C& x Académie des Traces

Invisible Traces of the Repatriated Objects

Adéwolé Faladé highlights and analyzes the traces left by the 26 repatriated artefacts by France to the Republic of Benin in 2021.

Restituted king Glele's throne being boxed. Presidential palace. Cotonou, rep. of Benin. 2022. Photo: Carly Dègbèlo.

By Adéwolé Faladé
26. March 2025

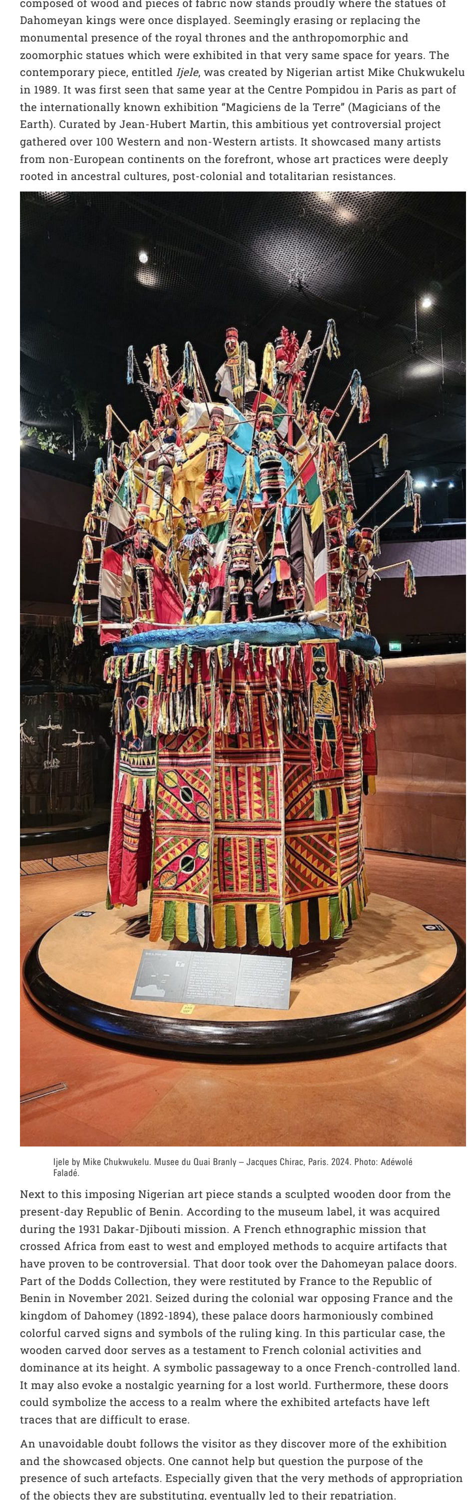
Three years after the twenty-six Beninese artefacts left the Musee du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, three years after it dedicated an entire week to celebrating Beninese cultural and artistic fields with guests such as Beninese artists and cultural officials, the hype seems to have collapsed like a soufflé.

Strolling along the aisles of the museum in the African collections section, it is unsettling to notice a void. The void left by the removal of the Dahomeyan pieces, further accentuated by an attempt to conceal the space they once occupied. Even more strikingly, as I progress through the dimly lit universe-passing from one display case to another, from one museum label to the next-not a single word acknowledges their presence or the repatriation process of the twenty-six items. What's more disruptive as I take a closer look, is that it becomes more and more obvious that the new works exhibited recall in multiple aspects the ones that returned to their homeland. Indubitably, the gone artifacts have left traces in every place they have been. Whether in the Parisian museum or in the Republic of Benin, the memory of the Dahomeyan works persists.

Traces of the absence …

At the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac :

The most iconic Dahomeyan artefacts have been replaced by works from Nigeria, the Republic of Benin's neighboring country. A gigantic and colorful sculpture composed of wood and pieces of fabric now stands proudly where the statues of Dahomeyan kings were once displayed. Seemingly erasing or replacing the monumental presence of the royal thrones and the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statues which were exhibited in that very same space for years. The contemporary piece, entitled *Ijele*, was created by Nigerian artist Mike Chukwukelu in 1989. It was first seen that same year at the Centre Pompidou in Paris as part of the internationally known exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre" (Magicians of the Earth). Curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, this ambitious yet controversial project gathered over 100 Western and non-Western artists. It showcased many artists from non-European continents on the forefront, whose art practices were deeply rooted in ancestral cultures, post-colonial and totalitarian resistances.



Ijele by Mike Chukwukelu. Musee du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris. 2024. Photo: Adéwolé Faladé.

Next to this imposing Nigerian art piece stands a sculpted wooden door from the present-day Republic of Benin. According to the museum label, it was acquired during the 1931 Dakar-Djibouti mission. A French ethnographic mission that crossed Africa from east to west and employed methods to acquire artifacts that have proven to be controversial. That door took over the Dahomeyan palace doors. Part of the Dodds Collection, they were restituted by France to the Republic of Benin in November 2021. Seized during the colonial war opposing France and the kingdom of Dahomey (1892-1894), these palace doors harmoniously combined colorful carved signs and symbols of the ruling king. In this particular case, the wooden carved door serves as a testament to French colonial activities and dominance at its height. A symbolic passageway to a once French-controlled land. It may also evoke a nostalgic yearning for a lost world. Furthermore, these doors could symbolize the access to a realm where the exhibited artefacts have left traces that are difficult to erase.

