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The Importance of Returns of Cultural Goods in African-European Relations

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In relations between African states and Belgium, France, Germany, and the UK, the issue of returning cultural goods removed during the colonial period is gaining prominence. This has both symbolic and practical dimensions: the returns emphasize the departure from postcolonial paternalism and demands for returns are a mean of pressure in bilateral relations. Countries not burdened by colonial baggage, such as Poland, may gain politically from this process.

About 90% of the historic objects originating in Sub-Saharan Africa are found in museums in Europe, most in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, London, Vienna, and the Vatican. Most of these objects were taken from the continent by force after colonial conquests. Demands for their return have appeared since the 1960s, but museums generally have refused, arguing that the objects were not safe in Africa. Fearing the depletion of their collections, the UK, France, Germany, and Belgium did not ratify for 30–40 years the 1970 UNESCO Convention, which demands the return of illegally removed artefacts to their countries of origin.

Nowadays there is a growing interest among Africans in their own heritage and has significance to the historical policies of individual countries. Modern museums have been built in Senegal, Benin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in other countries. Mali's rescue of manuscripts in Timbuktu threatened by jihadists in 2012–2013 has been recognized worldwide. Pressure for the return of monuments began to bear fruit when the global competition for influence in Africa has intensified and new players (China, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Russia) successfully compete with the former colonial powers. For European countries, the return of works of art can be used to restore the credibility of European countries in relations with their African partners.

France. This country has a new policy on Africa, namely that it no longer takes for granted a privileged position in former colonies. At the same time, it is opening up to new directions, such as Ethiopia, the fourth-largest importer of French goods in Sub-Saharan Africa. To maintain a positive image among both old and new partners, France dissociates itself from the tradition of paternalism towards former colonies by making gestures to show respect for them.

In 2016, the President of the Republic of Benin Patrice Talon formally demanded from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Paris return the treasures from the palaces of the capital of the former Kingdom of Dahomey, removed in 1892–1894. In response, in 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that within five years, French museums would transfer—temporarily or permanently—all African works that were forcibly taken back to their countries of origin. To determine the objects' actual and final status, he set up a commission chaired by French art historian Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr. In its final report of November 2018, the commission proposed a series of bilateral agreements allowing

returns to individual countries. Immediately after the publication of the report, Macron announced the transfer of the first 26 of the most valuable exhibits (thrones and sculptures) to the Republic of Benin. In addition, France will consider the status of about 46,000 objects from Sub-Saharan Africa in the collections of the Paris Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. French ‘historical diplomacy’ is not just about former colonies—during Macron’s visit to Ethiopia in March 2019, the parties announced that the French would restore the ancient stone churches in Lalibela, which are on the UNESCO list.

The UK, Other Countries—Nigeria. For Nigeria, the continent’s largest economy, it is essential to recover treasures removed during the British punitive expedition in 1897. British soldiers looted the palaces of the rulers of the Kingdom of Benin (today Benin City, capital of the Edo State in Nigeria), taking about 4,000 bronze and ivory items of great historical and artistic value from the 14th-19th centuries. They ended up in museums in Europe, the U.S., and on the art black market. The French actions mobilised the UK to accelerate its regulation of these items. In October 2018, after 10 years of consultation, the British Museum and museums from Sweden, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, which, together with the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments and the Royal Court of Benin (heir to the monarchy within the Nigerian state), form the Benin Dialogue Group, agreed to rent around 1,000 of the most valuable bronzes on a rotational basis. They would be exhibited at the new Royal Museum being built in Benin City. However, this declaration did not end the matter. Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, declared that if he becomes prime minister, he will support the full return of all monuments obtained by force during the colonial period.

In 2018, a protest at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in the U.S. forced the institution to establish a dialogue with the Nigerian authorities about the future status of a statue in its collection. The National Museum in Szczecin, Poland, which has in its deposits a piece commonly called a “Benin head” from the pre-war collection of the German Städtische Museum, may face a similar problem in the future. In March 2019, the Dutch National Museum for World Cultures, which holds more than 100 bronze busts from the Kingdom of Benin, announced its own return policy. It declared that it would not impose on the receiving states the way to care for them. The Belgian Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (close to Brussels), which houses the largest African collections in the world, including Nigerian bronzes, is working on responding to return requests.

German Approach. Playing an increasingly active role in Africa again, including in the field of mediation (e.g., in Sudan, Libya), Germany is building its image as a reliable, neutral partner. The discussion on its approach to African—and more broadly, colonial—material heritage was initiated by the construction of the Humboldt Forum, a museum complex in Berlin that absorbed the Ethnological Museum. There are in its deposits about 50,000 works of art extracted from what were then German colonies in today’s Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Namibia. The museum’s failure to undertake research on the provenance and context of the acquisition of the individual objects has been widely criticized. Under the influence of the debate in France and the UK, Minister of Culture Monika Grütters declared in early 2019 that Germany would not wait for return requests, signalling instead the development of its own model. However, the plan announced in October 2019—the creation of a central office to process countries’ requests to determine the provenance of monuments of interest—did not meet expectations. In an open letter, 100 scientists, artists, and museologists accused the German state of failing to move away from the status quo. In view of the delays in opening the Humboldt Forum, the German authorities will be under pressure to propose a compromise before the inauguration of the complex, postponed now to mid-2020.

Perspectives. The issue of returning cultural goods is an important variable in cooperation with African countries. This trend also extends to countries without a colonial history. The demand by African states on former colonial capitals and other governments in Europe to return cultural goods is more effective than demanding financial reparations for colonialism, such as Namibia’s claims towards Germany, criticized as vague, overstated, and even as moral blackmail. In practice, despite numerous declarations, the transfer of works on a large scale has not started. Training of local staff and preparation of infrastructure is underway. Sceptical voices are also increasing about the ability of African countries to absorb the collections, for example, the Cameroonian government forces’ attack on the Bafut Palace—a UNESCO object—and the theft of its collections in September 2019.

The return of historical and cultural objects will be an important test for the credibility of the partnership declared by the EU ahead of the Africa-EU summit in 2020. A failure of the test can be used by Russia, Turkey, and China to discredit their European rivals, and by African countries to make contracts conditioned on the settlement of the issue by individual EU members. Poland’s experience of many years of cooperation with Sudan to save and preserve objects on-site and building up collections only with the consent of both parties may become a political asset if properly included in the discussion on cultural goods. To maintain this potential, the Ministry of Culture should consider including the Szczecin museum in the work of the Benin Dialogue Group in search of multilateral solutions to the problem of returning African heritage.