of media and subjects.

Tall believed that artists should be institutionally trained, specifically within these national institutions. For Tall, this personally reflects Senghor’s directive to use individual talents in service of the nation. More broadly, it shows a mid-twentieth century optimism about the efficacy of state-run cultural institutions (see Falola 2001). Tall was the first director of the national gallery when it opened in 1983. In a 1983 newspaper interview, a
reporter questioned Tall about a new generation of artists to be exhibited in the national gallery. Tall alluded to the transition from an older generation (his own) that had participated in the birth of state-sponsored arts institutions to a younger generation questioning and splitting from this tradition:

I find that it is normal that there will be self-taught [artists] but in a country where there is a formative school for the Beaux Arts, it is not normal that there will be such a quantity of self-taught [artists]. The more inadmissible is that you do not see any of these self-taught [artists] show their desire to go to these schools to perfect [their work] . . . One must know the techniques that one practices to claim to bring a revolution. (Pires 1983: 15)

Institutional education was, for Tall, a natural precursor to any societal change. But these state-sponsored arts institutions became symbols of inconsistent ideologies. While Tall worked against a French system of the arts – including an aesthetic style, naturalism and an art historical canon that omitted artists of African descent – he advocated aspects of a French system of artistic expression and training. This institutional model can stand in contrast to West African models of apprenticeship-based training, even in the form of group apprenticeships. Similar to Senghor (his mentor), Tall adopted French philosophies of formal education in the arts and coupled those ideals with denunciations of colonial impositions. While Tall talked about the French imprint on the arts in Senegal, he neither condemned this imprint nor explicitly stated his role in bringing about aspects of this imprint.

The third institution that Tall helped to shape was the MSAD, the state-sponsored tapestry factory in Thies. The French tapestry factories on which the Thiès MSAD was loosely modelled – the Manufatures des Gobelins, de Beauvais and de la Savonnerie – were established between 1607 and 1667. Their primary mission at the time was to supply tapestries for official palaces of the Republic. Today, their mission is to actively preserve France’s arts heritage. This mission is analogous to that of the Thiès MSAD, to be a public symbol of national arts heritage and of self-sufficiency – a significant issue as newly independent Senegal gained its economic footing in the 1960s. Another related goal is to produce tapestries as symbols of the nation to hang in embassies and presidential residences around the world. Foreign state visitors to Senegal often receive a tapestry, and the current President Abdoulaye Wade makes formal televised addresses in front of an MSAD-produced tapestry.

In his work on the new tapestry style for the MSAD, Tall sought a means of expression that described Senegal as a creative, independent state. During his training in Paris, while he was rejecting the naturalism of French painting, he was influenced by the international modern arts movement of the mid-twentieth century. Tall’s training and conscious influences in the European modern arts makes his rejection of French arts a rejection of an older style of naturalism. The abstraction and symbolism that drove several modern arts movements in Europe and America also contributed to, and were shaped by, modern arts movements in Africa. The style Tall helped develop takes lessons
Mané, also of Tall’s generation, stated that Tall has had a profound effect on modern arts in Senegal. He said of Tall, ‘He is a monument,’ and, ‘his students are a bit imprinted with this.’9 Weavers in Thiès who have been trained in the style of the MSAD often adopt Tall’s version of a nationalist history that is inseparable from negritude ideologies. For example, Modou Diouf, a contemporary independent tapestry weaver in Thiès, has an allegiance to the nationalist weaving style that reflects Tall’s comments about ‘classical’, or representational, styles: ‘People have left the classical style. It’s the abstract weaving that Senegalese practise, generally. One weaves much more in the abstract than in the concrete, in the classic.’10

Although an independent weaver, Diouf has adopted aspects of the MSAD’s style along with its corresponding ideology of rejecting the old in favour of the modern. Whether employed by the tapestry factory or mentored by those who were MSAD-trained, weavers who practise this tapestry genre often connect their craft to ideas of nationalism. They are not only weaving; they are putting their national identity into practice. As Senghor and later Tall intended, they talk about using their skills to support the state. The ideologies that Tall presented in his narrative are not only personal; they remain in Senegal’s arts and nationalist lexicons. Tall, with his leadership, and Senghor, with his financial control over the arts, helped to define early Senegalese artistic nationalism. Diouf’s perspective illustrates the contemporary connection between weaving style and the adoption of this narrative of artistic nationalism. However, as Ndiaye and Mané show, this narrative was not accepted universally, and it did not control completely the regionally diverse perspectives on what it means to create Senegalese arts.

