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The Illicit Circulation of Ivorian Collections: Challenges and Prospects

ABSTRACT

The problematic of the illegal circulation of cultural goods constitutes a major challenge for formerly colonised countries that are already facing difficulties at a number of levels, and notably in preserving their cultural heritage. This illegal circulation, which originates in illegal trafficking, takes advantage of globalisation and the failure to enforce the legal texts pertaining to the protection of cultural heritage. Ivory Coast, whose national museum was pillaged in 2010, is one of the African countries whose works of art feature proudly in the great-

est public and private collections.¹ But what is the country's position in relation to the protection of heritage and what of the measures taken by the State at national and even regional levels? This article sets out to demonstrate how the illegal circulation of Ivorian collections represents a threat to this cultural heritage which today is at the heart of debates on restitution. Rightly viewed as an essential element of national identity, its use must now be subject to strict regulations that take into account the rights and aspirations of the country of origin, as recommended by ECOWAS.

1 Ivory Coast has 3,951 ethnographic specimens in the collections of the Musée du Quai Branly-JC and many other pieces have come up in sales such as the one organised in 2006 at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris (Vente Vérité).

Introduction

The museum in Abidjan is one of the richest museums of art nègre in the world. It has measureless riches. In a hundred years, in two hundred years, it is important that the Black people of the future should be able to look to those riches in order to create a new civilisation. ¹

It was in these laudatory terms that the Senegalese statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor described traditional Ivorian works of art in an interview he granted to journalists during his visit to Côte d'Ivoire in 1971. He concluded his statement by appealing to the national authorities to act on their momentous responsibility to preserve these riches. Sadly, the systematic pillaging that followed the post-electoral crisis of 2010 led to the



Fig. 1: A sacred warrior mask Téhé Gla
Musée des Civilisations, inv. no. 70.3.1

theft of 120 pieces in that outstanding collection. This loss gave rise to an important project, the Ghost Collection, designed to help recover the lost objects but also to make the Ivorian population aware of this loss. I shall return to this below. In the meantime, the art trade was constantly intensifying in the West,² with the number of auction houses growing exponentially.

The action against persons unknown taken by the national authorities in 2011, the investigation opened by INTERPOL, along with the existence of legislative texts giving a juridical dimension to the question of heritage protection, are not currently sufficient to secure the environment of cultural goods. To date, there is still no implementing decree for the law on the protection of heritage (although this was promulgated in

1 Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Fraternité matin* no. 2126, dated 16 December 1971, 5.

2 See the report by Jean-Marie Schmitt and Antonia Dubrulle in *Le Marché de l'art* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2014) mentions 13,685 auctions in countries of the European Union plus Switzerland, the United States, China and Japan. It numbers 294,840 lots sold at auction houses and the creation of 2,458,696 jobs.

1987), and it can be observed that the disappearance of cultural goods from cultural sites or museums is no longer due uniquely to westerners but is also a collaborative process, with the establishment of Ivorian dealers who also sell original objects. Numerous factors come into play in the loss of objects and the paralysis of initiatives to protect culture.

It is for these reasons that the author is committed to fighting for the protection of cultural goods in this new context of free exchange and trade on which no one seems to impose any limits. The observations put forward in this text are based on my twenty-seven years of experience as a museum director, fourteen of which were spent at the head of the biggest and most important museum in the country, the Museum of Civilisations in Abidjan, which was pillaged in 2011, and my authorship of a thesis, defended in 2018, on “Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Goods: the Case of the Museums of Ivory Coast.” Given these predatory practices, the issue of preserving Ivorian cultural goods, and the control of their circulation, raises the question of State engagement and, by extension, the problem of the failure to implement the legal texts pertaining to the protection of the said works. What is the specific policy for the protection of heritage and what are the psychological effects of the absence of objects in communities? To answer these questions more fully, my method of investigation draws on interviews, research in the field, documentary research and the study of administrative documents.

