C& x Académie des Traces

Restitution of Looted Artworks: A Catalyst for Tourism and Economic Development in Benin?

Salomé Soloum examines the cultural, historical, and economic implications of restitution and its potential to transform the country's future.

File d'attente des Béninois/es pour la visite des œuvres restituées

By Salomé Soloum
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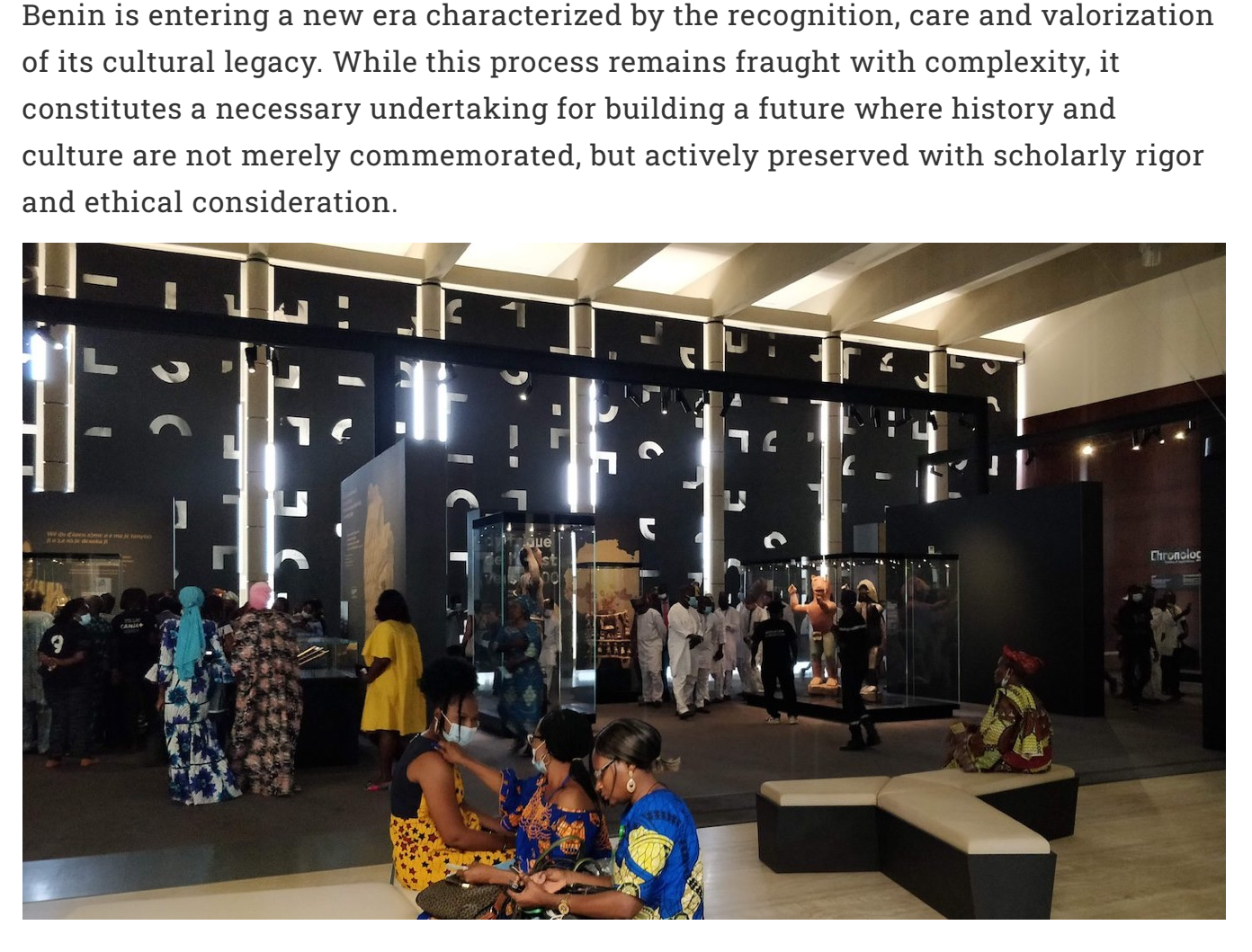
The restitution of cultural artifacts looted during colonial conquests awakens profound emotions throughout the African continent, and particularly in the Republic of Benin, a nation deeply rooted in a history and culture of extraordinary richness. In November 2021, the Republic of Benin celebrated a historic moment with the return of twenty-six invaluable cultural objects, which had been plundered during the 1892 sack of King Béhanzin's palace by French troops. This landmark event transcends the mere return of art objects; it symbolizes a crucial milestone in the recognition of historical injustices endured by African, while also reaffirming Benin's cultural identity. For Benin, the repatriation of these twenty-six artifacts carries immense symbolic weight, representing a cultural renaissance and opening up new pathways for significant economic opportunities. This article examines the multidimensional implications of the restitution – cultural, historical and economic – and explores its potential to reshape the country's future.