An unavoidable doubt follows the visitor as they discover more of the exhibition and the showcased objects. One cannot help but question the purpose of the presence of such artefacts. Especially given that the very methods of appropriation of the objects they are substituting, eventually led to their repatriation.

African collection, Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris. 2024. Door *Ieku*, Yoruba, Benin, Zou Department, Village of Gaura, 19th – early 20th century, Iroko wood. The main subjects of the door panel are a rider wearing a tall crown on the right and an embracing couple on the left. Surrounding these figures are a Quranic tablet, a lizard, a snake, a hen, a knife in its sheath, and highly geometric royal interlacing patterns. These images, which have no direct connection to one another, are very common in Yoruba artistic traditions. They sometimes reference oral traditions, popular wisdom sayings, or serve as mediums for social critique. Mission Dakar-Djibouti. Photo: Adéwolé Faladé.

The Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac is thus initiating other conversations based on their absence. Similarly, the Dahomeyan _now Beninese people have long forged their cultural and identity references through the void left by colonial and post-colonial periods. When visiting the African collection section, I could detect a note of melancholy lingering in the voices of the tour guides as they gesture to the former presence and current absence of Beninese artefacts. Once again, this underscores the profound traces these objects have left behind.

… Traces of an eclipsed presence in Benin

Following the return of the 26 artefacts to their new homeland, the Beninese government organized a contemporary art exhibition entitled "Art du Bénin d'hier et d'aujourd'hui: de la Restitution à la Révélation" (Art of Benin, from Yesterday to Today: From Restitution to Revelation). Both, the Beninese contemporary artworks and repatriated pieces were displayed together for three months at the Presidential Palace, from March to May 2022. Access was free, allowing a broader audience to become more acquainted with their history, the skills and craftsmanship of their forebearers as well as contemporary artistic production. Exhibiting at the presidential palace in Cotonou (Rep. of Benin) rekindles the link between objects absent for 130 years, and traces of their previous life. All within a framework reminiscing the memory of a kingdom, still vividly present in Benin's historical consciousness. This connection to a once-powerful kingdom allows people to re-appropriate a history that has been stolen from and rewritten for them.

Lissa Adjakpa dress, by artist Prince Toffa. "Révélation ! Art Contemporain du Bénin", La Conciergerie, Paris. 2024. Photo: Adéwolé Faladé.

The exhibition venue, Benin's Presidential Palace, serves as a space where the royal artefacts can finally be seen again and fulfil new purposes. A setting imbued with national power and authority. Displaying for months the repatriated Dahomeyan treasures reinforced their sacredness and almightiness. Indeed, they once again symbolize trophies of a victorious nation over its former colonial power. A long overdue triumph from the tedious battle to recover its looted cultural and heritage items.

After the exhibition ended, the repatriated objects returned into the storage boxes within which they had crossed the ocean back home. Once more, they ceased to be the focal point, their presence faded into obscurity, and their location became uncertain. With the construction of the museum intended to house them yet to begin, they have disappeared from public view. It remains unclear when they will resurfacing. Almost as if they had never really existed. Their traces however remain, albeit they are no longer visible. As a matter of fact, their aura is persistently present through the traveling exhibitions of the contemporary art section in Rabat (Morocco), Martinique and Paris recently. Beautiful art pieces, like the Lissa Adjakpa dress by artist Prince Toffa, are to be (re)discovered.

This text was created as part of the collaboration between C& Magazine and the Académie des Traces.

***Adéwolé Faladé** is a PhD candidate in History at the Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, Austria. She is interested in the repatriation process of Beninese artefacts from France and the new relations stemming from this return. Her research also focuses on the repossession methods implemented by the Republic of Benin, and how the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) copes with the absence of the artefacts. She is also a researcher for the ERC-funded "Repatriates" artistic research project for which she examines how contemporary Beninese artists are creating new conversations with the repatriated objects. Since 2016, she has led the Beninese cultural association MEWIHONTO dedicated to collecting, archiving, preserving and promoting Benin's cultural tangible and intangible heritage.*

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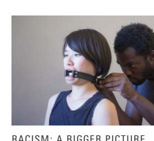

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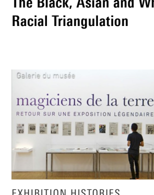

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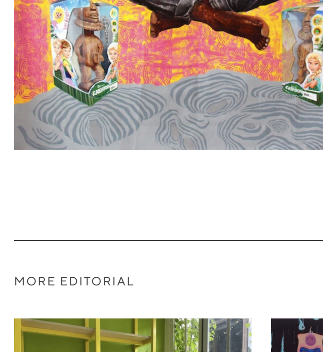

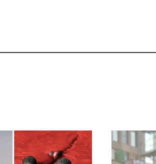

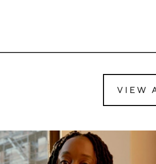

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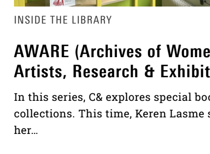

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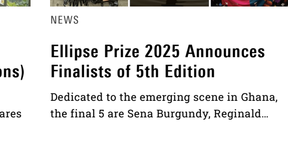

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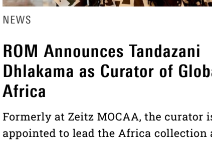

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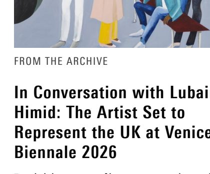

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