The information gathered makes it possible to understand the real causes of illegal circulation, but also to question the place of cultural goods in Ivorian society and what can be done for their appropriation by local communities. Finally, these considerations raise the question of restitution in the light of the speech made by President Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou and the reaction to it of ECOWAS member states.

Exogenous and endogenous factors in the illegal circulation of African collections

We cannot talk about the illegal circulation of African collections without referring to the exogenous and endogenous factors determined by the historical contexts and the effects of globalisation.

Exogenous factors

1: The historical context of relations with Europe

The period of the explorers (fifteenth to seventeenth century) saw the discovery of Africa and of its artistic production by the European travellers who reached the coast and then travelled inland across the continent. The Portuguese, the English and the Dutch were constantly bringing back to Europe the objects they had acquired from the native populations. Marine Degli and Marie Mauze describe the way the first voyagers looked at these

objects – fetishes, idols, savage or primitive art – as a form of caricature.³ While their prejudices meant that these objects did not immediately enter art history, they were nevertheless enthusiastically collected. For three centuries, the fascination with indigenous techniques and the richness of their materials would be the main criteria for recognition and for collecting.

The period of missionary evangelisation (mid–late nineteenth century), which saw the implantation of Catholic missions in certain regions, marked the beginning of the collection of objects typical of the material culture and various functional uses on a wider scale. In one of the letters he sent to his missionaries, written in May 1861, Father Augustin Planque, successor of Monseigneur de Marion Bresillac and founder of the *Musée Africain* in Lyon, reminded them: “Do not forget to send us, at the first opportunity, a collection of things from your new fatherland. We wish to have in our museum all your gods, first of all, and then weapons, tools, household utensils – in a word, nothing must be missing.”⁴ The inventory of the museum in Memni,⁵ a town in the south-eastern part of Ivory Coast, found in the archives of the country’s Museum of Civilisations, mentions over 1,360 objects that were transferred to the *Société des Missions Africaines* in Lyon, at a time when the national collection itself had no objects from that region. This was also the case with other sites where missions were based, such as Bassam, Moossou, Dabou, Bonoua, Assinie and Jacqueville.⁶ Out of the 15,210 pieces held by the Museum of Civilisations in Ivory Coast, no more than a hundred objects are from these sites.

The colonial period (late nineteenth–first half of the twentieth century) was a time of imbalanced relations between colonial powers and colonised states, when the former used their advantage to transfer original objects from the latter. This crucial period of colonial expansion was also a time when exceptional collections of African artworks were constituted. The objects brought back from Africa were placed in museums and private collections where they would strongly influence European collective consciousness. Major events such as the colonial exhibitions organised in France,⁷ Great Britain and the United States would also gradually broaden the impact of these objects, which had originally been deemed merely instinctive creations. Where they had previously been placed under the pejorative heading of “primitive arts,” African art objects, now referred to as “primary” or “tribal” arts, are today ranked among the greatest works of art, capable of permanently transforming the gaze that meets them. Everyone now has their favourite *Adiukru* or *Baule* statuette, their *Senufo* or *We* mask from Ivory Coast! However, if this

3 Marine Degli, Marie Mauze, *Arts premiers. Le temps de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 13.

4 *L’Echo*, Bulletin no. 1, 1902 – 1903 – 1904, 216 p.

5 Reference to the collection constituted by the mission and later transferred to Lyon.

6 These regions are all located in the south of the country, where the mission started out before progressing into the northern parts of the country..