A triumphal homecoming for royal treasures

The long-awaited arrival of the artifacts sparked widespread and deeply felt public enthusiasm among Benin's population. Citizens of all ages and backgrounds gathered with a palpable excitement to welcome these precious vestiges of a bygone era. This profoundly symbolic moment, charged with intense emotion, was characterized by former Foreign Minister Aurélien Agbénonci as a "renaissance for African culture" a homecoming that resonated powerfully in the heart of every Beninese.
His Excellency President Patrice Talon, present at this historic ceremony, emphasized the artifacts' emotional significance, describing them as "our essence" finally restored to their ancestral land. His address served as a rousing call for national pride, underscoring the imperative to safeguard and celebrate this exceptionally rich cultural heritage. Accordingly, these repatriated objects were elevated to national heritage status by Decree No. 2021-587 of November 10, 2021. Article 1 of the decree stipulates: "The twenty-six (26) cultural artifacts listed in the annex of this decree, restituted by France to Benin under museum and heritage cooperation agreements, are hereby classified as national cultural heritage."

By designating these artifacts as symbols of national unity, the Benin government has deliberately transcended traditional communal, cultural, and social frameworks. Through this legal decree, the objects have been transformed into state property, effectively superseding any particular socio-cultural group's claim to ownership. Furthermore, the state's strategic elevation of these artifacts to national symbols constitutes what Arjun Appadurai might term a "tournament of value" a deliberate political maneuver to reconstruct cultural capital beyond traditional ethno-social boundaries. However, this patrimonialization process has not achieved universal consensus among Benin's diverse sociocultural groups. As evidenced by the ambivalence expressed by descendant communities of populations historically subjected to slave raids by the Danxomè kingdom, these objects also reveal ongoing historical and memorial frictions that complicate any straightforward narrative of national reclamation.

The repatriation of these artifacts constitutes a deeply symbolic gesture that extends far beyond mere material restitution. For leading scholars such as historian Bellarmin Codo and art historian Didier Houénoudé, this event represents a critical epistemic turnig point: it enables the reassertion of national identity, restores a tangible connection between Beninese citizens and their historical past, and facilitates an informed international dialogue on cultural heritage restitution. Through the celebration and contemporary recontextualization of these works, Benin is entering a new era characterized by the recognition, care and valorization of its cultural legacy. While this process remains fraught with complexity, it constitutes a necessary undertaking for building a future where history and culture are not merely commemorated, but actively preserved with scholarly rigor and ethical consideration.



Public visitation of the restituted artifacts within the palace, Cotonou, Benin, 2022. Photo: Adéwolé Faladé

Context of adoption of new cultural policies

Since His Excellency Patrice Talon assumed the supreme magistracy as President of the Republic of Benin in 2016, the country has undertaken a substantial realignment of its political priorities. These are now characterized by a firm anchoring in national sovereignty and endogenous development. It is within this strategic framework that Benin's new cultural policies have been implemented, addressing multifaceted socio-economic, political, and identity-related challenges, while simultaneously enhancing cultural and historical heritage.

These policies emerge from a convergence of factors, including the promotion of cultural heritage, the stimulation of economic development, the assertion of Benin's presence on the international stage, the expansion of cultural tourism, and the desire to structure the cultural sector. In this regard, the government has reinforced the institutional and legal frameworks of the cultural sector, while also securing strategic funding partnerships. For instance, in November 2024, Benin signed a €60 million financing agreement with the French Development Agency (AFD) to support its public cultural policy. Furthermore, these new cultural policies align with a broader dynamic of reclaiming precolonial history and valorizing local cultures. They respond to a profound quest for identity and the imperative of strengthening national pride, while also consolidating a collective sense of belonging among Beninese citizens to a cultural heritage of immeasurable richness.

