

# The Repatriation of Colonial Artefacts in a Post-Colonial World

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## Introduction

In 2018, Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther* received significant recognition, not only for being the first Black superhero film but because it touches upon the debate surrounding colonial artefacts located in the Western world. In this Marvel blockbuster, the villain, Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) attends an exhibition at the fictitious Museum of Great Britain, where he consults the White curator about the acquisition of the vibranium mining hammer; Killmonger mentions that “[i]t was taken by British soldiers in Benin, but it’s from Wakanda. [...] How do you think your ancestors got those? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?” (Coogler 2018). From this interaction, Killmonger is stating that most of these cultural artefacts were stolen and have not been returned to their place of origin.



Figure 1: *Black Panther*, Killmonger at the Museum of Great Britain, 2018.

## **Background of the study**

The issue regarding the repatriation of colonial artefacts surpasses popular culture as it is a prevalent topic within politics and art. It is important to note the significance of repatriation as it “helps address the historical injustice museums have caused and restores Africans’ agency as producers of their own history” (Woldeyes 2019). At the end of November 2017, the current French President, Emmanuel Macron announced that restitution should be made for the fact that 90% of Africa’s artefacts are outside of the continent. Alain Godonou who is the Director of Museums of Benin national heritage agency mentioned at his address at the UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality that currently 90 percent to 95 percent of Africa’s cultural heritage is located outside of the African content and is hosted in large museums (Sarr and Savoy 61). The initiative to return colonial artefacts is not restricted to France, but other countries have also taken the initiative to return looted cultural objects. The proposition by President Macron overjoyed many; however, there are many issues as to why this can be problematic. There are concerns regarding if and what kind of reparations will be contemplated. As a result of Macron’s request Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese scholar, and Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian, wrote a report “Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics” (2018) which maps out the process of the return of colonial artefacts. Sarr and Savoy mention that currently in the French Public Collection there are “at least 90,000 objects originating from sub-Saharan Africa [...] 70,000 pieces alone are housed in the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac” in Paris (44). Two days after this report was published, Macron announced that by 2021, 26 artefacts would be returned to Benin (Gikandi 2020). This shows that France is taking responsibility and

looking critically at the permanent restitution of these cultural treasures. However, as cultural studies students, we are obliged to be critical of why this is only taking place now and why other cultural artefacts have not yet been returned.

One object that has been at the centre of this debate regarding the repatriation of colonial artefacts and the subject of my case study is the Bangwa Queen. The wooden sculpture is a sacred *lefem*<sup>1</sup> figure from the Western part of Cameroon and was looted along with other *lefem* figures during an invasion of German soldiers in the Bangwa community. The sculpture was later found in possession of Gustav Conrau in 1899 which he then brought to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. The artefact is currently located in a French museum in Paris (Campfens 80). It is important to note that during this research (June 2020), there have been no initiatives to return the object at present. However, there was one initiative in 2017, where representatives of the Bangwa community contacted the museum to initiate a dialogue. Unfortunately, there was no further communication between the two (Campfens 80).

### **Research Objective and Research Questions**

In this research, I would like to partake in the debate surrounding the repatriation of colonial artefacts. I will further examine if museums should return these objects and what the repatriation will consist of. Campfens mentions that the meaning of the Bangwa Queen transforms in “different settings and to different people” (Campfens 80). The sculpture’s transformation is “from an ancestral portrait in between human and spiritual world in her original African context, to an exotic ethnographic specimen for European scientists at the turn of the nineteenth-century,

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<sup>1</sup> *Lefem* figures are “effigies of the ancestors and other important royal status holders” (Brain and Pollock 83)

to a famous work of art that has inspired artists and commodity for Western collects” (Campfens 80). Campfens’ description of this difference and how it varies is also how value is added to the sculpture and how that changes regarding space and time- more specifically, to look at how these values impact the role of repatriation.

The objective of this thesis is to look at how the sculpture, the Bangwa Queen, was seen as valuable within its original place of creation and how value was created and added during its time in the West. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be looking specifically at economic value, cultural value and aesthetic value. Due to the change of location and ownership of the object, it will become evident that these values have changed. Temporal and spatial summation will be incorporated as time will show how the role and definition of the object have changed. Space will also play a role in understanding how the sculpture was interpreted within an African context compared to the way it was interpreted within a European context. This leads to my research question “How do the economic, cultural and aesthetic values ascribed by Post-Colonial Europe, affect the debate and return of the Cameroonian sculpture, the Bangwa Queen?” The sub-questions I will focus on will include: “What is the Bangwa Queen and her history?”, “What roles do cultural and aesthetic value play on the interpretation of the Bangwa Queen?”, “What is the significance of the economic value of the Bangwa Queen?” and “What is the debate and how can the soft laws apply to the Bangwa Queen?” I hypothesize that these forms of value impact the policymaking process and when the sculpture will be returned. In simpler terms, policymaking is what affects the debate and vice versa. Policymaking plays a huge role in the debate as there are specific laws in play which determine who has legal ownership to the object.