7 Wikipedia.org: *Exposition coloniale Internationale*, Paris, from 6 to 15 September 1931. Accessed on 9 February 2020. This exhibition, held at *Porte Dorée* and in the *Bois de Vincennes*, Paris, from 6 May to 15 November 19, displayed products and artefacts from all of France’s colonies and overseas dependencies, as well as those of the other main colonial powers.

desire on the part of Westerners to have African pieces in their collections is not in itself a bad thing, the fact is that the over-exposure of these objects and their intensive circulation to meet the needs of the art market has brought the risk of illicit trade. There is in fact a notable predominance of objects from former French and Belgian colonies at Parisian auctions.⁸ In terms of classification, Jean-Louis Danis reveals that nearly three quarters of African sales are made up objects from Ivory Coast (18%), Mali (11%), Gabon (8%) and RDC (32%), all of which are former French colonies. He even goes so far as to maintain that “Baule sculpture from Ivory Coast is recognised as among the most refined in all of sub-Saharan Africa,”⁹ and in the process, naturally, whets the appetite of those European collectors who might still be hesitating to acquire Ivorian cultural goods. One consequence of this desire for appropriation is of course the impoverishment of ancestral artistic production in certain regions, especially among the people of the coastal and the south, who have barely any sculptures left.

2. The art trade and the danger of illicit trafficking

The art market is undergoing a revolution due to the exponential profits from its sale of art objects in European and North America in particular. The legal or otherwise sale of cultural goods recorded every year is bringing earning in the hundreds of billions.¹⁰ Highly selective art markets like the ones in New York, Paris and London, which remain prominent, sometimes put on sales featuring lots with outstanding pieces representing the ancient traditions of formerly colonised countries. In 2016, the ambassador of Ivory Coast in the United States wrote to the Minister of Culture in his country informing him and the Ivorian authorities of an American sale in which a Senufo *debele*¹¹ statue had been sold for the handy sum of three million euros. Thus, rather than continuing with their role of stabilising society among the peoples from which they “immigrated,” these tutelary objects which once regulated the lives of their communities of origin, lose their function once transferred to the west. Whether by legal sale conducted in keeping with the juridical regulations of the country where the transaction takes place, or as a result of illegal circulation, this action relegates them to the simple rank of vulgar artefacts, and by the same token removes all sacred, anthropological and historical value.

At the Vérité Sale organised by the Hôtel Drouot, France, in 2006, Pierre Amrouche recognised only their commercial value when he wrote:

8 Claessens B. Jean-Louis DANIS, “Singes Baule,” *Africarium*, Fonds Mercator, 2016, p.10.

9 CLAESSENS B. Jean-Louis DANIS, “Singes Baule,” *Africarium*, Fonds Mercator, 2016, p.10.

10 The report produced by the Council of Voluntary Sales of Objects to Public Auctions in 2012 reveals that the global auction market attained a value of 24.5 billion euros. Since then, that figure has continued to rise, representing over 43 billion euros today.

11 Male statue from an initiation area in the Korhogo region, designed to protect new initiates to the Poro secret society who were still vulnerable to evil spirits. Its removal from the initiatory enclosure marked the end of one of the main phases of Poro and the access of initiates to the forbidden places in the sacred grove.

It is a purely French collection which brings together all the archetypes of French collecting, whether in terms of the origin of the objects, from our former colonies, or of the taste they exemplify. [...]Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Gabon [...] Extremely rare, they were fought over by some ten great collectors from around the world. They had been known about for a long time.”¹²

This sale of objects from the collection of the dealer Pierre Vérité (1990-1993) was held in the week when the Musée du Quai Branly opened. The total profits amounted to 44 million euros – a record for sales of tribal arts at the time.

Amrouche’s statement can be read as an admission of the seller’s unconfessed intentions, and it clearly expresses all the damage that was done to the formerly colonised countries which saw a large part of their ancestral heritage stolen. Collectors, usually of Western background, readily disbursed sizeable sums of money to acquire an original or symbolic piece. And while the big collectors buy only “ancient” objects with a pedigree, in that they have already been valorised by “French” collections, they have created a taste that stimulated, indirectly but in a very real way, illegal trafficking on site, trafficking that continues today. The international commercial value of these traditional, ancient objects encouraged transactions that also involved local buyers. The objects exported from Ivory Coast by means that were kept discreet were a response to strong demand from the market. The market for art, and above all for African symbolic objects originating in Ivory Coast, came into being a long time ago, in a context that was primarily colonial and will continue to exist. In an interview given in 2017, the head of the African Heritage Unit in the Department of Heritage and Collections at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac informed me that, much to their amazement, people were still coming to the museum to offer them ethnographic pieces of Ivorian origin, albeit always in vain. This dynamic helps explain the pillaging of the collections at the Museum of Civilisations during the post-electoral crisis in Ivory Coast in 2010. In the case of this national institution richly endowed with over fifteen thousand pieces, not all the works on exhibition were stolen, only the 17th-century gold pendants and a few sacred and cultic objects from the nineteenth century.

