

In 'The Omnipresent Past', Bondarenko and Butovskaya have compiled a fascinating collection of papers exploring the variegated ways that the continent's rich and complex history – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial – continues to impact and sometimes to haunt the lives of contemporary Africans and persons of African descent. The volume combines phenomenological approaches that consider the ways Africans experience historical memory alongside considerations of the ways in which past modalities of power continue to structure African realities. The editors have done a remarkable job of including African contributors to scholarship. This is a thought-provoking and comprehensive set of papers.

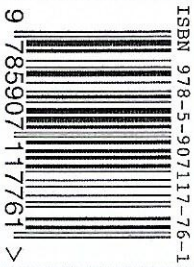
Robert Launay  
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Historical Anthropology of Africa and African diaspora is increasingly gaining a worldwide attention. This volume edited by Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Marina L. Butovskaya is a particular indication of the importance of the Past as far as Africa is concerned. The main objective of the volume is to present various manifestations of how the past influences the present in African societies and diaspora communities nowadays. The editors and contributors to the volume have achieved this objective by using in a very good way a specific methodological point of view which reaffirms the manifold relations between History and Anthropology within the framework of post colonial studies. The contributors have magnificently related how the past can shape modern Africa. I hope that the texts of high quality presented in this volume will initiate a dialogue, through which we will arrive at the conclusion that solutions in shaping modern Africa and African diasporas can come from objective analysis of different contexts and different perspectives. The volume is a treasure for all of us, especially Africans and Africanists. It serves also as an indispensable reference book for all students of history, anthropology, psychology and other social sciences.

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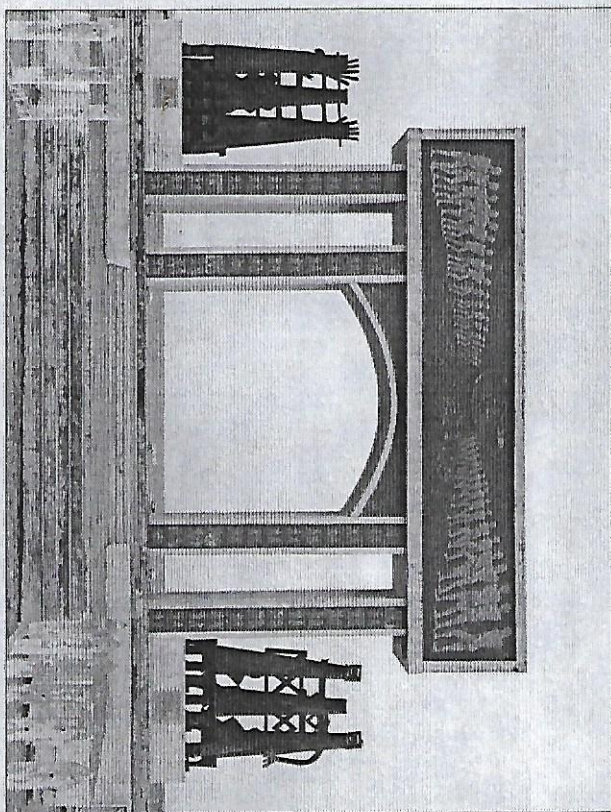
The colonial epoch in Africa struck the continent with many hard shocks: those shocks, however, can now be seen as just one episode in the continent's historical evolution. That evolution continues today, and is being shaped by the presence of the colonial and precolonial past in the cultural, social, and political spheres alike. Bondarenko and Butovskaya's volume brings that presence sharply into focus, both in the African continent itself and in its diaspora. External influences and pressures may play a key role in shaping Africa: it is the creative response of Africa's peoples to those pressures which will ultimately play the decisive role in the continent's future evolution. Anyone seeking to understand that evolution should read this volume.

David O'Kane  
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## THE OMNIPRESENT PAST HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN DIASPORA

# THE OMNIPRESENT PAST HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN DIASPORA



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MARINA L. BUTOVSKAYA  
Editors

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Editors

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**THE OMNIPRESENT PAST**  
HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN DIASPORA

**The Omnipresent Past. Historical Anthropology of Africa and African Diaspora.** Edited by Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Marina L. Butovskaya. – Moscow: LRC Publishing House, 2019. – 392 p., ill.

Contributors to this volume discuss a variety of ways the African past (African history) influences the present-day of Africans on the continent and in diaspora: cultural (historical) memory as a factor of public (mass) consciousness; the impact of the historical past on contemporary political, social, and cultural processes in Africa and African diaspora.