In addition, it is essential to realise that this debate is part of a more significant discussion regarding the decolonisation of the museum.

## **Thesis Structure**

The structure of the thesis is as follows; I will begin with a general background of the Bangwa Queen. Firstly, I will look at where the object comes from and how the object was interpreted within its original context and what the function of the sculpture was. Here I will answer the sub-question “What is the Bangwa Queen and her history?” Furthermore, I will look at how the sculpture arrived in Europe. In the second chapter, I will focus on how an artwork gains cultural and aesthetic values within the Western world and thus, how these values apply to the Bangwa Queen. In this chapter, I will answer the sub-question “What roles do cultural and aesthetic value play on the interpretation of the Bangwa Queen?” I hypothesize that the Bangwa Queen has gained significance due to the international canonisation and pedigree of the object. In addition, the object has been recognised by famous photographers and surrealist artists, thus allowing the object to be associated with avant-garde art. The cultural and aesthetic values naturally feed into the economic values, which will be the focus of my third chapter; “What is the significance of the economic value of the Bangwa Queen?” Finally, for the fourth chapter, I will return to the debate which focuses on the reasons why the sculpture should be returned and why it should not be returned. Moreover, I will analyse how these value factors have or can play a role in the return of the object and why there may be hesitation to return the object. In this part, I shall answer the sub-question: “What is the debate and how can the soft laws apply to the Bangwa Queen?” To understand the debate, I will look at some laws which have contributed to the repatriation of the

colonial artefacts and policies which have neglected the need for these artefacts to be returned to their place of origin. The structure of this thesis will subsequently take on a chronological order: the past, in regard to the history of the object and ownership; the present, focussing on the process of value gained during the sculpture's time in the West and, finally, the future, and how these factors affect the possible return of the object. This will include looking at laws, human rights and property claims.

## **Literature Review**

Before I begin the first chapter, let us briefly look at the main literature I have used in this study. The Bangwa Queen has been the subject of previous research. For example, Evelien Campfens' "The Bangwa Queen: Artifact or Heritage?" which focuses on understanding how human rights laws and international law affect the cultural object and its potential repatriation to the indigenous people. Her work was published in 2019, which is the most recent academic work on my case study. Robert Brain and Adam Pollock have also researched the sculpture in *Bangwa Funerary Sculpture* (1971) which gives contextual information regarding the Bangwa Queen. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies and of this topic, I will refer to multiple scholars from different academic fields such as cultural theorist Stuart Hall, political scientist Ken Booth and art historian Zoë Strother. I will incorporate their theories to further understand how the Bangwa Queen has been interpreted within post-colonial Europe and what these identities entail. In addition, I will also look at speeches, laws, and newspaper articles to understand the current debate. As a result, the theoretical framework for this thesis is

interdisciplinary as I will be focusing on postcolonialism, identity and institutions of the art world.

## **Chapter 1: The History of the Bangwa Queen from Cameroon to Germany**

The Bangwa Queen is an 85 cm tall wooden sculpture from Cameroon. Although France and England colonised Cameroon, before the arrival of the French and English Cameroon was a German colony in 1884. It was during this period that the sculpture and other figures went missing during an invasion by German colonists on the Bangwa territory; the sculpture was later acquired by a German coloniser, Gustav Conrau between June and September 1899 (Campfens 76 and 82). Although I have referred to the sculpture as the Bangwa Queen, it is essential to realise that when Gustav Conrau obtained the object he had documented that in the Bangwa language the sculpture was called *Njuindem*, which translates to “woman of God” (Brain and Pollock 124) and “mother of twins endowed with divine gifts” (Lajer-Burcharth and Söntgen 221). We can view this as the first difference of how Conrau has represented the sculpture as “Bangwa Queen.” At the same time, this new title does not convey the correct meaning of *Njuindem*, a “dancing priestess of the earth cult, diviner and mother of twins” (Bonnell and Grossman 76). In my theorisation, I am referring to representation and misrepresentation from Stuart Hall’s notion of how the West consumes the ‘Other’ namely dealing with identification and how “there is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’- an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality” (3). This suggests that representing something is either over-appropriated or

