What Challenges Does the Restitution of Cultural Assets to Benin Pose for Knowledge Production and Artistic Creation?

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Introduction

Some years ago, I explored the relationship between heritage and contemporary art in Africa (Tchibozo 2018a). The primary purpose of this research was to understand the sources of inspiration that could prompt artists to produce art when their heritage was scattered around the world and to ascertain whether such a situation could be interpreted in terms of resilience. Since then, major changes have occurred. With regard to the restitution of cultural heritage, some artworks, albeit symbolic, have been returned to the authorities in Benin. This sudden shift in international relations, which remains unfathomable in some regards, aroused much emotion as people were able to discover the genuine talent of their ancestors for the first time. These emotions were expressed at the first major exhibition, *Benin Art from Past to Present: From Restitution to Revelation*, organised by the Benin government to incorporate the returned artworks into the national heritage and avoid the potential for future controversy. The exhibition also helped revive memories of a hardly praiseworthy colonial past and played a key role in the drive to formally establish a common destiny. But we must realize that this will not be an easy task.

These works had long been kept in ethnographic museums which were the ultimate venue for appropriating artefacts from around the world as part of the scientific quest to create an encyclopaedia of world cultures. How can these artworks be reincorporated into a national space without harm? Under these new circumstances, can we now reverse the questions asked several years ago? Will the permanent presence of these artworks before the eyes of researchers and artists allow them to explore new directions of research and creation? In other words, how can our response to restitution produce new knowledge?

In this article, I will provide an overview of the context in which the restitution took place before exploring a case study and illustrating the different phases of the re-appropriation process.

I. From Distress to Elation

The euphoria surrounding the restitution of 26 artworks from the ancient kingdom of Danxomé, until recently a part of the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum collection, has led many to forget the difficult circumstances surrounding their initial departure from France. It would be a distorsion of history not to remember these

circumstances, even if it may seem as if we have already heard or read about them many times. They should be recalled whenever possible, as we are facing a complex situation to say the least. The returned artefacts are the testimony of a twofold violence, both political and psychological, which is representative of the scale of the events that have taken place since the late 19th century.

In 1892, the French army led by Colonel (later General) Dodds entered Abomey after a series of bloody and murderous battles. The troops of Abomey did not surrender immediately – the history of this episode is well-known and I will not linger on it. The kings' palace is said to have been set on fire and the looting that resulted in the removal of the now-returned artefacts is supposed to have been intended to "save" what could still be saved.[1] In 1894, after King Behanzin's surrender, Abomey was placed under French control, along with everything found there. The king was exiled from his homeland and spent his remaining time on Earth in Blida, Algeria after several years in Martinique. Abomey and the rest of the ancient kingdom of Danxomé became a scene of desolation, mourning, ruin and, above all, lost points of reference, as musicians and actors from the region continue to sing about and act out on stage to this day. Internationally speaking and as seen by the European populations, the argument for ransacking the kingdom was that it practised anthropophagy. Between 1890 and 1895, the Danxomé kingdom was pilloried in the press across Europe, where it was stigmatised as a despotic state practising human sacrifice. The obscured image of the kingdom presented in the French and European newspapers was used to justify the war, presenting it as a battle between civilisation and barbarism to bring an end to a kingdom stuck in another era. Véronique Campion-Vincent (1967: 27) sought to elucidate the situation: "The image of Dahomey portrayed in the press during the colonial conquest was distorted and lacked nuance; it was a truly mythical construction developed around the concept of 'savagery'." She demonstrates how this image was engineered to justify the colonial conquest of new territories in a context of rivalry between the traditional European powers. The image persists in Europe's collective memory to this day. In 2008, when I was attending the tourism salon in Madrid as part of a delegation from the Benin Ministry of Culture, I witnessed a scene that perfectly illustrated the complexity of our relationships. A Spanish woman wandering around the venue took several pamphlets about Benin from our exhibition stand and asked whether it was the same place as the ancient kingdom of Danxomé where people practised cannibalism. She added that she hoped things had changed since then. Stereotypes certainly have a very long lifespan. How can we eradicate this sinister image that continues to circulate?