This volume is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE).

*On the cover:* The 'Door of No Return', the monument on the site from which the slave traders' ships are said to depart to the New World, in the city of Ouidah on the Atlantic Coast of the Republic of Benin. Photo by Dmitri M. Bondarenko.

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**From cultural objects to museum collections in the Republic of Benin**

The modern museum as it has emerged in nineteenth-century Africa is a result of colonialism. But before the arrival of Europeans, African kingdoms had their way of treasuring their heritage. In the former Kingdom of Danxome<sup>1</sup> for instance, a building, the Djexo, that can be literally translated as 'treasures room' was devoted to the preservation of royal heritage. Longtime ago in the past, dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in the time of the Kingdom of Kongo<sup>2</sup>, the political entity that covered a large part of Southern Africa *ad ex* the contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the French Congo (or Congo Brazzaville) a large part of Angola, Central Africa, etc., there also were the *nkisi* houses as mentioned by Anne Hilton (1985: 51, 62), or what Malyn Newitt (2012: 116) termed as the 'great house of idols'. The rise of colonialism has dismantled the cultural organization of the kingdoms by introducing new ways of treating what is seen as heritage and valuable objects to be preserved for the posterity. In the case

**Introductory note**

The role of art, museums, and cultural heritage is critical in the process of nation-building, especially in the era of postcolony. This chapter, based on the (cultural) history of the territory of the Republic of Benin, attempts to analyze specifically the collections in the museums as well as the collecting policy from the inception of the modern museum in the country to date. It also reviews the political contexts of production of the materials gathered in the museums. The chapter finally highlights the strategy to build upon local identities in order to achieve a cohesive national identity for the benefit of the Republic of Benin as a whole.

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NATION BUILDING  
IN TEMPORARY BENIN REPUBLIC:  
THE ROLE OF ART, MUSEUMS, AND CULTURAL  
HERITAGE

The rest of the remaining regalia and other cultural objects from Agbome that have been saved from fire, theft and natural destruction have been parked and put under the responsibility of prince Sagbajou other places<sup>5</sup>.

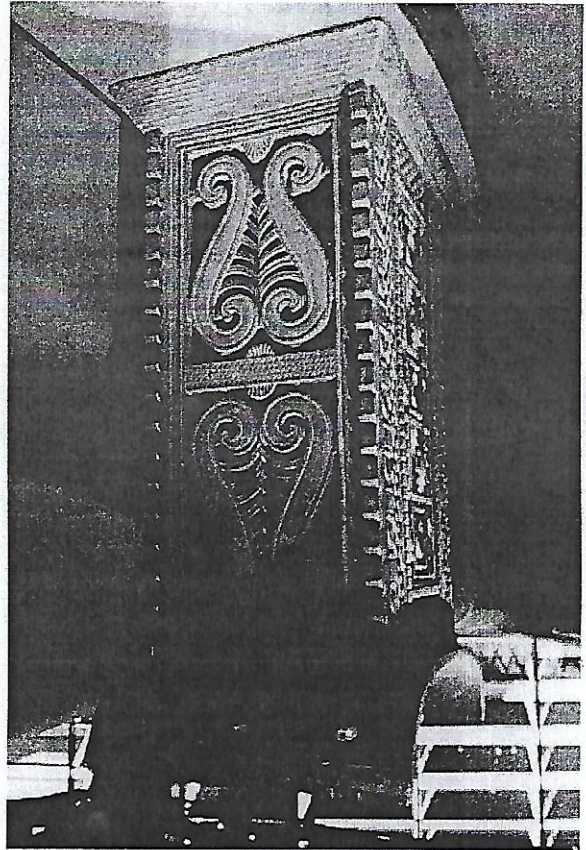
giving them to museums or sending them to the art market in Paris and their heirs have been getting rid of the objects related to colonialism 20<sup>th</sup> century. But after the passing of most of the colonial personnel, houses were decorated by these and other African objects in the early rest among themselves<sup>4</sup>. Several

Trocadero in Paris and shared the objects to the then Musée du his acolytes. They sent part of the 'exported' by General Dodds and the most symbolic regalia were of the sovereign, as war booty, After the looting of the palace administration in 1911.

was realized by the colonial ad- ades before the first restoration abandoned for almost two dec- latal complex has then been colonial administration. The pa- Agboli-Agbo enthroned by the despite the efforts of his brother palaces<sup>3</sup> in Agbome fell in ruins Gbehanzin to the French colo- After the deportation of King Dodds to the rank of General. has even promoted Colonel endorsing the military campaign The French government in

commandment of Colonel Alfred Amédée Dodds (Fig. 1). regalia and other significant objects by the French army under the Agbome and Cana (King Gbehanzin's palace) and the looting of the Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has led to the sacking of the royal palaces in 1892 of the Kingdom of Danxome, one of the most influential in West of the Benin Republic, the main focus of this chapter, the conquest in

Fig. 1. Throne of King Gbehanzin in the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, part of the regalia to be repatriated from France to Benin (photo by the author).