under-appropriated leading to a misidentification or misrepresentation, which can be seen in the process of re-naming the sculpture. According to DeFabo “[i]t is impossible to re-name without altering the meaning of the original person’s or object’s name” this act of re-naming can also be seen as an act of mis-identification (6). DeFabo mentions, for instance, that “[m]is-naming the figure with the Western monarchal term “queen” can be a conscious act to emphasize her importance in familiar terms for a Western audience” (8). Consequently, misidentification affects the divine meaning the sculpture had for its community. Fundamentally, this new interpretation has transformed the sacred sculpture into an object that signifies its superficiality than the actual meaning. This is an example of profanity. For this reason, I will now refer to the “Bangwa Queen” as her intended name *Njuindem* as a sign of taking back the power from Western discourse and giving it back to its original owners.

The sculpture, in its original context, is of spiritual and ancestral importance for the Bangwa people (Campfens 76) and was used to portray the dignity of the Bangwa women (Fomin and Ndobegang 635). *Njuindem* is a portrait figure or a ‘Lefem’ figure, which is a portrait of an ancestor. The sculpture is a symbol of the history and strength of a dynasty (Brain and Pollock 118). It is important to realise that the sculpture was not a piece of art in the Bangwa community, but rather a sacred object. Lefem figures, according to Brain and Pollock, were “treated as persons, called by name and deemed to possess the character of the original sitter. Handling them involves ritual precautions; they are usually cared for by a special retainer to whom the chief makes specific payments when they are brought out for use” (118). This suggests that the sculpture was a divine and memorable object to the people of the Bangwa Kingdom and especially to the Chief.

The sculpture visually portrays “a bare breasted queen from the Bangwa kingdom, [...] Her knees and arms are bent; in her right hand, she holds a shaker. Her head is turned slightly to one side. Her severely combed hair forms a larger pointed cone at the back of her head” (Lajer-Burcharth and Söntgen 221). From this description, the impression obtained is that this sculpture is not static but in movement. Brain and Pollock explain that she, Njuindem, is dancing and singing as she holds a rattle in her right hand and “in her left she carries a bamboo trumpet of the kind used for calling the gods” (124). Based on this description, we can see that Njuindem played a spiritual and sacred role within the Bangwa community. This thesis will later explain how the meaning and value has changed as new notions and concepts have been added, due to the change in time from a pre-colonial and colonial period to a post-colonial era. In addition, the spatial aspect has changed. The sculpture, for example, has been moved from Africa to Europe and the United States of America where a predominantly Western audience is currently consuming it. The change of space and cultural context, as well as, the Western gaze all contribute to how the sculpture has been objectified. This can be seen in the previous example of how the sacred object was reinterpreted as profane.

Currently, we live in a postcolonial era and part of this era is considering how we are renegotiating colonial relationships. Within the art world, this all depends on the ownership of the specific cultural object as some were gifts, sold or stolen. Although this may have been the case for a few objects, some have changed ownership after leaving their place of origin or creation. According to Campfens, the return of any cultural objects which were lost during colonial rule is a contentious subject (75). The reason it is considered contentious is because the plundering of cultural objects throughout history was considered lawful at the time, however,

Campfens wants to debunk this notion (Campfens 85). More specifically, it is important to look at the history of the object itself. After arriving in Berlin, Njuindem has been sold, auctioned and exhibited multiple times. This history of the object is essential as it shows the sculpture’s lineage which in the art world is known as its pedigree. A pedigree is “a work of art lists, not only previous owners, but also the exhibits and publications in which it has appeared, the sales at which it has changed hands, and the prices that have been paid at each transfer” (Price 102). According to Price, the use of a pedigree is to “constitute an authenticated line of descent, providing for the potential buyer a guarantee of the value of the purchase” (103). In simpler terms, we can see that pedigree is a form of value which shows the origin and traces the artefact’s history of ownership. As mentioned earlier, the pedigree shows auction sales, catalogues and exhibitions which the object has been a part of, thus, a pedigree determines the value of the object regarding if there is a price increase of the object at an auction (Herrero 24). Njuindem has a long history of ownership as once leaving Cameroon she arrived at the Museum Für Völkerkunde in Berlin and changed owners multiple times as seen below:

The Pedigree of the Bangwa Queen according to Steiner and Campfens :