Despite the country's independence in 1960, the distressing context in which artefacts were taken from Abomey to Paris has not been fully digested. Numerous attempts have been made to negotiate the return of the artworks. At the same time, the authorities were also working to develop a network of public museums allowing them to take charge of the nation's heritage. Museums opened in Ouidah in 1964, Porto-Novo in 1965 and Parakou in 1973. Legal instruments were also developed to protect what remains or will be returned and Decree 35/PR/MENJS was passed in

1 To date, it remains unclear who really set fire to the palace and why. Although pride, often attributed to the Danxomé kings in such situations, may have caused them to seek to avoid leaving their ancestors' memory in the hands of the enemy, caution must be exercised when analysing accounts of this episode. / If the pride of the Danxome rulers, which has been asserted many times, might have motivated them not to leave the memory of their ancestors in the hands of the enemy, it is necessary to express some doubts about the narration of this episode. The actual number of artefacts stolen during the fire lends weight to the argument presented here.

1968 with the aim of protecting cultural heritage. The decree had certain limitations, which were not addressed until 2007 when Law 2007-20 of 23 August 2007 concerning the protection of cultural heritage and natural heritage of a cultural nature in the Republic of Benin was adopted. This time, the law set out a specific structure for heritage protection, stipulating the creation of a national inventory of cultural heritage and a plan for safeguarding this heritage. It also provides for asset protection in the case of armed conflict and establishes conditions for the exportation of listed assets. These measures are accompanied by criminal sanctions. Nevertheless, the law has its own shortcomings due to a lack of implementing decrees.

In 1990, the country organised a National Culture and Sports Conference, where one of the resolutions agreed upon was the adoption of a cultural policy. In point three (3), entitled *Inventory, conservation and exhibition of cultural heritage*, the resolution states: "Benin's cultural policy will focus particularly on safeguarding and restoring endangered heritage [...] Therefore, the Benin government will proceed [...] to negotiate the necessary agreements required to repatriate our cultural heritage in the possession of the former colonial powers ." This text inspired chapter 3, article 13 (paragraph 3) of Law 91-006 of February 25, 1991 concerning the Republic of Benin Cultural Charter. It states that: "[the State] is also working towards the restitution of expatriated cultural assets". Benin began to awaken from its slumber, emerging from the grief into which it had been plunged by the loss of its artworks and started to demand their return. In 2016, the President of the Republic, Patrice Talon, sent an initial written request to France claiming the return of Benin's cultural assets. The request was dismissed by the François Hollande government according to French and European law, which states that the artworks benefit from the same inalienability as the entire national heritage.

However, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, former Director-General of UNESCO from 1974 to 1987, considered it legitimate for countries dispossessed of a significant part of their history to recover it. On June 7, 1978, he made a solemn appeal to the former colonial powers:

> The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes over hundreds of years, have not only been stripped of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would certainly have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better. [...] The men and women of these countries have the right to recover these cultural assets which are part of their being. [...] These men and women who have been deprived of their cultural heritage therefore ask for the return of at least the art treasures/master pieces which best represent their culture, which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish. [...] This is a legitimate claim... (Mahtar M'Bow, 1978).

In April 2017, Emmanuel Macron was elected President of the French Republic. On November 28 that year, he delivered a historic speech to around 800 students in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. The speech itself represented a paradigm shift in international relations. Paul Ricœur expressed his unease at the prospect of such a shift in an interesting essay: "No one can say what will become of our civilization if it ever really encounters different civilizations by means other than domination and

conquest" (Ricœur, 2001). We are now experiencing this encounter by means other than force and I believe that President Macron's actions will ensure that scepticism is gradually replaced with intercultural comprehension supported by scientific research.