**Diversity and cohesion in nationalist arts**

Ibrahima Mané was involved in the nationalist arts projects of the 1960s, yet later branched out into other arts projects. His narrative of the region’s weaving history used elements of ethnic, national, religious and regional identities. It differs from Tall’s narrative by including conflicting voices and histories of several weaving genres. While Tall focused on the nationalist style of weaving alone, Mané spoke of weaving practices associated with the nation and its many ethnicities. Mané not only acknowledged the contradictory aspects of artistic nationalism; he used them as important parts of the narrative. This diversified perspective on the region’s weaving practices has contemporary resonance with weavers not immediately affiliated with the MSAD and its explicitly nationalist style.

Mané started his explanation of the region’s weaving by acknowledging the separate histories told by the different ethnicities, and the significance of the profession to each:
The weaving practice in Senegal was made up of ethnic considerations (Sereer, Diola, sometimes Wolof, and Tukulor) and obeyed ancestral rules more in the design of the weaving professions than in the design of the final products.\textsuperscript{11}

Weavers of many different styles and products associate their work with a longer regional history. In addition, while weavers of several ethnicities spoke of the importance of their own ethnicity’s history of weaving, they also pointed out the parallel heritages of weaving in other ethnicities. Diallo (2001) and Dilley (1987), for example, describe similar findings in their accounts of ethnicity-specific weaving histories.

Mané used his personal history to explain his perspective on the arts as oriented to both nation and ethnicity. When the young Mané told his family that he was going to study to be a weaver, they were angry at his decision. One of the ‘ethnic considerations’ to which Mané referred is caste-based professions. His family did not approve of his chosen path of study: those of a royal lineage – the name Mané indicates royal lineage within the Manding ethnicity – did not adopt artisan trades, whether that was music or manual work. Casted professions are common to the history of several regional ethnicities. Historians and anthropologists (for example Dilley 1987; Diop 1981; Searing 2002; Ware 2009) emphasise the flexibility of these inherited caste systems, even while they guide social status, marriage and profession. An illustrative example is the Wolof ǹene, or artisanal caste, which includes weavers. Until the mid-twentieth century, the ǹene were endogamous, lived apart from other families and were respected for their skilled trades, yet were also sometimes feared and suffered social discrimination. Therefore, ethnicity-based castes are recognised cultural categories that influence social life. They continue to be significant for artistic communities and particularly weavers, who refer to their lineage within a caste as a historical and ancestral connection to their profession. Both ethnic and national histories are important aspects of weavers’ discourses about their work, and how they define themselves as weavers.

Manè said of his family, ‘their reaction corresponded to the attitude of the era’; weaving wasn’t for him in this ‘precise social category’. Today, he said, the caste system has less influence over individuals’ professional choices. Nevertheless, he added that he could define any art practised in Senegal today by whether it is categorised under caste systems or not. Mané distinguished between modern and traditional artists: traditional artists are those for whom ‘all their activities are animated by caste elements’. This includes painting, weaving and woodworking, no matter the ever-changing styles or techniques. While these artisans may use new technologies and be inspired to make new products, they use the same materials and techniques as their predecessors. Modern arts are those such as painting cars and metalworking, which the caste system never covered.\textsuperscript{12} Any weaving history, according to Mané, is rooted in the region’s ethnicities and is a continuation of these ethnicities’ conceptions of the arts. His definitions are broad enough to encompass stylistic and media variations within these arts.
Practices of weaving, as Mané stated earlier, are as significant as the styles produced. Historically, West African weaving has been associated with the West African strip loom, a narrow loom with a 1,000-year history in the region (see Bolland 1991; Kriger 2006). Different ethnicities in the Senegambian region are associated with their own styles of weaving, yet using this narrow loom is a commonality. For example, the Sereer and Tukulor ethnicities, as Dilley (1987) and Heath (1992) relate, have a shared regional history and their weavers also share weaving techniques and designs. Their strip cloth is characterised by long stripes of colour in varying, rather than uniform, widths. Manjak weavers set themselves apart through the brocading techniques they use, which result in brightly coloured designs floating in relief against darker backgrounds. For weavers who use the narrow loom and its associated techniques, the word ‘traditional’ is a way to set themselves apart from the wide-loom tapestry weaving used by those who practise the nationalist style. Narrow-loom weavers, contrary to what Senghor intended in his vision of artistic nationalism, perceive this nationalist style to be so removed from regional ethnic histories that it has no connection to Senegalese identity: it is ‘imported’ (see Cochrane 2009).