Owner	Museum	Year	Position
Arthur Speyer		1925	German Collector
Charles Ratoon		1920-1930	Paris Art Dealer
Helen Rubinstein		1930	The Princess Gourielli

	Museum of Modern Art's first African show  <i>African Negro Show</i>	1935	Exhibition
	The Brooklyn Museum  <i>Masterpieces of African Art</i>	1954-1955	Exhibition
	Palais du Louvre  <i>Afrique: 100 Tribus, 100 Chefs d'Oeuvre</i>	1965	Exhibition
Harry A. Franklin		1966	American Collector
	Los Angeles County Museum of Art	1966-1990	Exhibition (multiple)
Franklin's daughter Valerie Franklin		1983	Inherited
	National Museum of Natural History  <i>The Art of Cameroon</i>	1984	Exhibition
	The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History  <i>Expressions of Cameroon Art</i>	1986	Exhibition

Musee Dapper in Paris		1990	Sold in Auction
	Musee Dapper <i>Femmes dans les arts d'Afrique</i>	2008	Exhibition
	Metropolitan Museum of Art <i>Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures</i>	2011	Exhibition

As a result, it is easier for an art object to be canonised if the pedigree is long and rich “the process of canonization can be understood as the procedure whereby human action becomes institutionalized, authoritative, and recognized as canonical. This is a highly generalized process that informs the whole of human culture” (Snoek et al. 3). Briefly, we have seen the history of Njuindem within her African context and the many changes she has undergone due to the change of space and time outside Africa.

## **Chapter 2: Cultural and Aesthetic Values added within the Western World**

In this chapter, I want to look at how the sculpture has gained cultural and aesthetic value. The interpretation of Njuindem has changed as the sculpture has gained a new cultural value during its time in the Western world. Njuindem has switched hands of ownership multiple times and because of this, the sculpture has gained more value. Today Njuindem is part of the Dapper Foundation collection and is exhibited in the Musee du Quai Branly Jacques-Chirac in Paris. As explained earlier, Njuindem has been exhibited in multiple museums and exhibitions from Brooklyn, New York, Berlin and Paris. This international recognition has added to the process of canonisation of the sculpture. Resulting in a prestigious reputation.

Moreover, Njuindem has been photographed by Man Ray, an American visual artist who was part of the Surrealist and Dada movement. Another influential photographer who featured the sculpture in their work was Walker Evans, who was an American photographer and photojournalist. Figure 1 and figure 2 both portray the modern photographic medium and aesthetic. It was through this medium that African art reached a large audience. Additionally, the medium helped in “contributing to the process through which African art was transformed to meet Western aesthetic standards and to the construction of the canon” (Grossman and Bonnell 76). This “transformation” is evident in Man Ray’s photograph as the photo is taken from a high angle, with the use of sharp contrast of dark and light which highlights the facial expressions and carvings of the sculpture. Surrealism is an avant-garde movement which started in the twentieth-century in France. Moreover, Surrealism is defined as having the ability to “reveal the unconscious” (Bohn 169). An example of the Surrealist style in this photograph is through Man

Ray's use of shadows. According to Lusty, professor of Gender and Cultural Studies, "Man Ray's photographs exemplify the Surrealist's reconciliation of art and life, dream and reality. Through the incorporation of shadows, distortions and reflections they reveal a new awareness of the everyday visual world" (2016). Within surrealist art, shadows represent dreams, the subconscious and desire. Subsequently, the Bangwa Queen has been incorporated into a European artistic style, namely Surrealism.

In 1935 Walker Evans photographed the same sculpture but from a different perspective. Evans was a photojournalist and documentary photographer. His photograph was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's 1935 exhibition on *African Negro Art*. Evans' photograph can be interpreted as 'straight photography' as it simply illustrates the features of the sculpture with the use of a soft light. 'Straight' or pure photography means that the photographer has manipulated the image as little as possible; there are little to no artistic attempts. DeFabo mentions that "Evans approached the figure with a documentary style" (74). This neutral attempt, in essence, is the exact opposite of Man Ray's surrealist interpretation of the sculpture. Evan's camera focuses on the detail of the subject creating a harmonious composition (Grossman 316). As a result, the subject is depicted as realistically as possible. Which can be seen as an attempt to take an objective neutral stance. Thereafter, due to the fact that Evans was commissioned for this work to photograph Njuindem for the Museum of Modern Art, this created the "institutionalization of photography as a modern art form and galvanized the assimilation of both African objects and the photographic medium into the modernist sanctum" (Grossman 317). Since the museum began to realise the importance of photography and the artistic movement of modernism,

Njuindem too, began to receive a lot of recognition. As a result, through Evan's photographs, Njuindem became part of the modernist movement.