Another example that is typical of this shameful trade is that of the 2015 theft of the sacred mask from the village of Mougoukro in the Department of Toumodi (Central Ivory Coast), a piece that used to be brought out every seven years. Mr Kouamé Albert, who came from the village, contacted INTERPOL via the International Council of Museums (ICOM). What he says of the crime raises the suspicion that it was ordered from thieves who were well-informed about the place where the object was hidden.

12 Silvie Memel Kassi, *Le trafic illicite des biens culturels: le cas des musées de Côte d’Ivoire*, doctoral thesis, 2018, 18.

Endogenous factors

1: The postcolonial period of official cultural gifts

On the question of the flow of objects leaving the national territory since independence, it may be noted that this did not put an end to the dynamics of circulation initiated during the colonial period, but that the extraction has simply continued in other forms. Despite the symbolic and political importance of Ivory Coast's accession to independence on 7 August 1960, this transfer of Ivorian collections absolutely did not regress but continued, due to the intervention of the local authorities of the day and of the European curators in charge of managing the colonial ethnographic museum, ownership of which had been ceded to the Ivorian state.¹³ With the beginning of bilateral relations with other countries, the listed collections in the museum would serve as diplomatic gifts presented by the Ivorian state itself. Former curators in the national museum have spoken of museum pieces featuring in the sets of gifts offered to visiting heads of state. Archive images showing objects being handled by visitors to the museum visit suggest a kind of demonstration whose aim is to arouse the interest of the illustrious guest, rather than to simply show the work to them, and usually the object gifted to them after the visit was one they chose themselves. In this continuing process of dispossession we may note the dominant role played by the French ethnologist Bohumil Holas in transferring collections towards France. Holas directed the National Museum in Abidjan, as the Museum of Civilisations was formerly known, from 1947 to 1978, the year of his death. Indeed, when on a mission at the Musée du Quai Branly in June 2007, I was able to see the impressive gift of a thousand objects from Ivory Coast made by this former museum director to France, a donation that comprises objects of which some were previously listed in Ivorian inventories. It would be necessary to carry out a systematic comparison of the inventories in order to establish the exact number of objects that were thus transferred from heritage institutions in Ivory Coast to France. In any case, as Jean Gabus notes (1967), it was a dark time for the museum in Abidjan. He puts forward the figure of some ten thousand objects lost during Holas's mandate.¹⁴

2: The ambiguous position of local collectors

The independent Ivory Coast thus saw growth in the circle of local private collectors. Alongside the European collectors of the first half of the twentieth century, or those like Giovanni Franco Scanzi, Père Pierre Boutin, Samir Zarour and André Guenneguez,

13 The Museum of Civilisations in Ivory Coast was originally a crafts centre created by the colonial administration in 1942. It was known as the CENTRIFAN from 1943 to 1960 in reference to the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), which was headquartered in Dakar. From 1960 to 1972 it took the name of Centre des Sciences Humaines. In 1972 it became the National Museum of Abidjan as an institution dedicated to showing the cultural diversity and unity of the independent Ivory Coast. Since 1994 it has been known as the Museum of Ivory Coast Civilisations.

