

FIG. 1 (RIGHT): Portrait of General Dodds published in *Le Petit Journal*, December 3, 1892.

Author's archives.

Alfred Amédée Dodds was born in Saint-Louis, Senegal, on February 6, 1842, of mixed race parents. He died in Paris on July 17, 1922, after a successful military career. Joining the naval infantry when he left Saint-Cyr in 1862, he was successively promoted captain (1869), battalion commander (1878), colonel (1887), brigadier general (1892), and major general (1899). Distinguished in all his commands, he was knighted with the Legion of Honor in 1870, Commander of the Legion of Honor in 1891, and Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1907.

Dodds was the last Afro-descended member of the French army to have been appointed to this rank and the only Afro-descended general to have a street in Paris named after him.

After the “No, that won’t be possible” reply that France politely delivered to the Republic of Benin in 2016 in response to a restitution demand that had been made several months earlier (see *Tribal Art* magazine, no. 84, p. 122), a paradigm shift occurred due to another upheaval, this one political.

It is difficult to understand why, but on November 28, 2017, during his first visit to Africa, newly elected President Emmanuel Macron pronounced himself in favor of the restitution to Africa of the African patrimony in France. This position is entirely inconsistent with the long-held principles of inalienability, imprescriptibility, and non-seizability under which French museum collections exist.

This declaration was dressed up with announcements of “scientific” and “museological” partnerships. Though the African patrimony in question was partly veiled in improbable “temporary restitutions,” the intent is clear:

Within five years, I want the conditions to be in place for the temporary or definitive restitution of the African patrimony to Africa.

Who will go to the trouble to fight against this? To object and let whoever will listen know that justifying restitution to African countries by comparing it to the restitution of material looted by the Nazis is tantamount to comparing colonialism to the Holocaust, and that is as inadmissible as it is historically utterly false. As reprehensible and unjustifiable as it may seem to us today, who will dare say that colonialism does not meet the legal criteria that would define it as a crime against humanity? Who will remember that the majority of the works of classical African art on the market today were sold after the colonial period, as well as that those that did come out during that time were for the most part gifted, traded for, or purchased, and that those that actually were looted represent only a tiny fraction of the whole? Who will analyze the obvious and much-touted role that Christianity and, more recently, Islam played in the disappearance of so-called pagan idols? Who will take a hard look at the pitiful state to which museums in Africa have been brought in the hands of their directors or strive to understand the almost complete absence of African collectors of

RESTITUTION: The Tides of History or a Trend of the Times?

By Yves-Bernard Debic

Questions about the conceptual or legal foundations of such a move have been few and far between since Macron made this statement. On the contrary, a string of enthusiastic articles has redundantly competed to support this line of thought, though the similarities between them show them to be manifestations of an established and well-oiled propaganda machine. These have included the most outrageous conflation: colonialism, slavery, crimes against humanity, Nazi despoliation, punitive expeditions, blood objects (akin to the blood diamonds proposed by Irish geographer Hugo J. H. Lewis). All of the wounds of history have been lumped together and summoned to the High Mass of restitution. There has been no attempt to explain or to prioritize them, much less to differentiate between them.

African art? And, finally, who will be willing to grasp the history of mankind for what it is, without adopting some moralistic and anachronistic analysis or a false revisionist approach to explaining it, even if it is well intended?

Since we appear intent on suing history to right mistakes often made more than a hundred years ago, we should at least try to understand the situation without reducing it to a simplistic confrontation between the forces of good and evil.

The polemics surrounding “restitution” to some extent informed the demands formulated by the Republic of Benin for the return of objects brought back to France by General Alfred-Amédée Dodds after his capture of the royal city of Abomey on November 17, 1892. Given this, it seems obvious that we should turn our attention to the history of

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AU DAHOMEY
Le général Dodds

this war, which was waged by France against the Kingdom of Dahomey and resulted in the defeat of King Behanzin and the establishment of a French protectorate.

French press reports are all but unanimous in their conviction that these “ill-gotten gains” acquired by General Dodds in the course of a “punitive expedition” and now in the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac must be returned. However, the facts don’t support this. To listen to these reports, one is tempted to imagine an unstoppable force of heavily equipped soldiers led by a white-skinned, red-headed officer with a large mustache and a colonial helmet, all coming to chastise the “noble savages,” who are armed only with spears and arrows. Such imagery is straight out of a Tarzan movie and it is as much of an affront to historical truth as it is to Dahomey’s King Behanzin, who fought ferociously against the French (as well as against many neighboring Yoruba chiefdoms and kingdoms), often relying heavily on the famous Dahomey “Amazons.” Known as *minos*, or king’s wives, these were members of an elite, all-female military regiment for which its “incredible courage and audacity” even the French Foreign Legion expressed its admiration.