We can argue that Man Ray, “transformed” Njuindem by incorporating her into the Western canon of Surrealist and avant-garde art through photography. Similarly, Walker Evans “transformed” the sculpture through photography and the modernist movement. Ultimately, both photographers have represented the African sculpture in a modern, Western and avant-garde style.



Figure 2: Walker Evans, *Untitled*, Commemorative figure of a queen, Bangwa Kingdom, Cameroon, nineteenth century. Wood. Paris, Musee Dapper, 1935.

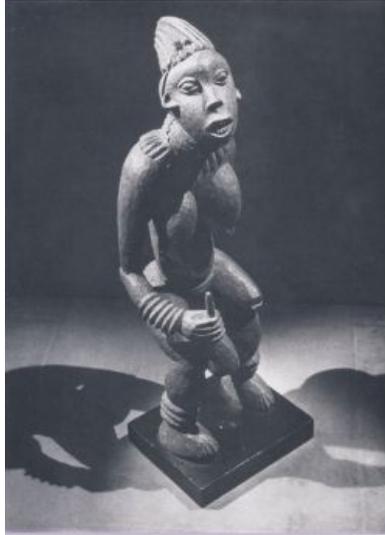


Figure 3: Man Ray, *Untitled*, Commemorative figure of a queen, Bangwa Kingdom, Cameroon, 19th century. Wood. Paris, Gelatin silver print: 29,5cm x 21 cm Private collection, Musée Dapper, c. 1933.

We see that through the use of Western aesthetics, surrealism and photography, Njuindem has gained significant recognition, as she has become associated with avant-garde and modern art within the West. In addition, she has been used in a new medium, namely photography. Grossman mentions that these two images are an example of how “radically different interpretations of an African sculpture or any three-dimensional object can result from different photographic approaches” (315). In view of this, the use of artistic styles and photography have contributed to the canonisation of the sculpture within the West.



Figure 4: Man Ray, *Untitled* (Bangwa “Queen” sculpture with model), c.1934.



Figure 5: Man Ray, *Untitled* (Bangwa “Queen” sculpture with model), c.1934.

Another way in which the sculpture has been interpreted within a Western context is through sexualisation, exoticisation and fetishisation. Man Ray photographed both of these images (figure 4 and figure 5) in 1934; we can see that the model's arm is placed between the legs of the sculpture. Moreover, this provocative photograph shows two female forms “one made of wood and the other flesh and blood;” this juxtaposition according to Grossman shows how the female body is consumed by the male gaze (135). This composition has sexualised both figures; hence the concept of gender comes into play as both women, the model and the sculpture, are in the nude and the soft light highlights the female body, in this case, the breasts. The model in this

image is unknown; many critics claim that the model is Caribbean model Adrienne Fidelin, a lover of Man Ray, many have gone on to suggest that the model is Helena Rubinstein. “Therefore, her racial ambiguity can add to reading the photograph—and by extension the Bangwa figure—as a sexualized and exotic woman” (DeFabo 72).

Another example as to why we can view this photograph as exoticised is because this image was featured in an article in 1935 for Paris Magazine titled “Une Nuit de Singapour” (A Night in Singapore) (DeFabo 34). The photograph was part of a magazine where “male fantasies were projected onto the bodies of females from any place that might be considered by the author to be exotic” (Grossman 136). In the case of Njuindem, we see how the black African female body has been sexualised for the consumption of the West. Similarly, the female model’s body has been sexualised to be consumed by the male gaze. The model is sexualised due to the fact that she is nude and in both pictures her breasts are hit by the soft light. The male gaze is a masculine “heterosexual practice” where women are objectified by men and perceived as sexual objects (Bloom 195).

The first set of photographs (figure 2 and figure 3) and the second set of photographs (figure 4 and figure 5) are an example of Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism according to Political Scientist Ken Booth is “one cultural variant of this universal socio-psychological phenomenon: societies look at the world with their own group as the centre, they perceive and interpret other societies within their own frames of reference, and they invariably judge them inferior” (13). This demonstrates that there is a power relation between the gazer and the object, this further shows Stuart’s notion of how the West interprets the ‘Other’, in this case, the black African woman. As a result, these photographs have transformed the Njuindem “from artifact to art in the

Western reception of African cultural production” (Bonnell and Grossman 4). In summary, these photographs have been exhibited in magazines and exhibitions which has allowed Njuindem to gain cultural recognition within the West, as well as, further contributing to her pedigree, while distancing her further away from her original African context.

