

# DIALOGUE ON THE RESTITUTION OF AFRICAN ARTIFACTS IN SWITZERLAND

## 1. Background Information

**African Diaspora Council of Switzerland (ADCS)** is the national platform of the African Diaspora and People of African Descent in Switzerland. As an umbrella association, the African Council is committed to defend the interests of its members and the African community living in Switzerland. Among its diverse services to members and projects, the work of the ADCS is focused predominantly on integration and development.

**African Foundation for Migration and Development (AFMD)** is a Diaspora led initiative which promote and coordinate the engagement of the African Diaspora in the development of the continent.

At the beginning of December 2021, CDAS and AFMD initiated a congenial process to support research on provenance, mapping, and eventual restitution of African artifacts in Switzerland. This project was initiated under the auspices of the Forum of African Sovereigns and Traditional Leaders with moral support of the Open Society Foundation.

This move also follows some reports in the Swiss media underscoring the need for restitution of African artwork in Switzerland. Indeed, the development of African youths is particularly threatened by the forfeiture of rights to artistic and cultural heritage. "A large part of this cultural heritage is now stored in museums in Europe" reported in (Swissinfo publication of 13.12.2020).

In addition, "decolonization only works if you find all the people involved, bring them to the museum, listen to them and involve them in the decisions. It is only when they feel that they are part of the project that it is a success (Swissinfo publication of 13.12.2020).

It is very important to highlight here that during our first contact with one of the Swiss museums based in Geneva, we learned of an initiative already started by eight Swiss museums, *the Swiss Benin Initiative (SBI)* which conducts research and studies on provenance of the art collections of the Benin Kingdom of Nigeria. This collaborative research work by the eight Swiss museums is carried out with their Nigerian colleagues and supported by the governments of both countries.

## 2. Objectives

Our approach consists in particular in raising awareness, supporting research on provenance and the mapping of African art collections in Switzerland, then contacting the diplomatic representations of the African countries concerned, who will then decide the fate of the mapped objects.

We are honored to be able to synergize and exchange with all the stakeholders both in Switzerland and from Africa who have been very cooperative in this project.

### **3. Activities.**

After the first discussions with the Museum of Ethnography of Geneva/GE, MEG in December 2021, the ADCS and the AFMD embarked on further activities. The efforts of dialogue in this initiative led the team to initiate contact with several Swiss museums and cultural institutions. Among them the Federal Office of Culture, Office of looted art, the association of Swiss museums AMS in Zurich, Swiss Research Association on Provenance, Historisches und Völkermuseum St Gallen/SG, Cantonal Museum of Archeology and History in Lausanne/VD, Museo delle Culture Lugano MUSEC - Catalogo/TI. In addition, our delegation also visited the Museum Rietberg, Kunst der Welt (Art of the World) in Zürich, Museum of Ethnography Neuchâtel (MEN) / NE and Museum der Kulturen Basel / BS. Further visits are planned for March 2023 at the Universität Zürich Völkerkundemuseum/ZH (16.3.2023) and the Museum der Kulturen Basel/BS (12.5.2023). Other museums concerned will also be visited during the year.

### **4. Impact**

We are very pleased to announce the completion of the first research and study work of the eight Swiss museums on the artwork of the Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria. This study has now been completed which led to the inauguration of Swiss Benin Forum on the 2nd of February 2023.

#### **SWISS BENIN FORUM, Museum Rietberg Zurich, 2.2.2023**

Nigeria - Switzerland bilateral cultural relations took another dimension on February 2, 2023. At the start of 2020, eight Swiss museums initiated a study of the provenance of Bronz artwork from the Kingdom of Benin in Swiss museums. These artworks have utilitarian functions. Beninese Nigerian conservators and researchers were involved in the project. The official presentation of their findings with a Benin-Nigerian delegation led by Prince Aghatise Erediauwa of the Kingdom of Benin and H.E. Ambassador Baba Madugu, Ambassador of Nigeria to Switzerland took place at Rietberg Museum in Zurich. Part of the discussions was focused on the question of ownership, custody and the future of the very intense and promising dialogue. This effort is still ongoing. Congratulations to Switzerland and Nigeria for the intermediate success of this dialogue...