In the meantime, controversy has arisen over whether or not his intentions were genuine. A succession of conferences, articles, press interviews and books on the issue of restitution followed.[2] Disputes erupted over all kinds of questions, including the recipients of the artworks to be returned. Yet those discussing these issues did not appear to grasp the timing of the events: when the pillaging occurred, a war was being waged to conquer the land that became the Republic of Benin. There was no longer a state linked to the king, who had been vanquished and forced into exile. The ancient kingdom of Danxomé had been consigned to history. Its last pseudo-king, Agoli-Agbo, was little more than a chief appointed to oversee the newly conquered region by the colonial administration.

The situation in 2017 was tense. Few people expected history to change in their lifetime, not least the Benin head of state,[3] who nevertheless insisted and reiterated his demand. In response, to cut short the controversy, the French President commissioned a report from Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. The recommendations made by the report led to the historical decision to return 26 artworks to the Republic of Benin. On November 10, 2021, they arrived in Cotonou amid much rejoicing in an event that will be remembered forever. Having left amid deadly battles and psychological violence, the artworks returned in far more joyful circumstances, welcomed as relics of the former kings and of the imagery that had shaped their respective reigns. Should we be happy or vexed by these circumstances? This is an important moral question, but one which is beyond the scope of this article. The main priority here is to consider the artefacts' future in this new context. They did not return unscathed from their stay in their adoptive country, as the following section will explain.

II. The Scientific Context Surrounding Restitution

The restitution was influenced by remote and more recent factors. It would not be helpful to review all of these, but some of them will be mentioned to support my reflections. I have selected three main aspects that are highly significant in terms of their lasting impact and how they symbolise the relations between the two parties.

The first aspect is relatively well documented. Since the arrival of the works in French public museums, they have undergone different presentations, depending on the evolution of knowledge on the territories where they come from, but also and above all, depending on the conjunctures of the artistic scene in Paris and in the world (Beaujean, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Tchibozo, 2018b). From the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography, inaugurated in 1876, to the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum, which opened its doors to the public in 2006, passing the Musée de l'homme, opened in 1936, the artworks underwent a number of museographic changes and were someti-

2 On this topic, see Dr Kwame Opoku 2017. https://www.modernghana.com/author/KwameOpoku.
3 He admitted as much himself in his speech on 10 November 2021 when the artworks were received at the Palace of the Republic.

mes displayed alongside the most famous of them all, the sculpture of the god Gu. In 1894 on, they were presented as war trophies in a logic of accumulation. By the end of the 1920s they began to be treated as unique art objects in response to an aesthetic regime that resulted in a far more subtle balance of power. In 1931, the artworks were brought together again to exemplify the French Republic's imperial grandeur at the *Ethnographic Exhibition of the French Colonies.* Artefacts illustrating the influence of royal power in Abomey, worthy of great respect as repositories of the memories of different royal reigns and therefore almost sacred, became an expression of France's technological domination, imposition of a specific vision of the world and imperialist influence. They were exhibited at different times and circumstances, subject to the need to underline France's political and psychological superiority.

The second aspect concerns the intensity of the scientific debate triggered by the presence of the artworks in Europe and the scale of their impact on society and artistic practice. When Carl Einstein published *Negerplastik* in 1915, it caused quite a commotion in the scientific community (to put it politely). The book led to the most formidable epistemological confrontation ever seen between ethnologists, anthropologists and philosophers or 'aestheticists'. The determination to claim that "the other", especially the non-Western, is different from "us" has persisted for decades. Should artefacts from elsewhere be considered ethnological exhibits or should they be viewed exclusively as art forms? In 1930, when the sculpture of the god Gu was exhibited in the gallery of the Pigalle Theatre in Paris, it was believed to represent an "epistemological convergence between the history of art and anthropology", as Maureen Murphy recalls.[4] The controversy continued: in 2015, Roberto Conduru took up the issue in a book co-edited with Elena O'Neill, in which he attempted to ensure that the Global South embraces the debate (Conduru, O'Neill 2015). Ultimately, the difficulty for some, to confine non-Western and especially African art into a purely anthropological experience, or for others to interpret it purely as an art form, gave birth to attempts of theorization of any kind, such as ethno-aesthetics. Can this notion of the ethno-aesthetics truly capture the African artistic experience? What do we make of this debate in these new circumstances in which artworks are being returned to the lands where they were created?