### **Chapter 3: The Economic Value of the Bangwa Queen**

Ultimately, Njuindem’s long and rich pedigree has resulted in high economic value. Even though pedigree has been previously explained, Steiner suggests the following:

“Although African art is silent on the subject of its collection, appropriation, and ultimate passage to the West, objects are never tacit about their subsequent excursions through Western hands.[...] The longer the pedigree, and the more illustrious the caretakers in the line of descent, the more prestigious (and more valuable) the object” (122).

Steiner is suggesting that Njuindem is extremely valuable due to her rich pedigree. Regarding the art market, according to Hulst, there are two ways in which an object can be sold. The first is through the primary art market, which is when the artwork is sold directly from the artist. And the second is the secondary art market which is a platform for reselling artwork (Hulst 5). The Cameroonian sculpture falls into the secondary art market category. In the case of Njuindem, the pedigree has helped canonise and popularise the object. Accordingly, Njuindem is seen as valuable, primarily since she is associated with avant-garde artists such as Man Ray. This association has extended her pedigree thus making her more prestigious. According to the Los

Angeles Times, the first time Njuindem was sold for a high offer at an auction was in 1966 when Harry A. Franklin bought the sculpture from the Helena Rubenstein collection for US\$26,000 (Muchnic 1990).

The second time the sculpture was auctioned for a high price was when the sculpture was sold for US\$3.4 million at the auction of the Harry A. Franklin Family Collection by Franklin's daughter, Valerie Franklin, to the Musee Dapper in 1990. As we can see from the pedigree the Cameroonian sculpture has been in the possession of private art collectors where, according to Steiner, the reason for possession is not just for the function of aesthetic but rather a form of financial investment. Steiner mentions that:

“ownership of African art today has become linked closely to economic investment. Once considered a thrifty substitute for the ownership of modern art, African art (when purchased from a ‘reputable’ auction house or gallery) now constitutes a major financial venture with high monetary stakes. Yet, on the whole, as Bourdieu predicts, collectors emphatically deny that they collect for economic gain” (163).

Although we have discussed the value of aesthetics, clearly depending on the owner, certain benefits are more significant than others. In this case, the financial investment is more beneficial for the owner. Steiner refers to Karl Marx's notion of the commoditisation of African art, more specifically, commodity fetishism which comes from the “calculated alienation of production from consumption and the overestimation of transcendent worth in the pseudo-sacral

space of the international art market” (163). This suggests that African Art is seen as desirable due to its “exotic” nature and its financial value.

#### **Chapter 4: Debate on the Return**

Before going into the details about the debate, it is crucial to understand why it is necessary for colonial artefacts to be returned. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) issued “A Plea for the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to those who Created It.” This plea suggests repatriation as a form of human rights for indigenous people in the former colonies to their cultural treasures. The Director-General, Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow wrote that “[o]ne of the most noble incarnations of a people’s genius is its cultural heritage. [...] They [...] have not only been despoiled of [...] masterpieces but [were] also robbed of a memory” (1978). The result of not having these artefacts within Africa is a huge loss for Africa’s identity and heritage as these objects carry memory, knowledge and history. The plea is looking at the general debate regarding the repatriation of colonial artefacts as an issue of morality despite laws which may be in place to stop the repatriation.

Notably, in 2011 the sculpture of Njuindem was recognised during its exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* exhibition. The Fontem (Chief) was informed of its whereabouts and “visited the United States to ascertain that this was true and recognized the Bangwa Queen” (Campfens 80). In 2017, representatives of the Bangwa community reached out to the Dapper Foundation which is a museum that focuses on traditional and contemporary African art in Paris. The representatives initiated contact with the museum, however, this “did not lead to any further

meeting or dialogue” (Campfens 80). Although I intended to analyse the debate of the repatriation of colonial artefacts and look specifically at Njuindem, it is evident that due to this interaction between the Dapper Museum and the Bangwa Community that there is a lack of dialogue and ultimately a lack of a debate.

Regarding the general debate, some scholars argue against the return of colonial artefacts mentioning that the looting of these objects “was legal at the time and, therefore, not a legal issue” (Campfens 75). Another argument is that due to wars and poverty within Africa, the continent is not institutionally ready to protect these objects, which would be safer in the USA and Europe (Ratha and Kabanda, 2015). For example, Julien Flank, the owner of Galerie Flank in Paris that exhibits tribal art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas mentioned in an interview that “returning the objects is possibly a good point, entering into dialogue is the best thing that we can do. But who are we going to return the objects to? I’m not sure today the museums in Benin are ready in terms of conservation, condition of the buildings to welcome these objects” (Euronews 2018) (00:01:24 - 00:02:47).