This research and study work resulted in the establishment of a list of collection from the Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria in the eight Swiss museums. The artworks have been listed in 4 categories, namely:

1. Objects looted in 1897
2. Objects likely to have been looted in 1897
3. Objects unlikely to have been looted in 1897
4. Objects not looted in 1897

Therefore, questions of international law on the legitimacy of properties arise in view of the value attached to these objects in the place of origin. The fate of these items is now the subject of negotiations in the next stage of the dialogue.



**BIS**  
Benin Initiative Schweiz

### National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM)



Prof. Dr. Abba Tijani  
Director General, NCMM



Theophilus Umogbai  
Director of Research, Planning and Publications, NCMM

### Benin Royal Palace Benin Traditional Council



His Royal Highness  
Prince Aghastse Erediauwa



Dr. Charles Uweonuyl Edosomwan  
Chief Obasuyi of Benin  
Senior Advocate of Nigeria



Patrick Oromaye  
Art Historian  
Member of Ekaibe Royal Society

### University of Benin City and Benin Studies Institute



Dr. Enibaku Uzébu Imarhigbe  
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Prof. Dr. Kokunre Eghafona  
Professor of Cultural Anthropology  
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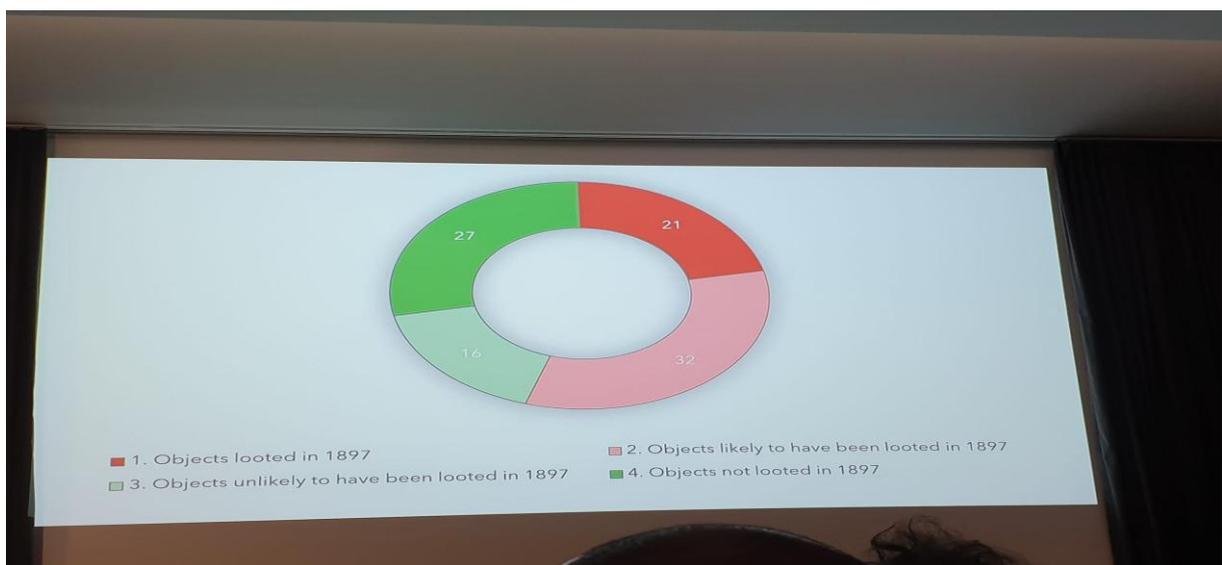
### Artists



Phil Omodamwen  
6th Generation Bronze Caster  
Benin City



Samson Oglamien  
Visual Artist and Artistic Director  
of the Edo Cultural Art Forum





Definitely Looted



Likely Looted



Unlikely Looted



Definitely Not