Nevertheless, the restitution of royal patrimony must be recognized as the catalytic force behind Benin's cultural policy transformation. Indeed, this act, simultaneously and historic, necessitated the implementation of specific measures to receive, preserve, exhibit, and integrate these works into a broader strategy for cultural and touristic development. These policy innovations, both combining pragmatism with long-term vision, underscore the Beninese government's commitment to bridging traditional heritage with contemporary modernity. They aim to address local imperatives while simultaneously aligning with international expectations. Moreover, they articulate a broader ambition: that of positioning culture as a cornerstone of economic and social development, and of enhancing the global visibility and affirmation of the nation's cultural identity.

Measures for conservation

The restitution of cultural treasures was met with widespread and tangible enthusiasm in Benin. Recognizing the paramount significance of these artifacts for national identity, the government swiftly implemented concrete conservation measures. Ambitious projects – including the construction and renovation of museums in Ouidah, Porto-Novo, and Abomey – were launched, demonstrating a resolute commitment to establishing infrastructure capable of supporting sustainable heritage preservation. Among these initiatives, the "Museum of the Epic of the Amazons and Kings of Danxomè" (MURAD), funded by the French Development Agency, stands out as a flagship project. Envisioned as a national showcase for Benin's royal heritage, this museum also seeks to narrate the history of the Amazons and Kings of Danxomè, thereby reinforcing national pride and raising public awareness of Benin's cultural richness. According to Gabin Djimassè, MURAD project lead and Director of the Abomey National Tourism Office, this institution aspires to provide a comprehensive reinterpretation of the kingdom's history while foregrounding the richness and diversity of its royal heritage.

Regarding the International Museum of Vodun, Alain Godonou, Director of Museums at Benin's National Heritage and Tourism Agency, affirms that this institution is poised to become a critical site of deconstruction of enduring stereotypes linked to Vodun. It will furnish the international community with the requisite intellectual and visual frameworks for a comprehensive and nuanced engagement with this tradition. Transcending the conventional function of a mere exhibition space, the museum positions itself as a site of transmission, education, learning, and intercultural dialogue. Its mission is to promote an informed and respectful apprehension of Vodun, while fostering constructive transcultural exchange.

Despite the government s numerous initiatives, only two are being implemented: the MIV and the Ouidah Museum renovation. In contrast the construction of the MURAD has not yet started raising auestions about the overall project timeline.

A strategy for Tourism Development

Beyond its conservational function, culture is envisioned by the Beninese government as a key lever for economic development. The President of the Republic, Patrice Talon, has emphatically underscored the decisive role that the restitution of cultural assets is capable of playing in poverty reduction and job creation. Indeed, although often marginalized in traditional economic discourse, the cultural sector harbors considerable potential for stimulating the local economy. With this in mind, the Beninese government aims to make culture a central pillar of its economic and tourism development. Anchored in this conviction, the country plans, as part of its Government Action Program, to allocate 1 trillion CFA Francs to the cultural sector over the next five years. This initiative seeks to spotlight Benin's cultural wealth and potential, while transforming the domains of culture, the arts and tourism into core engines of economic growth. This strategic pivot aspires to position Benin as a premier tourist destination, attracting visitors eager to engage with its unparalleled heritage of richness and diversity..

Impacts on tourism, employment, and economic development

The valorization of cultural heritage and the establishment of modern museums are expected to significantly influence tourism development in Benin. By attracting an international audience, the country stands to generate substantial revenue while also stimulating job creation in sectors such as hospitality, food service, and tourism logistics. Furthermore, foregrounding cultural heritage is likely to foster the growth of local craftsmanship and artisanal industries, thereby reinforcing the local economy. Importantly, by involving local communities in the management and promotion of cultural sites, Benin aims to cultivate a stronger sense of belonging and collective pride, while guaranteeing the sustainability of these initiatives.
Beyond their emotional and symbolic dimensions, the restitution of cultural artifacts has profound implications for both tourism and economic development. The return of these objects has captured the attention of international media and drawn increasing numbers of tourists eager to explore the country's history and cultural wealth. According to Alain Godonou, Benin could receive up to three million visitors by 2026, compared to only 350,000 in 2019. Endowed with rich cultural and historical assets, Benin now occupies a strategic position as a leading destination for art and history enthusiasts. The valorization of this cultural heritage also has the potential to invigorate local artisanal production and creative industries, further strengthening the national economy. By investing in the preservation and promotion of its cultural patrimony, Benin not only reclaims its identity but also lays the groundwork for sustainable and inclusive economic prosperity.

