

Dahomey: “Our heritage comes back to make us ask questions”—but what are the questions?

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17 November 2024

The fictional documentary *Dahomey* by French Senegalese director Mati Diop (*Atlantics*, 2019) won the top prize, the Golden Bear, at this year’s Berlin Film Festival amid broad critical acclaim and is now on general release.

A short film, it purports to deal with the meaning and significance of France’s restitution in November 2021 of a token 26 statues to the Republic of Benin in West Africa for Beninese citizens in today’s world. Benin was known as Dahomey until 1975, when 15 years after independence from France it took the name of Benin—after the Bay of Benin that took its name from the ancient Kingdom of Benin in today’s south-west Nigeria.

A pretentious film, *Dahomey* is bereft of any history, focusing instead in the post-modernist tradition on “giving voice and agency to artifacts” [!], “decolonisation”, “cultural identity” and “African identity”. As a result, it serves only to mystify and confuse.

The film spends an inordinate amount of time showing the physical process of repatriating the 26th artifact, held in a basement at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, its packaging and transportation back for display in the presidential palace Palais de la Marina in Cotonou, Benin’s seat of government. It gives pride of place to the wooden statue of King Ghezo, the ruler of Dahomey from 1797 to 1818. If this statue was given its real voice it would be that of one of Africa’s major suppliers of slaves for the trans-Atlantic slave trade! Of this nothing is said. Ghezo is instead given a synthesised voice to “speak” in the old Fon language to provide the film’s narrative and describe his anxiety about going back home, including his future place in it.

The second half of the film features a student discussion at the University of Abomey-Calavi, in Dahomey’s ancient capital, about the artifacts’ restitution, decolonisation and the future of Benin, interspersed with shots of young Beninese listening to it on their phones and laptops around the city. They are visibly unimpressed.

The students dismiss restitution with contempt, pointing out that: the return of 26 works, out of 7,000 looted objects held abroad, is “an insult;” “90 percent of Benin’s cultural heritage is overseas;” and it’s just a political campaign by French President Emmanuel Macron—and by implications all the other colonial powers—to bolster their flagging influence in Africa.

Students feel no connection to the “stuff” which they have never learnt about at school and question the building of lavish museums and exhibitions that children in the impoverished villages will never get to see. Others ask why they’re debating art when the real tangible consequences of colonialism, like poverty and hunger, are felt by many people in Benin.

What is one to make of this?

Diop explained in an interview with *The Africa Report*, “Most of the archives from Africa have been filmed by colonizers, and so I think it’s very important for us to take in charge through cinema our stories.” It was her “duty” to create the documentary because the repatriation is but the first step in reawakening its citizens’ cultural identity.

She said, “Only civil society can and must give meaning to this restitution. Otherwise, there is no real point, other than serving the interests of the Beninese and French governments. Restitution must involve the social fabric, otherwise it will simply be a matter of repatriation. It is up to us to bring this matter back down from the top to the bottom, to redeploy it in people’s consciousness and to approach it with as much depth, subtlety and complexity as possible. Because this heritage comes back to make us ask questions, to confront us with the colonial past, to enlighten and—above all—transcend the present.”

But what are these questions? What, where and when was the Kingdom of Dahomey? Who was King Ghezo? What were these artworks? What role did they play? When and under what circumstances were the artworks looted? What is the significance of the “colonial past”? Who initiated the restitution? What does this “enlightenment” consist of? What is meant by “transcending the present”?

Her film makes little attempt to answer these historical questions and explain their relevance for today.

Very much the child of the African-European relationship, Dahomey emerged as the Fon people sought to defend themselves against their slave-raiding neighbours, to become one of the great West African Kingdoms, along with Oyo, Benin and Asante, between the 16th and 19th centuries. It was dependent for its survival upon superior weaponry, bought from gunsmiths in Birmingham, England, along with other luxury goods for its autocratic rulers. These could only be obtained via trade with the city states of Ardra and Ouidah—in exchange for slaves.

Dahomey grew into a prosperous, conquering polity that was permanently at war with its neighbours, had a callous attitude towards human life and played a key role in slave hunting for the transatlantic slave trade, sending around 1.9 million slaves across the Atlantic, a large part of the total. It even raised a “Praetorian Guard” of several thousand women fighters. As Stanley B. Alpern explained in *Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (2011), Dahomey perhaps more than any other African state, “was dedicated to warfare and slave-trading. It may also have been the most totalitarian, with the king controlling and regimenting practically every aspect of social life.” Nevertheless, it continued to pay tribute to Oyo, its neighbour who was subject to the same pressures, for decades.

This prosperity—for the kings and merchants—was not to last as Britain shifted its policy. Ending its Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and abolishing slavery in its territories in 1833—both because of its abhorrent nature and crucially as a means of undermining France’s profits in its Caribbean possessions—Britain sent its navy to patrol West Africa’s coast to prevent slaving and protect the interests of its traders. This put paid to Dahomey’s Atlantic slave trade, upset its trading networks and set in motion an enormous and long lasting social and economic crisis for its rulers and merchants that was replicated across West Africa.

Some of the fiercest resistance to Britain’s anti-slavery patrols came from none other than King Ghezo, the narrator of Diop’s film who

worries about his reception back home in 2021.