Overall, this debate is part of the legacy of colonial history. Although we have seen why there may be hesitation to return these objects, Campfens, however, despite the lack of dialogue and debate, looks at how there are initiatives regarding how and why Njuindem should be returned. The sculpture should be returned because of its sacred importance to the Bangwa community. Campfens mentions that in Cameroon, the sculpture was “kept in the royal shrine for prayer and consultations purposes by the reigning king” (79). Although the sculpture has been displaced for many years from its place of origin, fortunately, the Bangwa people have not lost their spiritual and religious beliefs. However, “misfortunes that have hit the kingdom since the

loss are attributed to the absence from the shrine of the lefem figures like the Bangwa Queen” (Campfens 80). Moreover, regarding Njuindem and the legal aspect of her return, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) mentions that individuals should have “access to cultural goods” (Campfens 99).

In addition, another reason supporting why Njuindem should be returned has to do with the fact that objects with spiritual meaning are prioritised over others. John Henry Merryman, a law professor, mentioned that “objects of ritual or religious importance to living cultures [should] remain with or be returned to those cultures” (Campfens 88). The ICESCR and Merryman are suggesting that access to one’s cultural objects is a human right, especially if the object is of spiritual or religious importance within that country or community. More importantly, the Bangwa people want their cultural object to be returned, “[t]he Bangwa people wish to bring home the Bangwa Queen since she is sacred, for them and personifies the ancestors of their epic Chief Fontem Asonganyi. Moreover, she symbolizes the injustice of the colonial rule” (Campfens 84).

As previously mentioned the Cameroonian sculpture has gained value within the Western world, it is imperative to acknowledge that there was an attempt for the sculpture to be returned. Albeit there was initiation from the Bangwa community to start a dialogue regarding Njuindem, there was no further communication in 2017. Moreover, according to this research (June 2020), this has been the only attempt to return the object. The main reason to not return the object is that Njuindem has gained economic, aesthetic and social value within the Western world; thus, it would be a serious loss for the West not just financially but also for the market in regards to attracting tourists and the prestige and importance of museums.

What is noteworthy is that within France “African cultural pieces are protected by strict French laws that consider them state public property, even if they were taken illicitly” (Vandoorne and Said-Moorhouse 2018). Unfortunately, Campfen mentions that,

“[i]f the appropriation of the Bangwa Queen could be held to be unlawful under customary international law, and is attributable to the state, this would amount to an international law obligation by the state responsible for the looting. This might be relevant for Bangwa figures that are still in Berlin; however, the Bangwa Queen is not in possession of the state responsible for the taking but, rather, in the hands of a third party, the Dapper Foundation” (95).

The purpose of the report by Sarr and Savoy essentially maps out the process of restitution and actually suggests that for repatriation to take place “the terms for the transfer of property, and the conditions linked to such an approach- [requires] namely the necessary modifications to the French law concerning cultural heritage and their inalienability and inaccessibility” (Sarr and Savoy 28). Ultimately, the report by Sarr and Savoy is advocating for the French law to be revised.

Campfens specifically focuses on soft laws which are “not enforceable in an international forum” however they “operate as a set of international expectations about future actions” (Lemons and Brown 5). Campfens mentions the plea by UNESCO as well as the pursuit for a legal framework by ICESCR which are essentially policy suggestions which is what Sarr and Savoy allude to. Campfens also mentions the UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the

Rights of Indigenous Peoples) where they are focused on the right of indigenous people to have access to their culture. Campfens points out that the UNDRIP refuses or “abstains from defining Indigenous people” (101). However, in 2010 the ILA (International Law Association) listed criteria where this was defined by the Working Committee on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights; “[g]iven the fact that the Bangwa identify themselves as an Indigenous people, and would seem to meet the ILA criteria, there is no reason to assume they [the Bangwa] would not be entitled to the special protective framework of the UNDRIP” (Campfens 101). Moreover, Campfens looks at a 2015 study by the Expert Mechanisms on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which revealed that the UNDRIP “is aimed not only at state collections but also at private collections” (Campfens 102). The study states that “[w]hile the role of public authorities is crucial to ensuring such repatriation, the repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains requires the cooperation of the places where the objects and remains are stored, such as museums and auction houses” (Expert Mechanisms 18). Moreover, the study advises museums “and other places in which the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples is stored should inform the relevant indigenous peoples and develop mechanisms to facilitate the return of such cultural heritage when sought by the indigenous peoples concerned” (Expert Mechanisms 24).