Towards a Bright future

The restitution of cultural artifacts to Benin transcends the mere recovery of material objects; it embodies a strategic opportunity to reaffirm the nation's cultural identity and lay the foundation for a prosperous future. By aligning cultural heritage with economic development, Benin is asserting itself as an indispensable actor on the global stage. To maximize the dividends of restitution, strategic and rigorous heritage governance is essential. This includes not only the meticulous preservation of the objects but also their valorization through temporary exhibitions, educational initiatives, and international partnerships. In parallel, Benin must invest in the training of qualified cultural professionals to ensure the effective and sustainable management of its cultural resources. It is therefore fair to assert that the country is well-positioned to transform this historical chapter into a forward-looking narrative where culture and economy converge in service of collective well-being.

Consequences of Benin's new cultural policies

While Benin's aspirations to position itself as a renowned tourist destination and stimulate its economy are clear, it is vital to acknowledge that these ambitions produce both promising and problematic consequences. Certain historically significant sites are being sacrificed to make way for the construction of hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-oriented infrastructure. Temples and local families are sometimes compelled to relinquish ancestral lands, generating social tensions and collective mourning. Max Kéké, for example, has expressed deep grief over the destruction of the Route des Pêches, a pathway sacrificed to tourism development. For him, its erasure constitutes the loss of a crucial chapter of African history, as the route marked the trajectory of enslaved people prior to deportation. Kéké's perspective echoes that of many Beninese citizens who feel dispossessed of their historical legacy. The urbanization of memory sites such as the Route des Esclaves, the Route des Pêches, and Place Chacha has thus cast a pall of silence over the population.

In this light, Benin's cultural policies appear to follow a logic of economic capitalization on the slave trade and colonial past, while marginalizing memorial imperatives and critical reflection. The prevailing orientation privileges foreign tourists and diasporic communities, often relegating local concerns to the sidelines. This raises pressing questions about how these reforms are perceived by Beninese artists, whose perspectives can offer crucial insights into the stakes and frictions involved in this ongoing cultural transformation.

Benin's new cultural policies are perceived in varied ways by local artists, shaped by their institutional experiences, fields of practice, and individual needs. For some Beninese artists and filmmakers, government initiatives aimed at valorizing cultural heritage—particularly through the restitution of artifacts (such as the twenty-six works returned by France and the kataklè returned by Finland)—as well as the construction of new museums compliant to international conservation standards, are commendable. These artists regard the reforms as a renewed source of inspiration, reinforcing both social cohesion and national pride. They also see these changes as opportunities for increased support—financial, logistical, and institutional. Training programs, grants, and artistic residencies are envisioned as tangible means to develop skills and advance artistic practices.
Nonetheless, while many initiatives have been met with enthusiasm, critiques persist regarding implementation, accessibility, and tangible impact on the ground. A significant number of Beninese artists and filmmakers have voiced concern that cultural budgets overly prioritize infrastructure at the expense of creators. They lament insufficient inclusion in the formulation of cultural policies and argue that their specific needs and lived realities are overlooked. Consequently, there is apprehension that these policies may be excessively oriented toward tourism and economic returns, neglecting the support required for contemporary artistic creation and experimentation.

Jean Odoutan, filmmaker and founder of the Quintessence Festival, shares these concerns with fellow filmmakers. He advocates for robust structural support for the production and dissemination of local cinema, particularly through investments in film studios and technical training. Similarly, visual artists like Dominique Zinkpè acknowledge the government's efforts to provide museum exhibition spaces but aspire to more substantive backing for production and international promotion.

Benin stands on the threshold of a new era in which culture and heritage play a central role in the country's economic and social development. Through ambitious conservation projects and a carefully devised tourism strategy, the nation seeks to establish itself as a leading cultural destination. By celebrating and integrating these works into the fabric of contemporary life, Benin paves the way for an era of renewed recognition and valuation of its cultural legacy. Despite its complexities, this process represents an essential endeavor toward a future in which history and culture are not only celebrated but preserved with the utmost respect. This dynamic vividly illustrates the dual capacity of art and culture to safeguard history and shape futures. By investing in heritage, Benin does not merely preserve its past; it actively maps out a vision of prosperity wherein culture emerges as a potent engine of inclusive growth and development.

