“Selling Preoccupations”: Cultural Policy and Economic Development in Dakar, Senegal after Senghor

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In the early 21st century, culture-led urban regeneration became all the rage in American and European planning circles. However, the idea is not new. Leopold Sedar Senghor was Senegal’s first president following the West African country’s independence from France in 1960. A poet-philosopher and key theorist of negritude, Senghor believed that by first developing national identity through the arts, national prosperity would follow. He promoted “High Art” while censoring popular, “low brow” cultural forms. While he succeeded in turning the country (specifically the capital city, Dakar) into an international cultural hub, he neglected to stabilize the economy. Thus, subsequent leaders focused less on cultural policy and more on economic development. This meant less funding for the arts, but also allowed previously banned art forms to emerge.

This project examines cultural policy and production in Senegal since Senghor, focusing on two of Dakar’s emergent cultural scenes: “feminist” art and theatre for development. The first case examines how eight women-artists expand and break out of the limited notions of gender previously offered by negritude; appropriate and critique “Western” notions of womanhood/feminism(s); and use local cultural forms and communitarian values in crafting their work. Secondly, I analyze how the Kaddu Yarakh troupe creates participatory, issues-based plays using multiple sources: the methods of Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed;” NGOs; and the conflicts and desires found in their community. These artists’ comfort with integrating local, global, and transnational influences speaks to Dakar’s tradition of créolité, holding “African/Western,” “indigenous/colonial” in creative tension.

These analyses speak to a broader question: How does one evaluate the effects cultural policy and production on economic development, and vice versa? By looking at how such practices have been implemented in Dakar since 1960, I hope to provide some evidence-based insights for cities considering similar strategies today.