What really happened is not difficult to verify, and abundant sources tell the story. Behanzin was undoubtedly a great king, but, like his forebears, he was also a slave dealer and a ruler who did not hesitate to use force against his subjects and neighboring kingdoms to establish and maintain his privileges. The history of the Kingdom of Ketou, which was mercilessly punished by Behanzin’s father, King Glele, first in 1882 and then again in 1886, is edifying on this point. In the second conflict, the city of Ketou was sacked and looted, its temples and altars destroyed, and its houses burned, all under Glele’s personal direction. Its people were sent into slavery in Abomey after its chiefs were summarily executed. The memory of the persecution by Dahomey is so vivid in Ketou that a square in the town is devoted to the “centenary of the renaissance of Ketou 1894–1994,” commemorating and celebrating King Behanzin’s unconditional surrender on January 15, 1894.

The purpose of the Dodds expedition was not to loot the regalia housed in the royal palace of

Abomey. It was motivated by a geopolitical conflict that pitted France, England, and the Kingdom of Dahomey against one another for control of the small coastal kingdom of Porto Novo. After brutal combat, this ended with the taking of Abomey on November 17, 1892, and Behanzin’s ensuing flight from the region. But once again, history cannot be reduced to such a simple synopsis. Above and beyond the viciousness

“ Who will analyze the obvious and much-touted role that Christianity and, more recently, Islam played in the disappearance of so-called pagan idols? Who will take a hard look at the pitiful state to which museums in Africa have been brought in the hands of their directors or strive to understand the almost complete absence of African collectors of African art? And, finally, who will be willing to grasp the history of mankind for what it is, without adopting some moralistic and anachronistic analysis or a false revisionist approach to explaining it? ”



of the fighting, the horrible loss of human life in both camps, the image of the palace of Abomey in flames, and of the “war booty,” other relevant facts exist—that of the Yoruba slaves, who, once liberated by Dodds’ army, used their freshly gained freedom to turn on their former Fon masters with bloodthirsty fury, and that of a defeated king who set fire to his own palace before fleeing his capital. That fire was extinguished by the French, who, as an emblem of their victory and without for an instant doubting the moral and political justifiability of their actions, took with them the artworks that the Republic of Benin, a state that did not exist at the time, now claims as its own.

These facts are related, among other places, in a 1985 reference work published by UNESCO: *General History of Africa*, volume VII: *Africa Under Colonial Domination: 1880–1935*, page 128:

But what upset the Fon military plan most was the destruction of the harvest by the Yoruba slaves

released by Dodds' army. Abomey was faced with an acute problem of provisions. To avoid starvation, some soldiers went home to search for food and to defend their villages, which were being pillaged by the liberated slaves.

Dodds, continuing his inexorable advance, entered Abomey, which Behanzin had set on fire before heading to the northern part of his kingdom where he settled.

So before judging history, condemning Dodds (and all of colonial France along with him), and justifying the restitutions of allegedly ill-gotten objects, a few questions are in order: Who are the bad guys in history? Who are the good guys? Can one condemn the Yoruba slaves that Dodds liberated for having taken revenge on their Fon masters? What are we to think of the town of Ketou that owes its "renaissance" to Dodds? Were these objects, which are the symbols and regalia of a government that actively practiced slavery and were saved by Dodds from destruction by fire, really illegally acquired? If so, who were their legitimate owners? Why do they need to be restituted, and to whom? When the modern-day Republic of Benin formulates a demand for their restitution, is that demand historically and morally legitimate?

By anchoring the question of the assignment of ownership of cultural property in the context of restitution, President Macron, who during his campaign did not hesitate to describe colonialism as a "crime against humanity," has sparked a fire that he will have a great deal of trouble extinguishing. Let us look at the definitions: "To retribute" means to return something to its legitimate owner, so "restitution" is thus the act of returning something that one does not have the right to possess. The very fact of invoking these terms immediately opposes an illegitimate owner with a dispossessed one. The linear equation is thus solved as follows:

Colonization + crimes against humanity
 + *looting*
 = *restitution*

FIG. 2 (left): *Directory of Museums in Africa*. UNESCO-ICOM, Documentary Center, 1990.

Tribal Art magazine archives.



FIG. 3 (above): Statue of King Oyingin, erected to celebrate the centenary of the renaissance of Kétou 1894–1994.

Photo: Fawaz Tairou, Cotonou, 2017.

Make no mistake, this is how the message has been understood in Africa. Statements made by the African delegations at the international meeting held at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris on June 1, 2018, leave no doubt about this. According to Patrice Talon, president of the Republic of Benin, the cultural property of Africa is "being enslaved" by museums, which are "environments of repression." The president of Gabon urged swift action and warned that "we mustn't allow these questions to be appropriated by the streets." Lastly, the former director of Kenya's national museums declared that "we are at war, and the war is just beginning."

So, is France at war—albeit a patrimonial or cultural one, or so we hope—with Africa because its museums are places where African artworks are "enslaved" and "repressed"? This is a sad but predictable response to a clumsy gesture by President Macron that was made in the spirit of national repentance. But history and the rule of law cannot be ignored with impunity. Unfortunately, the presidential statement was not anchored in any serious reflection, and no one now can predict what will happen to French museum collections.

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