However, leaders of the nationalist arts movement desired an arts expression that would transcend the ethnic diversity that they perceived to be contrary to a unified national image. The tapestry style that Tall helped to develop had no connection to the ethnic styles of weaving already present in the region; using a wide loom set it apart even more. In an interview with Harney (2004), Tall called this a ‘completely new language’ (Harney 2004: 59). In a similar decision, Senegal’s early national leaders chose French to be an official language of state. Instead of privileging one ethnicity’s language over another, they instituted French as a common language of bureaucracy. Speaking French remains an uneasy practice, representing national politics, business and globalisation, along with a history of colonialism (see Swigart 2000). In both national language and national arts, rather than seeking to encompass the diversity of languages or artistic styles, or select a representative from this variation, the national leaders chose something new to represent the whole. However, to do this they needed the ethnically diverse population with a long history of weaving to buy into a new narrative of the arts. Senghor’s administration wanted weavers to adopt its definition of artistic nationalism, yet Mané also saw a need to strengthen the nation’s cultural diversity as represented in the arts.

Mané and his colleague Ibrahima Gueye became involved in the national project in the 1960s to restructure the artisan sector, and in particular weaving. Under its auspices, they managed a programme encouraging a diversity of established weaving styles that were historically associated with particular ethnicities. To ignore and simply ‘replace’ a 1,000-year artisanal heritage with significance for several ethnicities would be not to destroy it, but to lose out on state control of a small business sector. Mané and Gueye talked with weavers about ways to promote their work, and to develop a national
project organised around both craftspeople’s needs and national interests. One project that arose out of their efforts was the Artisan Village network, which continues to expand under partial state sponsorship. This was part of Senghor’s decentralised control of local businesses, yet with a far freer hand than its dominance over agricultural production. On Artisan Village campuses in several cities across Senegal, individual workshops are grouped together. Each campus includes weavers but also woodcarvers, jewellers and artists who work in other media, without restrictions on style. They both produce and sell their work in these spaces.

Mané described the promises and limitations of the national projects in the arts. He was the first director of the first Artisan Village in Soumbédioune, which is now part of Dakar. His work to establish the Artisan Villages coincided with the 1970 Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (World Festival of Black Arts), held in Dakar. He had hoped to use this event as a way to publicise weavers’ work. However, he was informed that the work of the Artisan Village weavers was to be separate from the festival. Mané commented, ‘Unfortunately, the administration did that instead of investing capital in the growth of weaving. Our competencies were so used; this was at the base of the constraints of the era.’

While Senghor encouraged the arts through state funds, he focused most of these funds on his definition of national arts, into which he grouped the state-sponsored tapestries but not weaving that reflected ethnic heritages. Cameron (1989) notes that this is a commonality among state arts institutions: artists must conform to certain styles, or risk losing the financial patronage that they need. Restrictive state arts patronage often results in stagnation within that narrowly defined style. Mané sought to encourage arts development that would avoid that stagnation, and also speak to Senegal’s diverse history of the arts. Through his work and his background, Mané was in a position to see competing interests among the several groups of people who were not always in agreement about state arts support: officials who controlled this funding; those who implemented state programmes; MSAD-influenced tapestry-makers who used the wide loom and the nationalist style; weavers who used the narrow loom and associated their craft with ethnic traditions; and artists who experimented with multiple media and techniques.