14 Jean Gabus, *Plan d'agrandissement et de modernisation du musée d'Abidjan et de création de musées régionaux* (1967).

whose numerous publications highlighted those rich and precious collections, the 1970s witnessed the progressive rise of national collectors, most of them eminent Ivorian figures. Among these collectors we find illustrious names such as that of former president Félix Houphouët Boigny, the ambassador Georges Ouegnin, the writer Jean-Marie Adiaffi, and the drumologist¹⁵ Georges Niangoran Bouah, to mention but a few. Paradoxically, whereas the former group were passionate about art, meaning that their activity sometimes led them to the national museum, these new collectors did not seek contact with national heritage institutions and did not have any relationship with local museums. These first Ivorian collectors were much more interested in foreign museums, which they perceived as more legitimate, and so, once they were outside the country they hurried to the European museums while also recommending them to their relations or friends. Their presence among private collectors of African art objects was thus a matter of snobbery, since it brought them closer to their Western colleagues. The latest generation of collectors, in the 21st century, many of whom come from a business background, seem motivated mainly by the money to be made on investments. Indeed, at their initiative the first auction of tribal arts to be held in Ivory Coast was organised at the District Hotel in Abidjan in July 2017. If the biggest sale of the day, at 30,489,803 euros, cannot yet compete with the kind of numbers regularly posted by auction houses such as Sotheby's or Christie's, we may note that the figure is enormous for a country whose population is very poor, and that such prices cannot fail to attract the attention of local players, stimulating them to get involved in the market.

3: The CAVA or local market. A necessary evil?

The Centre Artisanal de la Ville d'Abidjan (CAVA), created in 1990 under the aegis of the Ministry of Crafts, is the most important space for the exhibition and sale of art and craft objects, and most of these are of Ivorian origin. Located at Bietry in the Treichville district of Abidjan and housing some fifty crafts shops presenting a creatively diverse range of local producers, the centre gets a lot of visitors, especially large numbers of tourists passing through the country. It represents eleven sectors of activity, including jewellery, sculpture, painting, weaving and decoration. This permanent market offers artisans and visitors not only a real opportunity to make deals, but also, for the latter, a chance to discover the country's culture. A visit to the CAVA offers the traveller the sure prospect of being able to take home an authentically Ivorian souvenir. However, if the centre's economic activity helps reduce poverty, its rather chaotic workings are highly prejudicial to the country itself. The fact that the art market is not regulated, and that the minister for this sector of activity has no service in charge of monitoring the kind of objects that are sold or leave the country, exposes Ivory Coast to the dangers of trafficking and illegal circulation. Indeed, the investigation carried out in the framework of my study proves that among the population that has worked on this market for at least ten years, 38% have no official authorisation to trade, while the illiterate 52% do not know which ministry is supposed to be in charge, and are ignorant of the national legislation designed to protect

15 Drumology is the study of African talking instruments and their language.

the cultural heritage.¹⁶ The majority of them are from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), being for the most part Malians, Senegalese, Burkinabes and Guineans, and their installation has been a gradual process, a matter of co-optation or affiliation through a relative or friend who, judging the activity profitable, submitted the request to the other members of the group. It is also notable that much of the activity is done to order, which no doubt stimulates dubious activities that are highly harmful to the heritage.

Business isn't what it used to be. The only alternative left to us is to sometimes satisfy the demanding clients who insist on having ancient or authentic objects. We are forced to supply them.¹⁷

It is in these terms that a merchant who did not know us replied, referring to the activity of marketing original works. The conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that the fate of the Ivorian cultural heritage is sealed because it has been left in the hands of non-nationals, who make their everyday living from the trade in original pieces, to the detriment of Ivory Coast, which is being asphyxiated by a dispossession that does not speak its name.