Finally, the third aspect in this analysis is the forced march of African art towards the canons of the European art world. During the colonial period, in the mid-1950s, a strategy for reorienting the rules governing artistic production was adopted in most African countries; in some cases, this involved passing down the obsolete rules of European fine arts, while in others, especially among young artists, it involved conditioning them to produce what the Western art market would accept (Tchibozo 2018a & 2019b). Workshops were organised all over the continent, especially in Nigeria, both Congos, Senegal, Uganda, Ethiopia, etc. and new movements were born. These include the Oshogbo School in Nigeria, the Poto-Poto School in Congo Brazzaville and the Hangar in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As early as the 1910s, however, the canons governing artistic practices in France, and by extension, Europe, were being questioned. These circumstances gave rise to two phenomena with incalculable consequences for artistic creation in Africa. Everything produced

4 Murphy (2009) has referred to La Revue Documents, which focused on archaeology, fine arts, ethnography and popular music and was first published between 1929 and 1930, as a source of evidence of this epistemological evolution.

by this generation of artists was labelled "naïve art", a term that was synonymous with "déjà-vu" and rather ironic in this context. Joëlle Busca (2000) describes the situation well, emphasising the lack of mastery of the rules adopted by these artists and their obsolescence in Europe. From "naïve art", the narrative shifted to "tourist art" or "airport art", which were terms used in Western literature to refer to a type of artistic production that began under the colonial regime. This marked a turning point, leading artists away from the areas in which they should have continued to work. They lost their way – although I do not wish to generalise – by moving away from the royal path sketched out by their predecessors and abandoning their artistic roots in many cases. In these new circumstances, how can we reconnect with these roots?

III. The Scientific Challenges

The task of identifying new orientations for research and creation, now that the artworks are permanently back on Beninese soil, will be immense. The challenge of this undertaking requires the mobilization of all actors, including officials whose concrete involvement will be the barometer of their commitment. The financing of research programs must seriously help us to trace the path to follow. Funding for research programs must help us outline the path to follow.

As a starting point, we must reflect on the narratives already constructed around these works. What will become of them? Will it be these narratives that continue to inform the exhibition of the returned artworks in this new context? What will their status be if we do not develop a different approach to the existing one? There is a rather fatalistic atmosphere surrounding these subjects of reflection, but this is certainly due to a form of emotional chaos surrounding the situation. A lot of people are not willing to accept this change occurring before our very eyes. They may well resist it – you can already sense it on the ground – without really knowing why. A certain amount of educational work will be required before actually launching these new intellectual and creative endeavours.

During the weeks preceding the restitution of the artworks, the two parties agreed to organise a Benin Week at the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum. A whole series of activities were planned for the occasion, including a day of reflection that was finally condensed into a morning because the official ceremonies were to take place at the same venue in the presence of the two heads of state. I had the honour of closing the morning session with a talk on 'The migration of Art Objects in World History'. Although far from being irrelevant in this configuration, the topic deserved a new approach, especially in these circumstances. As a result, I focused on the word "journey" (migration), which allows for a perspective which differs from the one opened by the original topic. Could this give rise to new questions?

If taken at face value, the act of migration is an active process rather than a passive one. It is a voluntary act, and I must insist on that aspect. Those who decide to migrate are aware of the potential for culture shock when they encounter "the other". They face the challenge of adapting to a new context and must be prepared to experience an identity crisis.