The state’s decisions about funding for the artisan sector were in keeping with its handling of other business sectors across Senegal in the 1960s and 1970s. Senghor’s administration sought state control over the informal business sector, ultimately weakening the private economy. Mané and his colleagues intended the Artisan Villages to encourage and support private artistic enterprises; these institutions have had mixed levels of success, not only because of state sponsorship. The Soumbédioune Artisan Village, for example, has greater visibility in its location in Dakar than the Thiès Artisan Village. The campus in Thiès is located in a secluded part of the city, away from the city’s central market. With not as much traffic already surrounding it, several artists with workshops there told me that they have grown
frustrated with the lack of natural foot traffic that would bring people in to see their work. They often do not have the reliable sales that they need to sustain their businesses – a problem familiar to other independent weaving workshops. While a state enterprise, artists run their workshops independently, handling their workshop upkeep and sales on their own. This is in direct contrast to the Thiès tapestry factory, in which weavers receive a government salary not dependent on sales and the administrative arm handles any marketing and managerial duties. Nevertheless, Artisan Villages have continued to grow: state funding has made it possible for them to be established in over a dozen large towns across Senegal.

Mané’s perspective on artistic nationalism was – and is – far broader than Senghor’s and Tall’s. Similar to Senghor and Tall, he believed in the goal of supporting the nation through its arts. Mané’s focus on the nation’s cultural diversity expressed in the arts, rather than a separate artistic style that would replace it, has greater resonance for contemporary artists in Senegal. Weavers place too much importance on the symbols of their ethnicity and their profession – the casted lineages, the narrow looms and their practising of the trade – to replace it with what they regard as an ‘imported’ art style. This is not nationalism for them; it is foreign.

Nationalism and contemporary weavers

The majority of Senegal’s weavers thus practise styles of weaving that rely on the narrow loom. The weavers in Thiès who are either employed by the MSAD or practise the nationalist style in private workshops are a small percentage of the region’s contemporary weaving populations, yet they provide an insight into the ways that the 1960s and 1970s nationalist arts projects have influenced contemporary weaving. Weavers who have been trained in this style, and are not under the auspices of the MSAD, have modified the idea of artistic nationalism to make it an expression of their own creativity and nationalism. In this way, I argue, they have retained Tall’s discursive arguments about artistic nationalism, even while reinterpreting his stylistic, technical and institutional definitions of the same.

The artistic nationalism associated with Tall, which relies – and insists – on a particular style and associated techniques along with institutional training, has come to be seen as historically important, yet limiting in a contemporary context. While the style remains popular in other media, including underglass, canvas and mural painting, it does not have the same widespread legitimacy in weaving – most weavers do not recognise it as a regionally and historically rooted craft. In weaving, the style has become a symbol of the 1960s avant-garde arts, and of the state. This perspective is shared by scholars of the region, such as Harney (2004), and by regional weavers who practise ethnicity-based styles using the narrow loom. The diverse perspective on the arts that Mané found important, while marginalised in the scope of the
Senghor administration, resonates with regional perspectives on the arts, both historical and contemporary. The regional public perception of the weaving styles using the West African strip loom is that of indigenous, ‘traditional’ weaving, with a positive conversational use of the word ‘traditional’.

Weavers using only selected ideological and technical aspects of the nationalist tapestry style have been more successful in finding a creative and marketable niche for their craft. Nevertheless, they can only do this outside the auspices of the MSAD. An informal network of weavers using the nationalist style has taken root in Thiès, and is practised in household-based or small group workshops. Many of these independent weavers, such as Diouf, learned the techniques necessary for this style from MSAD weavers, whether active or retired. In this relatively small weaving community, mentors and apprentices have formed a small social network, with the commonality of their mentors’ institutional affiliation and their adherence to this particular style. The apprenticeship model of arts education diverges from Tall’s standards for state institutional learning. Apprenticeships take on different forms, depending on the workshop and its financial standing. Most apprentices are younger adults, both men and women, who have completed varying levels of formal schooling. At the same time, several family workshops have trained their children in the craft. Diouf, similar to many of his colleagues, talks about practising his national identity through his craft. But he has broken away from the state-institution-based training and production that Tall and his colleagues set up and promoted.

