

# **"Colonial theft of cultural assets: Restitution? Reparation?"**

Kokou Azamede

University of Lomé

Mission 21 webinar, Basel, 12 June 2024

# Introduction

- Provenance research and the various debates on the subject of the restitution of looted cultural property are increasingly revealing the complexity of the subject and the challenges it poses. As do the definitions of the terms relating to the topic. Aim of the lecture :
  - - explain the context of the collections
  - - analyse the terms restitution and reparation in relation to their implementation.
- The analyses will relate to the context of Christian missions and the missionary perception of cultural assets.

# Introduction

- Aim of the presentation :
  - explain the contexts of the collections
  - analyse the terms restitution and reparation in relation to their implementation.

# 1. colonial and missionary Context(s) of the collections

## 1.1 Colonial political context

under forms of

- Plunder / spoils of war (during punitive expeditions or similar)
- Confiscation in a balance of power
- Purchase at a low price
- Bribery
- Illegal appropriation

# 1. colonial and missionary Context(s) of the collections

## 1. Missionary context

- The mission was to
  - Christianisation of "pagan" societies from Africa, etc.
  - Civilisation of "natural people"

Embossing:

School education, adoption of Christian behaviour and acquisition of European way of thinking

This process meant a change in the everyday cultural life of the African people

# 1. colonial and missionary context(s) of the collections

## 1.3 Collection of cult entities

- The missionaries' fight against other forms of faith in the mission areas led to the gathering of cult entities of the people there.
- According to missionary doctrine: such entities are laden with the devil's spirit and must be burnt to prove the victory of Christianity or good over paganism or evil.

# 1. colonial and missionary context(s) of the collections

## 1.3 Collection of cult entities

- The collection took place in several ways:
  - By handing in converted locals: as a trophy
  - By purchase (cf. Missionary Spieß of the North German Mission)
  - Through Verschenk (cf. Missionary Spieß of the North German Mission)

## 2 The question of restitution

- - 1. Problem**
  - Restitution is the result of a process that comprises several phases of activities.
  - The process involves actors from the society of the former colonial powers and those from the society of origin of the cultural assets.



## 2 The question of restitution

### 2.1 Problem

- The following questions are important in order to arrive at a result:
  - What is looted or illegally collected?
  - Where did that happen?
  - Who did this?
  - Why was this done?
  - How (under what circumstances) did this happen?
  - From whom was this stolen?

## 2 The question of restitution

- **2.2 Restitution process**

- Working on these issues brings two players into contact and dialogue, who exchange information about:
  - the social and cultural consequences
  - the social and cultural values of the stolen cultural assets
  - the different ways of dealing with illegal collections
- Only then can a clear decision be made as to how the restitution should take place

## 2 The question of restitution

### 2.3 Meaning of restitution

- The term restitution is associated with several other terms, depending on the perspective:
- From the society of the colonisers: Restitution (of artefacts/objects)
- From the society of the colonised: repatriation, return (of cultural objects, cultural goods, and "human" body parts)
- From the society of the colonisers: Recognition Reparation (Wiedergutmachung)

## **2 The question of restitution**

### **2.3 Meaning of restitution**

- From both societies: Reconciliation: intercultural dialogue (different relationship concept) at eye level, etc.

### 3. the question of reparation

- The theft of cultural property does not only mean the theft of artefacts.
- It is also about the theft of cultures and identities of people who for centuries have been
  - attacked,
  - whose identity/history is denied, frowned upon.
  - The cultural, social, political and historical consequences are still

### 3. the question of reparation

- Reparation can often be interpreted in terms of material or financial action, as the capitalist system can.
- Restitution should be understood in the first sense in the context of restitution
  - as a realisation that you have done wrong
  - Respect for the people who have suffered and continue to suffer as a result
  - Introduce dialogue at eye level with people to discuss and process various aspects of the shared past and its effects

### 3. the question of reparation

- The case of African Christians from former mission stations is all the more complex because missionary societies have contributed to the devaluation of social structures and people's cultural identities
- People today find themselves in transcultural spaces,
- Challenge: Distinguishing one's own tradition / identity from the missionary and colonial legacy

# Conclusion

- The question of restitution cannot be regarded as the handing over or assignment of stolen property after the facts have been recognised.
- It is intended to give the main players in colonial history the opportunity to clarify aspects that are still unclear and that remain at the centre of the common life of all humanity.
- It is an opportunity for an open and sincere dialogue between the formerly colonising and colonised people.