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MACRON PROMISES TO RETURN AFRICAN ARTEFACTS IN FRENCH MUSEUMS: A NEW ERA IN AFRICAN-EUROPEAN RELATIONSHIPS OR A MIRAGE?

... our research methods resemble the interrogations of an investigating magistrate much more than amicable conversations, and because, nine times out of ten, our methods of collecting objects involve forced purchases, if not requisition. All this casts a certain shadow over my life, and my conscience is only halfway clear. When all is said and done, as much as adventures like the taking of the kono finally leave me without remorse, because there is no other way to obtain such objects and because sacrilege itself is a rather grandiose notion, still all this constant buying leaves me perplexed, because I have a strong impression that we are going in vicious circle: we pillage the Negroes under the pretext of teaching people to understand and appreciate them-that is, ultimately in order to mold other ethnographers who will go in turn to 'appreciate' and to pillage them...

'Michel Leiris. Phantom Africa, 2017. (1)



Royal statues, Dahomey, Republic of Benin, now in Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France. Left, King Glélé, half-lion, half- man. Centre, King Ghézo, half-bird, half-man. Right, King Béhanzin, half-shark, half-man.

There comes a time in life that a person starts believing that certain situations will never change unless a miracle occurs but if you do not believe in miracles even this poor consolation is not available to you. I have heard for years, intelligent persons, both European and African, state that the fight to recover Africa's looted/stolen artefacts from the West is hopeless and that we should not waste precious time and energy on what they consider impossible.

Neil MacGregor, James Cuno, Phillipe de Montebello, the scholars from Ethnology Museum, Berlin, Ethnology Museum, Vienna, now World Museum, and officials from the Humboldt Forum have been telling us for years that African cultural artefacts are best kept in Western museums. The high priests of the so-called universal museums, with their infamous [Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums](#) (2000) convinced themselves and others that the West had almost a God-given right and duty to keep looted and stolen African artefacts for the benefit of Africans and humanity.

We began wondering whether they might not, after all be right. We consider as necessary the fight to recover what our predecessors have created, especially as Westerners are quick to argue that Africans have created nothing worthwhile but at the same time high-jack our cultural artefacts.

Then comes Emmanuel Macron, the young President of France, 'la Grande Nation,' who declares that African artefacts must be returned to Africa and that this is a matter of priority for him. Moreover, he made such a declaration in front of some 800 students in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on 28 November 2017:

"I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France. There are historical explanations for that, but there are no valid justifications that are durable and unconditional. African heritage can't just be in European private collections and museums. African heritage must be highlighted in Paris, but also in Dakar, in Lagos, in Cotonou. In the next five years, I want the conditions to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa. This will be one of my priorities." (2)

That there are Westerners, including even a Western president, who also believe that African artefacts should be seen not only 'in Paris but also in Dakar, in Lagos, in Cotonou', was exciting, considering the contrary views that have been expressed in the last decades in which we have been writing on this subject. (3)

I thought, even if Emmanuel Macron does not do anything more than what he has said about the need to return African artefacts in France, he has already made history in a matter where all the French presidents before him, even those who presented themselves as friends of Africa, such as Giscard d'Estaing, or as admirers of African art, such as Jacques Chirac, only thought of keeping our treasures in France. (4)

Macron would not need to worry about building monuments for his remembrance, as George Pompidou, François Mitterrand, and Jacques Chirac did. (5) His remembrance will be written in the hearts of many Africans who will recognize his concrete contribution, if he succeeds in returning a respectable portion of the thousands of African artefacts in France. Musée du Quai Branly seems to have most of these artefacts.

Emmanuel Macron has not only made a historic speech. He would be starting a cultural revolution in France where requests for restitution of African or other arts looted during the colonial era are considered impossible and routinely dismissed. Recently in 2016, a request by the Republic of Benin for recovery of some of the 5000 artefacts stolen by the French during colonial invasions was rejected by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis that the artefacts were part of French national heritage and thus inalienable- [an open letter to then-French President François Hollande](#) . Since the Edict of Moulins, 1566, that provided that

property inherited by the State was inalienable, all such demands have been rejected. Macron would thus be reversing a practice of several centuries and ushering in a new practice.

I was blown over by Macron's speech on 28 November 2017 as reported in the newspapers, but the news seemed too good to be true, so I got the full text and decided to subject that part relating to restitution to further examination.

Macron's statement that he wants the conditions for the return of the artefacts to be achieved within the next 5 years, subjects the promise of return to serious conditions that will not be easily and quickly achieved. He added that this supposes '*a great deal of scientific and museological partnership, because, make no mistake, in many African countries, it is often the African museum officials (conservateurs africains) who organized the illicit traffic and sometimes, it was the European museum officials or collectors who saved the African artworks for Africa by taking them away from the African traffickers, our common history is more complex than our reflexes!*

The best homage that I can pay not only to the African artists or the Europeans who have fought to safeguard these works is to do everything so that the works return and to ensure also that there is security, that there is also care for the protection of these work. Therefore, the partnerships will ensure that there are well-trained conservators, that there are academic commitments, that there are State to State commitments to protect these arts, that is, your history, your patrimony and if you permit me, our history'. (6)

