

African cultural heritage matters

The cultural heritage of each African community, of each African country matters. It reflects its life, its history, its identity. It links the past with the present and the present with the future. It inspires and enforces the social cohesion. Furthermore, it is essential for self-assurance, which in its turn is necessary for creativity and personal as well as national development.

This heritage should be protected and be part of the lives of its citizens, especially of the young people, who need to learn and be inspired from it, the way young people and artists from the West are inspired from the African art, especially from music, sculpture and painting.

Yet, how can they be inspired, how can they reassure their identity, how can they understand the present without the knowledge of the past, when almost 90 per cent of the physical cultural heritage of Sub-Saharan Africa is outside Africa? The most part of the cultural objects missing were the victims of colonization.

Forty years ago the Senegalese head of UNESCO emphasized the problem. He wrote: "These men and women of Africa who have been deprived of their cultural heritage ask for the return of at least the art treasures which best represent their culture, which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish. This is a legitimate claim".

At last, the French president Emanuel Macron was the first western leader responding to that claim. In 2017, stating that the crimes of European colonization cannot be disputed and that the African heritage should not be found in private collections and in museums, he commissioned two academics to study the matter and offer recommendations. Their report (Sarr and Savoy) called for restitution of several artifacts to African countries from where they had been taken and suggested criteria, a timetable, and programs of joint research, training and exchange. Consequently, President Macron announced the return of 26 bronze objects from Benin on the basis of a law that the National Assembly passed regarding the removal of archaeological treasures from national collections for restitution purposes.

Although the historic initiative of President Macron created strong reactions in several quarters, especially in museums in the West, a debate has commenced, and certain sporadic restitutions have occurred. Of course, one hears the pretext that the Africans would be unable to store properly returned artifacts, a familiar argument of the British Museum used as regards the sculptures of Parthenon. We answered with the new Museum of Acropolis, for which I am proud to have played a role.

The cultural heritage of Africa, the north and the Sub-Saharan Africa is immense and varied. The cultural treasures from the monuments of Egypt to the mausolea and the

manuscripts of Timbuktu, the bronzes of Benin, the wooden sculptures of Nigeria, the art of ife and oba, the Ashanti buildings of Ghana, Axum and Gondar, and the objects from Maqdala in Ethiopia, the stuffed lions and the Maasai art of Kenya, the sculptures of Zimbabwe, the Zulu art of South Africa, the Afo-A- Kon statue from Cameroon which recently appeared for sale in a New York gallery and was repatriated, are only some of the vast and different elements of African art treasures, from jewelry to monuments and the one to two thousands of languages and dialects.

African governments realizing the enormity of the task have taken various actions, often with international assistance and within their economic means towards protecting and preserving this rich heritage. For instance, In 1989 the Southern Africa Coordination Conference, (SADCC) assisted by UNESCO and Nordic countries, formed an Association of Museums to collaborate for their cultural and natural heritage. The Museum of Black Civilizations opened in Dakar in 2018. The Zeitz MOCAA, a museum of Contemporary Art in Cape Town is thriving..

According to Yole Soyinka , the Nigerian Nobel laureate, who participated in the Athens Symposium on Culture against Apartheid in 1988, organized by my UN office and chaired by Melina Mercouri, culture is an expression of a total way of productive life, adding “cultural continuity and cohesion aid communities in discovering and marketing new products and technologies”. And professor Mazui wondered whether Africa needs cultural engineering, namely purposeful use of culture for economic development. There are also economic implications. In the European Union 7.5% of the employment comes from cultural activities and the U.S. museums contribute 50 billion annually to the US economy. Africa should also benefit. International collaboration and assistance from the developed countries would be required.

The factors are present. The talent and the resilience, especially of the women of Africa- this great African advantage- the traditions, the inventive spirit and the dynamism are present. The African cultural heritage matters. It can help to build the Africa we want. We, at the Hellenic-African Chamber which is of Commerce and **Development**, will inscribe it permanently in our agenda.

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