Perhaps he should worry. Ghezo reluctantly agreed to terminate the slave trade in 1852, but with the alternatives—palm oil production on large plantations—far less profitable and internal dissent mounting, he resumed slave trading in 1857, one year before he was assassinated by a rival faction amid rising tensions and changing relations with the European powers—France in Dahomey’s case. They now sought increasing control over prices and credit rates that ultimately led to replacing trade with territorial possession and local revenues.

While France had obtained a foothold on the Slave Coast in the form of a “protectorate” over the trading town of Porto Novo to “protect” Dahomey against Britain, it was not until 1888 that open hostilities between France and Dahomey broke out. It was in 1892, during a violent four-year colonial war of conquest that France seized the statues. In 1894, having taken control of the territory, France incorporated it into French West Africa as French Dahomey. This shift from trading partnerships, which had lasted for more than two centuries and contributed so much to capital accumulation and industrialisation in Western Europe and North America, to conquest and direct control by the imperialist powers occurred across West Africa. The Europeans’ “scramble for Africa” was inaugurated at the 1874 Berlin Congress 150 years ago”.

Colonial rule meant the death of any local control over production and trade, the introduction of coinage and banks and the elimination of the old merchant families. While production rose, this benefited the colonial powers, enabling their further growth and development, not their West African colonies that experienced no such development.

Dahomey threw off colonial rule in 1960. But like all the other former African colonies, it could not throw off the control exerted by the international banks and corporations that dominated every aspect of the country’s economic life as a producer of cotton, textile goods and agricultural products for export. Its ruling elite could provide no solutions to the social and economic problems confronting the working class and peasantry within the framework of capitalism. Its only response to steeply escalating social tensions is repression, arrests and the crushing of protests and strikes by the police and the army.

As factional fighting broke out among the national bourgeoisie amid rising discontent among the Beninese masses, Dahomey soon succumbed, like its neighbours, to military coups and dictatorships.

While Dahomey’s statues and artworks are distinct from the world-famous Benin Bronzes, they borrow heavily in form from their West African neighbours. Made of wood, ivory and various metals, Dahomey’s artworks had no religious function but were used to adorn the king’s palaces. Dahomey’s kings were often depicted in large zoomorphic forms with each king resembling a particular animal. Among the 26 statues repatriated to Benin along with Ghezo are his descendants Glele, in the shape of an intricately carved lion-headed effigy, and Béhanzin, Dahomey’s last ruler, depicted as half man, half shark.

The looting of King Béhanzin’s artworks by France was by no means unique. The national museums, along with other public galleries, cultural centres and academic institutions in the imperialist centres of Europe and North America are stuffed full of looted artifacts. Stolen during colonial wars of conquest or procured in dubious circumstances, they should be returned to their places of origin if requested. Far from being carefully preserved, as these venerable institutions claim, many of the artifacts languish in storage, often not even catalogued or properly safeguarded, as the theft of 1,500 items from the British Museum that recently came to light demonstrated.

The issue of the restitution of such artifacts, so long rejected by the colonial powers, has now become entangled in broader geopolitical conflicts, with a few institutions now repatriating—or offering to repatriate—a handful as a public relations exercise. In the case of the 26 statues, their restitution was a transparent attempt by Macron to bolster

France’s plummeting relations with its former colonies. Speaking at Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, during a trip to West Africa in 2017, where he faced great hostility, Macron launched a “new relationship between France and countries on the African continent” and vowed the return of African artifacts would become “a top priority” for France.

Africa’s national bourgeois leaders are likewise seeking the return of these artifacts for their own purposes. In Benin Republic, President Patrice Talon’s government is spending €1 billion on four museums in a bid to make culture and tourism the country’s second economic pillar after agriculture. Like so many leaders of newly “independent” countries, Talon, a cotton magnate, is using museums and the country’s cultural artifacts to cultivate a sense of national identity, pride and unity and cover over the massive class differences between the handful of super rich and the impoverished masses. But his lavish reception party welcoming the return of the statues cut no ice with the people of Benin who saw it for what it was—a sordid public relations exercise to burnish his image.

In power since 2016, Talon has packed institutions with his own supporters, neutered opposition parties and clamped down on the media. The poverty rate in the country’s 13 million population stands at 36 percent. While official unemployment is just 2.4 percent, underemployment is a massive 72 percent as around 90 percent of the workforce works in the informal sector on a casual, day by day basis. Inflation has risen, driven by higher food and petroleum prices, particularly since the start of the US/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine.

Diop herself only hints at this in her interview with *The Africa Report*, when she admits she had to select most of the students who participated in the discussion because “it wasn’t easy to find young people in Benin who could express themselves freely, without fear of being repressed by the authorities. But in *Dahomey*, their words and their point of view belong entirely to them.” While Diop said, “My film is a counter-narrative to a certain governmental scenario, but it allows a multiplicity of points of view to be expressed,” the film provided few scenes of Benin life outside the presidential palace and room hosting the students’ discussion.

The film, without dealing with the country’s history and its economic domination by monopolistic banks and corporations, does not and cannot provide a way forward or “transcend the present” to use Diop’s words. Her unspoken “liberal” opposition to Talon is based on an appeal for “justice,” “cultural identity,” “decolonialism” and “an African voice”, but is above all a rejection of the class basis of society and the international nature of the working class without which nothing can be understood and nothing fundamental can be changed.



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