The inadequacy of the legal texts

Ivory Coast has several legal texts designed to fight abuse in the national and international circulation of cultural goods, and therefore to help make artworks secure. For example, these normative instruments grant the legitimate owner, be it a state, a museum or a private collector, the possibility of recovering an object that has been stolen or illicitly exported, to which end they can appeal to an ordinary jurisdiction. In other words, in general these texts provide for the return or restitution of pillaged or stolen cultural goods. However, given the importance of this question of illegal circulation it is worth taking a closer look at the Ivorian law no. 87-806 dated 28 July 1987 concerning protection of the cultural heritage. Articles 58 and 59 of this law state that the exportation of listed goods is forbidden: "the exportation of cultural goods is forbidden. It may however be authorised in exceptional circumstances, for a limited period and with clear conditions for return." Article 59 lays down that, in addition to the provisions concerning listed objects in Article 58, "the exportation of art objects and antiques by any individual is subject to prior authorisation, which is provided in the form of an export certificate. The State may in such a situation assert its right to acquisition within conditions set by decree." Unfortunately, over thirty years later, there is still no decree for implementing this law, even though statistics provided by the Museum of Civilisations (one of the two national museums charged with delivering export certificates) show that an average of five hundred objects leave the national territory every month.

16 Silvie Memel, *Le trafic illicite des biens culturels*, 216 - 217

17 *Op. cit.*

It is important to note that these inadequacies naturally result in a low level of security for cultural goods. Pending promulgation of the law (which is currently being updated), we may note for the moment that in the case of Ivory Coast illicit trafficking is less severely punished than simple theft. In other words, the sanction reserved for this grave misdemeanour corresponds to a 3rd class fine. It is not penal, therefore.

The psychological and political effects of the absence of objects in communities

The psychological and political effects of the absence of objects in communities can be apprehended in terms of perception, or the relation that Ivorian communities have to their museums, which are the repositories of collective memory. In these spaces dedicated to the art and culture of a given country one can discover and also learn about the traditions, civilisations and way of life of a people and its evolution. The Ivorians have not suffered only from the absence of resonant, tutelary objects, for the objects transferred were rich in mystic and anthropological power and were credited with specific functions in relation to their sacred, cultic character, and consequently played a central, stable and regulatory¹⁸ role in the community. When they are uprooted from their native soil, they take with them their references, whole worlds and bodies of knowledge, permanently changing practices and customs, and even the way this knowledge is passed on to the younger generations. The consequence of this situation is the ignorance and lack of interest shown by young generations, which museum curators confront when analysing attendance figures. For over the years the void left by these absent objects has led to the development of psychological barriers in potential users, some of whom are, even today, reluctant to enter museums, which they wrongly view as cemeteries of fetishes or establishments set aside for the elites. Until a recent date, daily statistics for the museum in Abidjan put nationals at the bottom of the scale, with only 8,000 entries per year in 2006, and some days without a single visitor.

Is Chedlia Annabi therefore right to say that “in Africa, where most of the museum collections are the heritage of the colonial administration, the museum appears in the collective consciousness as an institution conceived outside the continent and implanted with no prior study in an environment that has its own traditions and particularities.”¹⁹

Wrongly perceived as an establishment for non-nationals, the image of the museum in the collective consciousness is often that of a place reserved for “whites.” And one can see why: a study of museum attendances carried out in 2017 found that in a population of 170 respondents comprising individuals from every kind of social background, type of

18 Royalty, or central power, is a way of managing men that is symbolised by the king and his court, who animate daily life and perpetuate practices and customs. We find, in descending order: the King, the tribal chiefs or heads of canton, village chiefs, court or family chiefs. Unlike the Akan, Gur and Mande peoples, which have royalty, the Krou people do not have a central power: that role is played by the mask.

19 Chedlia Annabi, *Manuel de gestion des musées africains*, Publications of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – ISESCO-1435H - 2014.

education and standard of living, 119 had never visited a museum, whether in Abidjan or around the country.

The Ouagadougou speech and the beginnings of a solution

This raises the political question of how the African cultural heritage is to be appropriated and valorised by communities. In this respect, the speech given by President Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017 concerning the restitution of cultural goods is promising, but also complex. For this is a question that implies numerous issues involving both the holding country and the country of origin.