Glele according to the governor Fourn's decision (decision n°148, 23 February 1921) and in prevision of a museum to be established in the palaces of kings Ghezo (1818-1858) and Glele (1858-1889), respectively the grand-father and the father of Gbehazin who fought against the French army.

Almost another decade had passed when the objects that were used in certain condition according to the cultural system of the kingdom, were documented with little collected information. They were transformed into museum objects likely to be seen by whoever and with no precaution. This development has been conducted by the governor François Joseph Rocca from 1928 until the opening on 30 December 1930. It is worth giving this detail for two main reasons. The first is that in the 1920s metropolitan France was still suffering under the millions of dead and the huge destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. So building a museum in the empire was not at all a priority for French authorities. The second is that the museum in Abomey is the first opened in French West Africa, even before the creation of the Institut français d'Afrique noire (IFAN) by Théodore Monod in Dakar (Senegal) in 1936. The museum will soon celebrate its one hundred years anniversary, being the oldest one in the region and the first step in French museum policy in West Africa. It is after fourteen years of existence that the museum in Abomey will be put under the responsibility of IFAN in 1943 (see Arrêté n°1520 A. P. A. du 08 octobre 1943, confiant la gestion du palais et du Musée historique d'Abomey à l'Institut français d'Afrique noire, IFAN).

While the first action in French museum policy in the colony of Dahomey will be to transform royal palaces into the museum, this model of museum creation will not continue. From 1949, as indicated in the registration system, the next action will be to collect cultural objects and artifacts from the whole colony and gather them in what has become the Ethnographic Museum of Porto-Novo. The French Institute, IFAN, also encouraged the collecting of objects in the rest of the empire in West Africa. Every colony was supposed to send part of her collected objects to build the federal museum at IFAN in Dakar.

At the independence, each colony has transformed her (local) museum into a kind of national museum while the then president of Senegal, Mr. Léopold Sédar Senghor kept the collections of the former French West African colonies in the 'federal museum' for his

own country with the argument that there was no need for the fellow countries to claim them back because being there is in a way being at home – in Africa<sup>6</sup>.

The Benin Republic has continued with an unwritten national policy that consisted of building progressively a museum in each administrative region. This unsaid policy has not been completely implemented when the regions have now been split into twelve. This increases the challenge of establishing museums in different parts of the whole country.

### Typology of collections in Benin museums

Reflecting on typology here will not solely reside on the categories of objects as usually seen in museum works, but it is more talking about the genesis of the objects in the collections (in relation to nation building). This being mentioned, two types of collections are distinguishable in Benin museums.

There are the collections largely from different cultural groups in Benin gathered by the former French Institute (IFAN) that are now in the Alexandre Sènou Ethnographic Museum of Porto-Novo. They have been enriched along the time. A survey in the registration system unveiled the state of the collections as represented in the following table:

Periods	Amount of items	Percentage
1949-1960	859	64%
1961-1966	116	9%
1967-1972	158	12%
1973-1990	61	4%
1991-2005	146	11%
Total	1340	100%

Evolution of the collections of the museum from its inception to 2009 (Effiboley 2013: 180).

The first column indicates the time frames, the second the amount of items collected and the third, the percentage these represent in regard to the whole collection of the museum. The first remark is that for a whole museum, the amount looks small, given the number of objects from the Republic of Benin outside the country. One knows for in-

stance that in the Musée du quai Branly, the registration system shows an amount of 5584 objects from the Republic of Benin in its collections.<sup>7</sup> There are also other objects from Benin in local museums in the hands of the heirs of colonial administrators. An analysis of the table in terms of policy shows that the colonial administration for a decade has collected far more objects than the independent state of Benin. The policy of the country will continue to be applied in the post-independence museums. Hardly anything has been collected for the past decade despite the clarion call of the current government to promote tourism through a new policy that focuses on establishing new museums.