As a discipline, Art History has not been left untouched by the issue of migration and the creative process has been explored in the context of migration movements. This has led to the emergence of the concepts of the "centre" and the "periphery", which had already been applied in Europe since the Renaissance before being extended to cover the rest of the world after the colonial conquests. The artistic production of a large part of humanity was thus marginalised and it would not be until the mid-20th century that it began to be perceived as part of the complex migration process thus giving it a universal dimension (Ricœur 2001). Mieke Bal (2002) has shown that the history of art can only cover the culture of the specific geographical location being referred to. It is a collection of narratives that it cannot represent on its own. Against this backdrop, the discipline has opened up to other methodological approaches and become what could currently be referred to as "World Art Histories", echoing the plurality of cultural hubs around the world. The analysis of objects of migration or in migration adds complexity and renders the dominant narratives obsolete.

The pieces discussed here had not yet been classified as artworks or recognised as such by the discipline of Art History when they began their journeys to other lands. They travelled alone, without the opinions of anyone other than those of the people who had decided to transport them; they ended up in public museums, art dealers and even private collections. The act of acknowledging their potential role as part of the complex migration process could therefore give rise to confusion, which must be avoided at all costs. At best, one could in some ways speak of migration by transfer. Fresh perspectives of this kind must be constantly sought in partnership with our colleagues in the Global North. A better understanding of what these artworks were, are and may become is at stake. This will not be an easy task, but it is vital that they are given a new status. They were once feared artefacts in a context of royal power, with no concessions regarding their role in terms of commemorating ancestors, representing a philosophy and dominating their environment. After they were seized from their plinths in Abomey, they had lost all pretence of power by their arrival in Paris and had become mere objects to be displayed as a demonstration of France's supremacy and the defeat of a civilisation viewed as backward. Returning from this interlude, they are now situated within a nation state context, a Republic governed by republican rules that has no intention of gathering the rest of the world's masterpieces around them. As a result, it has become difficult to afford them the same significance as they had centuries ago, despite the nostalgia triggered by emotion.

Conclusion

Thanks to the perseverance of its political leaders, Benin is now entering a new chapter in the restitution of its cultural assets, which many believe is only just beginning. The 26 artworks returned to the country illustrate the way in which the issue of restitution appears to be restructuring international relations and triggering changes to the production of knowledge about the world's cultures and the consolidation of the creative industries. At this point in time, their presence will not immediately resolve all of the issues requiring research work, but their presence does indeed raise challenges for the global scientific community as a whole, both

in Benin and for our colleagues in France and elsewhere in the world, who have been working on these artefacts for many years.

In 2014, I did an experiment on the subject as part of the Humboldt Lab exhibition program with colleagues from the Berlin ethnographic museum. I published a statement on *Missing artefacts and scientific cooperation*.[5] Although the term "missing artefacts" can refer to the pieces that were looted and referred to as "spoils of war", it also encompasses all kinds of trafficked items, especially from the colonial period. Therefore, our expectations will not wholly be met by the restitution of the pieces since there is another equally concerning situation at play. To this day, I am unable to study certain forms of artistic production without having to consult works in private collections held abroad. This is what happened in 2013 when a student decided to research *Agonlin Sculptural Art: a Stylistic Analysis (Improving our Understanding of History through the Study of Bocio and Gelede Masks)*. The project was quite simply rendered impossible since a corpus spanning at least 50 years is required to study a stylistic trend. There is no Bocio left in Benin; all of the examples have been sold on the black market and their production ceased when the sculptors converted to Christianity, in spite of the fact that they were originally produced in vast numbers in the region.

It is thus more urgent than ever to set up research programs involving Master and PhD students covering all the areas where the artworks are now located, including Benin. It will also be necessary to develop tools for dialogue and research between researchers from Benin and from elsewhere, especially if their projects involve museums and research institutes as well as universities. This will have the advantage of reducing the asymmetry that has characterized these relationships up to now.

5 The statement, which can be read in German on the Humboldt Lab website, argues the need to study the origin of the artefacts displayed in European museums more closely and to discover their history. The exhibition held during this partnership was titled Objektbiographien and formed part of the main exhibition at the ethnographic museum in Berlin in 2015.

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