At the political level, given that French law has yet to be changed more than two years after the Ouagadougou declaration, there can be no definitive restitution from a legal point of view. The economic question, too, remains unresolved as regards measures that African nations will now have to take to make possible the act of cession or restitution, a process that also implies transport, customs clearance, the reorganisation of reserves, the existence of suitable storage structures, a plan and safety provisions for the works, etc. Who handles what and how will the considerable costs pertaining to this procedure be apportioned? For formerly colonised countries, therefore, now is the time to mobilise.

The regional level

The heads of state and government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have made a political declaration concerning the return of African cultural goods which was adopted at the Cotonou summit in Benin, in December 2018. The ECOWAS commission began by organising a meeting of all the heads of cultural heritage and museums, and then of culture ministers, in order to ratify the Regional Cultural Policy document and its action plan, as well as the 2019–2023 ECOWAS action plan on the return of African cultural goods to their country of origin. Pending the next conference of heads of state, which should see their actual application, each member state has a road map and is reflecting on the concrete actions for the process to put in place, including aspects of the negotiations and the procedures to follow in order to bring about the return of these cultural goods. One of the important resolutions taken during the meetings concerns the need to create a formal framework for cooperation, both between African states and between the items' countries of origin and holding countries in order to ensure equitable benefits for the parties involved and, above all, the reappropriation of cultural identity by Africans.

The national level

In 1987 Ivory Coast put in place the government's sectorial policy in matters of conserving and protecting museums and cultural sites listed as part of the national heritage or world heritage by the minister for culture. Several entities have been created with responsibility for protecting the country's cultural goods, namely the Ivorian Office for

Cultural Heritage, the Cultural Heritage Department, the Cultural Brigade, the National Central Office of INTERPOL, the National Police, Customs and public museums.

At the national level, there have been laws, decrees and orders on protection of the cultural heritage, with a listing of sites and historic monuments and the inscription of cultural goods in a national inventory. The updating of Law no. 87-806 of 28 July 1987 concerning the protection of the heritage takes a rigorous approach to the question of repressing illicit trafficking. The new text provides for coercive measures, with prison sentences and high fines designed to dissuade thieves and traffickers. Law no. 2014-425 of 14 July 2014, articles 15, 16, 17 and 18 of which concern national cultural policy, also covers illicit trafficking and the return of transferred cultural goods.

The international framework

At the international level, the agreement concerning the measures to be taken to prohibit the importation, exportation and transferral of illicitly owned cultural goods, adopted in Paris on 14 November 1970, was ratified by Ivory Coast in decree no. 89-1327 of 26 December 1989. It has also ratified the UNIDROIT agreement of 1995 on stolen or illicitly transferred cultural goods (November 2019). In terms of cooperation, this is already in place with UNESCO, INTERPOL, ICOM and AFRICOM. Hence the publication in 2011 of the list of objects stolen from the Museum of Civilisations in the INTERPOL database.

Museology

In terms of museology, the full range of activities in this field are carried out by the two major national museums that are the Museum of Civilisations and the National Costume Museum of Grand-Bassam. These include inventory, updating of inventory, documentation (marking, numbering, photography, measuring, etc) of the collections, granting of export certificates, monitoring of visits, and information and awareness campaigns. However beyond these traditional activities, and given the many challenges facing them, the leaders of these institutions are thinking about ways of redefining their museums and repositioning them in their African context in order to facilitate their reappropriation by different types of visitor. Taking initiatives in terms of inventiveness and development so as to allow everyone to have their say and tell their own story: this is the challenge that the Museum of Civilisations has set itself.