Apart from the type of collections in the Ethnographic Museum in Porto-Novo which model is replicated along other publicly owned museums, the second type consists of the Fon<sup>8</sup> cultural objects from the former kingdom and the region surrounding Abomey that are gathered in Abomey Museum. In fact, as the arts of the former Kingdom of Danxome are celebrated and that the tradition is visible till to date in the museum in Abomey, it is important to explain the origin of these arts and crafts. As it is no longer necessary to say, the Kingdom of Danxome was built upon conquest like many others around the world. There is even a traditional song that reflects this. It says:

*Ségala, ségala mado w'en we*  
*Ségala mado w'enwe, kpòhì gála mado w'en wè b'ò ayixwè è*  
*Ségala, ségala mado w'en wè*  
*Ahwan è gba Kètu, b'ò gba Meko èdè tò dè kpò à (bis)*  
*Abèwòkùtá wè nyi tò èkpò è b'ò mi ná gba b'ò wá yi xwè è*  
*Ségala, ségala mado w'en wè.*

The song translated reads as follows:

*May the Lord help, help me deliver a good message to you.*  
*May the Lord help me deliver a good message to you; may my Ifa help me deliver a good message to you before going home,*  
*May the Lord help, help me deliver a good message to you*  
*The war that destroyed Ketu and Meko left aside no localities (repeat)*  
*Abèwòkùtá is the remaining locality to be defeated before we go back home*  
*May the Lord help, help me deliver a good message to you.*

This military song gives an idea of how expansive the Kingdom of Danxome had been before its fall but also about its envisaged borders. Edna Bay confirmed the fact when she wrote that:

The Fon dynasty was pledged to a constant expansion – an augmentation of the nation's wealth in people, lands and products. A tightly organized bureaucracy assured control over internal production while warfare expanded territorial boundaries and added population. (Bay 1985: 6).

And the policy of the kings during these campaigns was, after the conquest of a kingdom or a locality, to bring to Agbome every object/craftwork that looked nice and that the Kingdom of Danxome did not have at home, as well as the object/craftwork's makers. As a matter of proof the sculpture of the God of iron Gu that belongs to the objects the Republic of Benin asked in 2016 for repatriation from France was not originally from Agbome. It was brought there after a war at Doume-Tchetti, a town not far from Parakou as well as Akati Ekplekendo that has been identified as the maker. But today, it is claimed as a masterpiece of the cultural heritage of the Benin Republic, as the Parakou area is its part – the borders of the Republic of Benin do not coincide with those of the former Fon Kingdom of Danxome. The same thing goes to the art of applique in which the clan of Yemadje in Agbome is specializing. Its origin dated back to another conquest of the Danxome Kingdom by the sovereign Agadja (1704–1732) within the people of Weme earlier in the past. According to Joseph Adandé (1993: 40), those were two young men from Weme that the king brought to Agbome with the specimen of applique art. The king changed their name and renamed one of them Hantant and the other Zintlou. The king also assured that they teach the art the children of Danxome to popularize this know-how. By doing so, the king not only wanted the specific art in his kingdom but he also cared about the posterity beyond his own reign. To put it differently, he wanted future generations to keep enjoying the same art by producing it at home. We could say that the arts of Agbome in general are a kind of crystallization of a sort of national ingenuity and that we should no longer consider these arts as local but as really national despite the context that has given birth to this national art *avant la lettre*. Today the heirs of these two artists are still living and making this art in Abomey.

There are more examples of the story of this kind. So the arts of Abomey are intrinsically cosmopolitan and national to some extent. They have been built from the arts and crafts of the different regions that were conquered by the Kingdom of Danxome and should be seen and treated as such. But more than hundred years later, do we need to keep enlivening the reminiscences of the past? In other regions of the world, wars also were common long ago and those peoples have sur- passed this souvenir of this warlike feeling. One should remember the wars among European nations, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most memorable examples is the case of France and Germany and the war that, the most, had historical impact was the Franco-German war of 1870-1871 that led to the partition of the region of Alsace-Lorraine. In addition, there was also the anger of the Président du Conseil, Georges Clemenceau, against Germany during the 1919 conference for the resolution of the 1914-1918 war in Paris that among other things made the bed for the Second World War (1939-1945) during which Germany occupied France. Despite all these wars, France and Germany have become so close today that the Franco-German couple as they are commonly called weight a lot in the decision-making process at the European Union's assemblies.