From our analytical vantage point, Benin's recent cultural policies represent a coherent and strategic response to fundamental challenges, laying the groundwork for a promising future. Through these new cultural initiatives, Benin has embarked on a critical reappropriation of its long-marginalized history and heritage that was poorly represented on the international stage. These measures have allowed the country to assert itself as a vital cultural force on the continental stage, enhancing its soft power and global influence. The Benin model is now setting a precedent, inspiring other African nations—such as Mali, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Madagascar—to follow suit in demanding the return of artifacts looted during colonization and still housed in French museums.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to foreground the potential pitfalls associated with reductive folklorization or excessive commodification of culture, particularly when cultural expressions are framed as mere tourist products. Such approaches risk distorting living traditions into staged performances tailored to appeal to a foreign audience. In this context, Benin's cultural policy must aim for a critical and sensitive equilibrium between economic valorization and the safeguarding of vibrant, living cultural practices. It must also ensure that tradition is not sacrificed on the altar of rushed modernization that is divorced from local realities.

Taken as a whole, Benin's new cultural policies represent a decisive opportunity for national development—provided they are implemented in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and respectful of local traditions. These initiatives affirm the capacity of culture to serve as both a material and symbolic resource, offering a valuable model for other nations seeking development trajectories rooted in cultural identity and sustainability.

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

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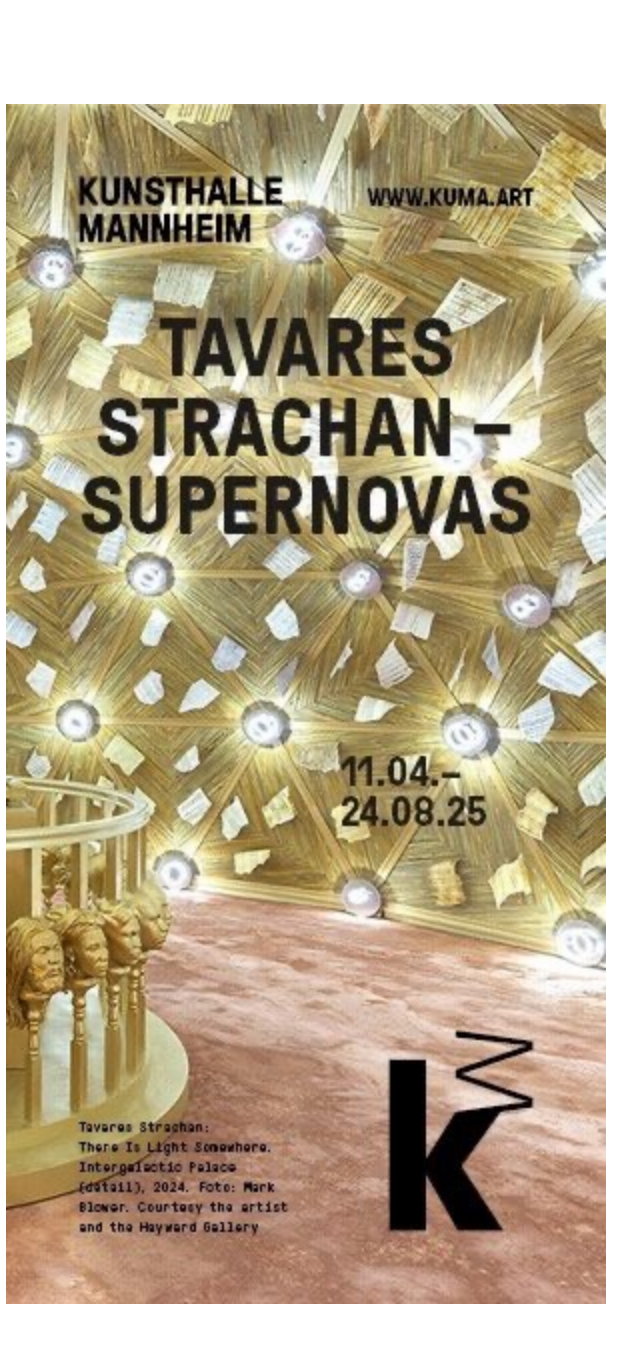

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