In “Ethnocentrism Still Sets the Terms of Restitution of African Art” Z.S Strother, a professor of African Art, mentions that there is a political agenda concerning the return of the sculpture. Strother mentions that France's use of art patronage is "a means of promoting soft power in Africa" (2019). Strother suggests that the hesitation in returning African Art is a form of neocolonialism. If Njuindem is returned, it will create a domino effect, if the sculpture is returned, then other countries and communities will ask for their colonial artefacts to be returned

as well. This has previously happened, for example, in March 2020, the Zimbabwe National Bird Statues which were looted from the ruins of Great Zimbabwe were returned after having been away for over a century (Cosgrove 2020). Moreover, repatriation will continue to happen in the future. However, due to the prestige and significance of the sculpture in both the West and Africa, there will be significant changes within museums and policies regarding repatriation. Ultimately, most museums within the West which primarily display artefacts taken from the colonised will make a loss or have very little to exhibit. As previously mentioned there is a lack of a debate regarding Njuindem, however, there have been initiatives by many organisations and individuals to repatriate these cultural objects. Despite Macron's speech and persistence on "the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa," it is clear that very little has been done.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to understand "How do the economic, cultural and aesthetic values ascribed by Post-Colonial Europe, affect the debate and return of the Cameroonian sculpture, the Bangwa Queen?" Despite the fact that emphasis has been made on one specific object, this is part of a more extensive debate regarding the repatriation of artefacts taken during colonial times. Within the first chapter, I focused on "What is the Bangwa Queen and her history?" Here I explored the role and purpose of the sculpture, as it represents a "dancing priestess of the earth cult, diviner and mother of twins" (Bonnell and Grossman 76). Moreover, I explored the sculpture's journey from Cameroon, where she was respected and viewed as a sacred object, until her passage to Berlin, Paris and New York. Within Europe, the sculpture was

‘re-interpreted’ firstly through her name as within her country of origin she was referred to as Njuindem. However, she was renamed and is most commonly referred to as the “Bangwa Queen.” I explore how her pedigree gained value due to her cross Atlantic career and exhibition within museums.

Within the second chapter, I explored the following question “What roles do cultural and aesthetic value play on the interpretation of the Bangwa Queen?” Here the sculpture was reinterpreted through photography and modern avant-garde styles which not only helped canonise the object but also assisted in popularising the object as these photographs appeared in museums and magazines. Njuindem was photographed by famous photographers such as Walker Evans and Man Ray. Although the sculpture was the subject of these artists, the sculpture was also subject to the imposition of Western standards and ideologies, which are very different from the use and purpose that the sculpture was originally intended for.

The third chapter is where I ask “What is the significance of the economic value of the Bangwa Queen?” This is where we see how the cultural and aesthetic values have impacted financial value. Moreover, Njuindem was sold for US\$3.4 million at an auction which shows how the value has increased from her last auction where she was sold for US\$26 000. The sculpture is highly valued and seen as an economic investment within the Western context.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I return to the broader debate regarding the repatriation of colonial artefacts and how this applies to Njuindem, “What is the debate and how can the soft laws apply to the Bangwa Queen?” Ultimately, there are many reasons arguing why the sculpture and colonial artefacts should or should not be returned. However, many scholars and institutions believe that having access to one’s heritage is a human right, especially if the artefact is of

spiritual or religious importance. For further research it would be interesting to understand the role of memory and how objects hold memories. Especially since Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow emphasizes that indigenous people have been “robbed of a memory” this may strengthen this argument even further (1978).

To conclude, we can see that Njuindem has been reinterpreted within a postcolonial framework. In addition, we can see that the roles of economic, cultural and aesthetic values within post-colonial Europe have indeed affected the debate of the return of the Cameroonian sculpture, Njuindem. Moreover, we can see how these all affect policies, laws and the responsibilities of museums. More specifically, we can see how these added values are responsible for the hesitation of repatriation, as Strother mentions that this is an example of soft power. Clearly, there needs to be more dialogue between the West and Africa, which we saw in the report by Sarr and Savoy to know how the position of each object is affected by the debate and what this means regarding its repatriation. Ultimately, due to past colonial relations, laws, policies and responsibilities need to be reconsidered within post-colonial relations and what this means for indigenous identity, history and knowledge.

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