### Rhetoric around cultural objects for building a cohesive nation

With the type of objects in the Benin museums and their specific biography, how can they be used to strengthen national belonging? The question is particularly relevant at the time the Benin Republic has demanded for the repatriation from France of the regalia exported by the French army in 1892-1894. Among these objects, there are some that remind the glorious past of the Kingdom of Danxome. In the context of repatriation of cultural objects from Danxome, what role could museums and cultural heritage play in strengthening national belonging? There are examples that sound relevant to the matter.

The first one is for instance when the Alexandre Senou Adande Ethnographic Museum in Porto-Novo designed and presented an exhibition entitled *Naitre, vivre et mourir en République Bénin* ('Born, Live and Die in the Benin Republic').

The project was initiated in March 1998 under the initiative of Ecole du patrimoine Africain (EPA), a regional institution based in Porto-Novo, Benin capital city, with the museum staff and scholars

The applique is made of a blue cloth bordered with red color band with the characters in different colors. The work from left to right shows the king of Nikki on a horse, dressed in a yellow-like cloth with a white turban and a red cap at the top of his head. He is accompanied by his prime minister also transported by a horse and dressed in a simple white turban. The third person is also on a horse. He looks like a musician holding *gangan*, an armpit drum ('talking drum') with a grey-white turban. Apart from those figures, there are three *wasangari*

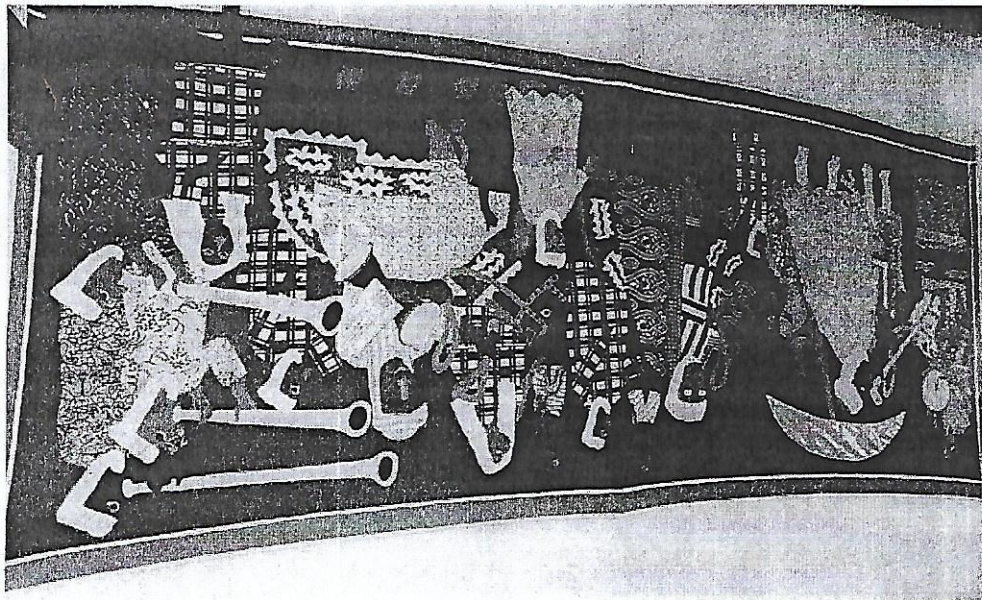
originating from Abomey. The work was commissioned to Yves Kpede, a contemporary artist called Gaani (Fig. 2). We were told by the minister of the court that artwork that describes a scene of the annual ceremony in the region Abomey-Calavi to Nikki, a city close to the Eastern borders with Nigeria, in April 2019, we saw in the palace of the king a huge applique of the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Abomey-Calavi. During a study trip with the students also relevant to the current topic. Beside this story, I have recently encountered another example that is **Weaving the national thread**

graphical practices in Benin before being removed. lasted about ten years in the museum also because of poor maintenance. Owe to its transversality, the exhibition was a real success and commissioned for deceased family ancestors as well as local authorities. of the country, a dark cloth for mourning and the *asen*, iron altars comes in this exhibit the *sato*, a funerary drum popular in the southern part of the country. One could see among others with the departure of our loved ones. And the team has tried with the available objects to make visible the state of being when we are confronted with the death in its multifaceted aspect. The last section addressed the theme of life in the Otamari, inappropriately called Somba, cultural group by the colonial administration. The last section addressed the steps of life in the Otamari, inappropriately called Somba, cultural destiny. The second part of the exhibition was devoted to the different functions in order to welcome him/her in life and prepare him/her for his the Yoruba culture as well as prenatal and postnatal traditional precautions to present in the first part of the exhibition the birth of the baby in country and the ratio of objects and artworks per group, the team decided to tell a story that matters to a large part of the people in the country. Taking into account the cultural groups in the from the University of Abomey-Calavi. The idea was to use the collec-