Prospects

In the light of the above, prospects could be shaped by the political will shown by the national authorities to be part of the regional dynamic set in motion by ECOWAS in order to obtain the effective return of cultural goods held abroad, in keeping with the measures taken to this effect. A first list of 148 objects has been published by the government of Ivory Coast, and a formal request to French authorities has been issued through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the symbolic return of the Tchaman war drum Djidji Ayokwè. As part of this broad programme, there are plans to build a museum of interna-

tional stature, and to international standards, in 2022–23, as well as twelve regional museums. As for the Museum of Civilisations, the institution recently set about reorganising its storage and having its doors armoured in preparation for the reception of these returned objects.



Fig. 2: The traditional Chefferie signing the Manifesto
Photograph: Silvie Memel-Kassi

In terms of strategies to be adopted, the cultural and pedagogical project of the “Ghost Collection,”²⁰ together with its accompanying manifesto, need to be more adequately deployed nationwide. As its name indicates, the Ghost Collection is a collection that does not exist but evokes objects whose memory remains extremely vivid. It is a response which takes absence as its starting point and is constructed around the pieces that were pillaged during the post-electoral crisis of 2010, that is, 121 priceless items from the national heritage (royal items, jewellery, masks, sculptures, finery and cultic art objects, some of them dating as far back as the seventeenth century). To give these stolen pieces their voice back, the Museum of Civilisations, the CI, the Tapa Foundation and the association Art(sans)frigue had the idea of a multidimensional project involving artists, musicians, writers and performers organised around the themes of memory, transmission and trace. Follow up on the “Manifesto for the Ghost Collection,” launched on 22 November 2018 (figs. 1, 2), in December the museum presented works by Ivorian and French art students in a dialogue on the theme of the amputated heritage. It was hoped that their artistic responses would transcend absence by creativity, and feed into the intensely topical national and international debate on the pillaging of cultural goods, the role of

20 Source: Elodie Vermeil, Réparer les mémoires, Bouillon de Culture, *BAAB Magazine*, 63.

museums in Africa and the return of works to their land of origin. Beyond its cultural and artistic dimensions, then, the Ghost Collection has a key social and communitarian dimension. Using a strategy of targeted dissemination (copies of the manifesto are distributed to regional cultural directors working with regional councils, mayors, prefects, associations, groups, etc.), the idea is to get as many Ivorians as possible committed to protecting and conserving cultural goods by signing the manifesto, and in particular rural populations that are the source communities, who produced the objects kept in the museum. Thirty-two regional culture directors have been made aware of these issues and are working in the field to obtain ten thousand signatures with the collaboration of all the actors and all those involved (prefects of the regions, regional councillors, mayors, customary authorities, the national police, the customs, the national gendarmeries, teachers, students, artists, etc.). Five thousand signatures have been collected so far as we look forward to the great event of the national exhibition planned in May 2020 (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: View of the exhibition “La Collection Fantôme” at Musée des Civilisations on 16 December 2018

Photograph: Silvie Memel-Kassi

Conclusion

The illegal circulation of cultural goods, which is driven by illicit trafficking, constitutes a real threat for Côte d’Ivoire, which has an incalculable number of original works in the West. Far from ebbing, moreover, this process has intensified with the rise of the international market, the creation of local markets, the growth in the number of private collectors, the inadequacy of the legal texts, the institution of practices more or less legal practices of depreciating Ivorian collections by the first governments, and the lack of interest taken in museums by their communities, the result being a situation critical in every respect. This was the rather grim situation in which President Macron made his speech on the return of African cultural goods to their country of origin. This devel-

opment is at once promising and complex because of the many issues involved, and it demands a certain level of organisation from the countries of origin as well a series of institutional, legal and technical measures. It was in this context that the conference of the heads of state of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), held in December 2018, concluded with a political statement on this subject, and that it mandated its commission to concentrate on devising a five-year regional action plan to be followed by all the member states in order to obtain the definitive return of African cultural goods. Ivory Coast has placed itself within this dynamic of restitution pursued by a series of measures, and plans to go even further by involving all the interested parties and in particular the communities involved by signing the “Ghost Collection” manifesto, a cultural project designed to raise awareness.

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