Even with these changes from Tall’s conceptions of nationalist arts production, the independent practitioners of this weaving genre have adopted Tall’s stance on elite and vernacular weaving styles. Tall argued for a perspective of an elite and a vernacular, with elite nationalist tapestries versus vernacular any other type of weaving. Weavers who practise the nationalist style, even in part, are today a marginal group – elite only in the sense that they set themselves apart consciously from a strong artisanal sector that maintains its diversity in styles, techniques and business models. By affiliating themselves with this style, weavers publicly demonstrate their own status and the value of their work. They then use these social valuations in negotiating the economic value of their work. Diouf has adopted this perspective. He also refers to the nationalist style as the only true tapestry weaving in Africa, similar to Tall’s assertions of the same idea. I asked Diouf why he believes this and his response was clear:

Simply because, in black Africa, there are no tapestries as in Senegal. In other countries, there are woven rugs. But here in Senegal, we have woven rugs, we have tapestries. So, one says ‘Senegalese tapestries’ because there are no other tapestries in Africa. And not many throughout the world, actually.14

Diouf is unyielding in his definition of Senegalese tapestry weaving, to the point of disparaging other styles and techniques.

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However, he pushes these same standards to the point that they are not always visually recognisable in his work. Diouf’s speciality is portraiture in tapestry weaving. He strives for representationalism in skin modulations and folds of cloth, taking the style of his tapestries in the direction of the painterly naturalism that Tall sought to replace. His skill in blending colours for skin tones is in marked contrast to the solid colour forms that characterise the nationalist style. Diouf’s specific techniques do not neatly align with his own idealised standards for the craft. Tall and Diouf each argue that a style based on abstracted colour forms represents the artistry of the nation, and specific techniques are to be used to achieve this style. Practising their craft outside the financial sponsorship of the MSAD, Diouf and other independent weavers have commissions to fulfill for clients who have other desires for their tapestries; they also have a lack of institutional oversight that gives them more freedom to innovate in their work.

Creative uses of these techniques, such as in portraiture, are ways that weavers can develop their own personal expression. They develop niches for themselves in a competitive art market by diverging from a strict style. By marketing these specialities, they can raise the value of their work. Tall adheres to a tight standard of tapestry making, and associates adhering to these standards with a loyalty to nation. But independent weavers with the same strong sense of nationalism adapt this style to their own needs. They make the nationalist style relevant in contemporary artistic expression, but only by modifying it to market demands and their own skills and specialities.

Mané also spoke of nationalism within weaving, yet his perspective on artistic nationalism integrated longer regional heritages of weaving with new artistic ideas. Weavers who have embraced this diversity have been able to weather changing art market demands. While state funding during the 1960s and 1970s emphasised modern arts, the stylistic and philosophical definitions of modern arts (read: national arts, in Senghor’s and Tall’s conceptions) were limited. Ibrahima Mané found this to be true in arts funding, and Iba Ndiaye encountered these limitations in both his teaching and his own painting, for example. However, Ndiaye’s work, along with that of many artists who have embraced different styles and media, has been widely received and recognised. Modou Diouf, even with his strict ideological conceptions of style, has received recognition for his skill in portraiture. Similarly, several former MSAD weavers have found that individual recognition has come after they left the auspices and stylistic oversight of the state-sponsored workshop. They combine varied influences in their work, including MSAD techniques and styles.

One weaver who left the MSAD is Baye Moké Traoré, who worked there from 1969 to 1992 before splitting with the workshop to develop his own multimedia work in painting, sculpture and weaving. He credits the tapestry factory and discussions with weaving colleagues for skill in specialised weaving techniques. Nevertheless, like Diouf he has developed variations on these techniques to develop an individual style, which he calls Mokéisme.
When I asked him to describe Moukéisme, he replied that it is his personal artistic vision that he developed after leaving the MSAD: his combination of sculpture, weaving and painting into one composition. These three elements must be a cohesive work of art, with technical perfection in each medium. During one of my visits with him, for example, he was at work on a series of canvases with three-dimensional weaving elements, wooden structures and thick applications of paint.

Traoré has promoted himself within national and international art circles by referencing both his national identity and his individuality. In a newspaper article about a 2009 exhibit of his work, Traoré said of his work and philosophy:

*Moukéisme* is a symbiosis of three primary elements, which are, for me, the means to express my art. I search for a perpetual essence. Africa is a mask, I am a mask. I am not music; I am the rhythm that gives me my creative pulses. Up till the present the main artistic currents have come from foreign sources. I work to create my own current. (Tchedji 2009)

On the international art market, this insistence on bringing the ‘artistic currents’ himself, rather than absorbing those currents that ‘come from foreign sources’, is not explicitly nationalistic. While absorbing global influences, Traoré states that he does not rely on them. Rather, he speaks of the power of indigenous, and individual, artistry. He, not outsiders, brings the artistic currents for himself. His work has achieved international recognition, and thus higher economic and social value in art markets. By stating that he derives his inspiration from himself and from his home, he attributes significant social value to his home.