To conclude, one could say that most of the artworks in the museums of the Benin Republic are to some extent a creation of local national-  
**Concluding remarks**

countries to become more in coherence with their context of origin. may be a good idea to open museums that transcend our current small come together to build regional associations like ECOWAS, SADEC, it any longer, and that the states created by the colonizers are trying to claiming back now belonged, do not exist as independent political units the pre-colonial polities to which the cultural objects Africans are to the same nation. Another alternative may be that, given the fact that tion in order to tell a national story that could strengthen our belonging think how to reweave these cultural objects in their context of produc- tion of the cultural heritage of her territory from France, we need to At this moment when the Benin Republic is asking for the repatria-

Fig. 2. Appliqué commissioned to Yves Kpèdè an artist from Abomey by the court of Nikki in the Northern Benin (photo by the author).



trumpet players. Simple companions or spectators are a part of the scene in the artwork. What this artwork tells is how a craft originally from Weme, indigenized in Agbome after a conquest war more than a hundred year ago is now decorating the court of Nikki. This is a magnificent way of weaving the national thread for a cohesive existence of the identities therein.

ties as well as a constructed heritage along the vicissitudes of history. The role of museums in the country should not rest upon the ethnicity of the heritage but on the positive way of weaving these local patri-monies in order to build a national conscience, a kind of 'national we' that will keep strengthening our living together. The coming repatria-tion of the war booty exported by the French army in 1892-1893 is an opportunity to discuss our sensitive common history. This is the chal-lenge to come for our country and others embarked in the project of repatriation. The postcolonial nations need to endorse their common past and reweave it in order to build cohesive nations for the future. But (above all) this work is possible only if we, collectively, care about an 'economic democracy' where every member of the national community has a minimum in terms of job, shelter, social security, health care, etc. But we seem to be far from this idealistic view.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, its author calls the precolonial kingdom 'Daxome' and calls it 'Dahomey' when writes about the colonial time. He also calls the city that was that kingdom's capital 'Agbome' meaning pre-colonial time and 'Abomey' when he discusses later periods, including post-colonial (editors' note).

<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom of Kongo was a powerful one when the Portuguese came to the African coast at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They helped dismantle it by fueling the intrigues that ended up with the battle of Ambuila in 1661.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'complex of palaces' to explain the specificity of the King-dom of Daxome in regard to their conception of the royal power. In contrary to several kingdoms around the world, Chateau de Versailles in France, Schonbrunn in Austria and even Ife, Oyo and some others in Nigeria, the king in Daxome had the duty to erect his own palace next to the one of his predecessor. This is a special manner to inscribe his power into the space and to mark it by his emblems and personality. And this kind of policy has per-mitted the implantation of twelve palaces representing the (accepted) twelve kings who reigned in Agbome.

<sup>4</sup> A full detail of the war-related objects sent to the museum in 1893 and 1895 by the members of the Dodds' campaign of Daxome, according to the documentation of the Musée du quai Branly, is provided in the PhD disserta-tion of Effiboley defended at Université Paris Ouest Nanterre – La Défense on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2013 (Effiboley 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Savoy and Felwine Sarr in the recently commissioned report of African arts in French museums, *Restituer le patrimoine africain* (2018),

highlighted very well how the art market is nourished by this source of acquisition.

<sup>6</sup> I got this information from Professor Alexis Adandé whose father was one of the IFAN staff in charge of collecting (policy) in French West Africa. But despite this expressed will to show African brotherhood, the IFAN museum has never, on its own initiative, involved Benin museums in a program or communicated on the state of Benin collections therein.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.collections/qualitatively](http://www.collections/qualitatively).fr accesses on 15 March 2015. For a larger view on collections in publicly-owned museums in Benin, see Effiboley 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The Fon is one of the dominant cultural groups in the southern part of Benin and they speak the Fongbe language which belongs to the Adja-Fon and under the umbrella of the Niger-Delta linguistic group.

<sup>9</sup> An exhibition of iron altars of the Fon people of the Benin Republic was organized at the Emory University Museum of Art and Archeology in 1985 and gave birth to the catalogue titled *Asen, Iron Altars of the Fon People of Benin* (Bay 1985). The exhibition traveled to the Museum of Natural History in Alabama and the Grinter Galleries, Centre for African Studies of the University of Florida, Gainesville.

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