Traoré’s work and statements have resonance with Tall’s and Senghor’s focus on Senegalese artistic talent: they desired that Senegalese artists should not only train in Senegal – thus creating the MSAD and the national arts school – but also work so that Senegal as a nation would be recognised globally. Traoré has created a more nuanced and flexible perspective on practising this nationalism. His influences from the MSAD would not be as recognisable as, for example, those in Diouf’s tapestry portraiture. Together, their work illustrates the varied ways that individual artists have diverged from Tall’s and Senghor’s strict definition of artistic nationalism. Present-day weavers have made national expressions in weaving legitimate in a contemporary sense by contributing in varied ways to Senegal’s art scene and to ideas of Senegalese arts.

Mané spoke of the need for artistic diversity – specifically that of ethnic heritages – for artistic nationalism to thrive. While I have not focused here on weavers who work in the ethnicity-based styles of weaving, the same arguments could be made for their work: they combine old and new styles and techniques to both root their work in the region and keep their work vibrant. Neither these styles nor the nationalist style are obsolete. They have been modified so that they are in conversation with contemporary arts. As a
result, the nationalist style has not turned into one unified style, as Tall and colleagues envisioned and instituted in the 1960s.

Conclusion

Artistic nationalism remains significant in Senegal because artists continually update it, keeping it relevant in both Senegalese and international contemporary arts scenes. The efforts of Senghor, Tall, Mane and other leaders to establish artistic nationalism in the mid-twentieth century has succeeded, but only because individual artists have modified these leaders’ original conceptions of both the ideology and stylistic practices of artistic nationalism. They have done so by individually varying on the nationalist style, discursively referring to the importance of artistic nationalism and participating in art markets not tied to state control. Rather than rejecting it outright, weavers have transformed the strict definition of artistic nationalism into a plurality of legitimate artistic expressions of nationalism.

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Please note that some pseudonyms have been used.

Notes

1 Papa Ibra Tall, interview with the author, 15 February 2005, Thiès. All translations by the author.
2 ibid.
3 ibid.
4 Papa Ibra Tall, interview with the author, 2 November 2004, Thiès.
5 These elites included wealthy landowners, aristocratic families, local political operatives and religious leaders, including marabouts and Sufi religious leaders. Religious leaders in particular first gained political clout under the French regime and today continue to influence state and local governance, serving in an advisory capacity. Boone (2003) comments on the diversity of these elites’ interests in political power, making it impossible to think of political access as a simple duality between state and local interests. Schmidt (2009) notes that local elites’ access to political power in Senegal was comparable to that of Côte d’Ivoire, yet other independent countries in West Africa differed from this political structure.
6 The term avant garde dates to the nineteenth-century French modernist idea that the arts could motivate social change. Ramey (2002) and, in the context of Senegal, Harney (2004) describe avant-garde art movements to be originally anti-establishment, yet quickly controlled by
institutional and/or state strictures. This, in turn, makes the same radical arts movements part of
the establishment, and indeed under its control. Tall’s use of the term here is similar, discursively
reflecting his desire for the arts to transform a newly independent society. At the same time, he
ensured that the arts he idealises were under institutional control.

7 Papa Ibra Tall, interview with the author, 2 November 2004, Thie’s.
8 The state-sponsored workshop was based on a European model that gained popularity in the
sixteenth to eighteenth century. Factories that produced fine arts were not always financially
sustainable: state sponsorship ranged from ownership and control to exemptions from export
tariffs.

9 Ibrahima Mané, interview with the author, 29 January 2005, Thie’s.
10 Modou Diouf, interview with the author, 16 November 2004, Thie’s.
11 Ibrahima Mané, interview with the author, 28 January 2005, Thie’s.
12 Ibrahima Mané, interview with the author, 4 February 2005, Thie’s.
13 Ibrahima Mané, interview with the author, 28 January 2005, Thie’s.
14 Modou Diouf, interview with the author, 16 November 2004, Thie’s.

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