Macron is putting responsibility for the presence of African artefacts in France, at least partly, on African museum officials who organized illicit traffic and adding that European collectors and conservators saved these artefacts. This is a completely inaccurate explanation of the looting and stealing of Africa artefacts. It is not our business to defend corrupt museum officials. They will do that themselves, but I suggest that the portion of our artefacts that were sent out of the continent through the connivance of museum officials would be a small proportion compared to lootings carried on by the French army in Dahomey in 1892 under General Dodds or the British invasion of Benin in 1897. One must also not forget the so-called scientific expeditions that carried away thousands of African artefacts. The best-known example is the French Dakar-Djibouti Expedition that has been well-described by Michel Leiris in *Afrique Fantôme*. What Macron perhaps does not realize is that the illicit traffic exists because Western museums have been willing to buy objects they know must have been looted or stolen. So, the idea that European museum officials and collectors have somehow saved African artefacts from African dealers and museum officials cannot be accepted. One could also think about Leo Frobenius and his various dealings with African artefacts. We still do not know where the *Olokun* is that disappeared after Frobenius had looked at it in Ife. (7)

Macron sets as pre-condition for the return of African artefacts the presence of well-trained conservators as well as adequate security and care of the artefacts before they are returned. In order to achieve all this, he proposes partnership between France and the African countries. When the 5 years period Macron sets out expires, he may well say the necessary conditions have not been fulfilled

because the African governments have not done their part. It reminds us of the argument the British always made that there were not adequate premises in Athens for the Parthenon Marbles. But when Greece built a top ultra-modern museum at the Acropolis, the British Museum Director, Neil MacGregor declared that the location of the Marbles was never an issue.

The real question though is, what right do successors to looters have to set conditions under which they will return looted artefacts to the owners? Can someone who has stolen my Mercedes Benz declare his willingness to return my vehicle on condition that I build a suitable garage of specific dimensions and hire a driver with a certain level of experience? Where do Westerners derive such arrogance from that even when they are clearly wrong, they still want to dictate the rules of the game?

If Macron is serious, he should unconditionally declare his intention of returning the looted artefacts. He should also abandon any idea of having a supervisory role regarding the security of the artefacts once returned. This should not be his business. This is the duty of the African States to look after their artefacts as well as after all their other resources. We will never be free and independent as long as some others assume a supervisory role to intervene whenever they believe things are not being properly run in Africa. We should have the opportunity to make our own mistakes. If after all that we know about security of artefacts, we are not able to protect the looted objects after their return from hundred years of exile in Europe, the world can form its opinion.

Despite the novelty of a French president declaring an intention to return our artefacts, Macron is not really, on serious examination, very far from the positions of the various European museums that are constantly complaining about the lack of security in Africa even though they themselves have been buying the looted artefacts and are often the inspiration and motivation behind such activities. The difference though is that Macron sounds optimistic about restitution whereas the museum directors and dealers do not envisage the eventuality of restitution.

The French president could demonstrate his seriousness by setting up immediately a committee of Africans and French specialists to study the issue and report in six months about what artefacts could be returned immediately, whilst we await a further list in a year of further objects that could be returned. The need for further information or knowledge should not be an excuse for postponing indefinitely the restitution.

We do not know whether Macron discussed his intentions with French specialists in African art or will do so after his remarkable speech in Ouagadougou. If he does, he will be surprised by the objections many will raise. He would be told how absolutely necessary African artefacts are for the French museums; how they constitute a great attraction for tourists and above all, their importance for the French economy, especially as regards

job-creation. Paris is the centre for the international art market in African art. The prices of individual pieces have sold in the recent period for 5 million euros and above. The dealers in African art at the *rue de seine* will not forgive Macron for having the idea of returning African artefacts.

In any case, we can expect resistance, perhaps indirectly, in a form of delays in everything that concerns restitution of artefacts from French museums. A museum such as *Musée du quai Branly* that holds thousands of such artefacts will not be in hurry to fulfil the wishes of Macron assuming they are genuine and seriously meant and not a publicity stunt. That museum has almost all the artefacts that the French stole during the infamous Dakar-Djibouti Mission.

There is no question of ‘temporary’ and ‘permanent restitution’. As we have often said, we would expect African artefacts, especially those relating to political power, e.g. kings and queens, to be returned; it would be up to African States, in discussions with Western museums, to determine which artefacts are to be physically returned whilst those that should remain in the Western museums will be symbolically returned, with appropriate ceremonies and events, at the African embassies in Paris or consulates elsewhere. These ceremonies should be widely publicised to impress on the consciousness of all, African and Western, that a new era has begun in the relationships between Africa and Europe.

The Emmanuel Macron seems to be the first Western leader who understands how Africans feel when we see our masks and artefacts displayed in Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Chicago, London, Geneva, New York, Paris, and Vienna which we cannot see in Abidjan, Accra, Bamako, Benin City, Cotonou, Kinshasa and Yaoundé because the best African art has been sent to the West. Having taken away our gold, diamonds, timber and other resources, and as if to complete our defeat, denigration and denudation, the colonialists took away our symbols of power, rule, family, beauty, joy and sheer delight in the power of creativity. Having denounced as pagan, they took away our religious symbols and objects of ancestral remembrance. They wanted to deny our humanity by robbing us of all that indicated creativity and inventiveness in African society.

But what are the African States doing or saying on all this? Republic of Benin has submitted a request, but what about the other countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. They could improve their museums and ensure better security. Often the impression is created that it depends on the European States to decide all. Many African States have not as yet drawn up a list of artefacts they seek to recover from Western States even though at the Cairo Conference on restitution in 2010, held under the leadership of Zahi Hawass, this was requested. (8)

Our countries have not taken the opportunity of preparing a list of national treasures which would also contribute to teaching the general public about national culture. It is almost as if nobody cared and yet, we have statutory bodies that are entrusted with the preservation and conservation of our national treasures. Those institutions that apparently pursue a policy of quiet diplomacy as regards the restitution of cultural artefacts from Western States, seem almost embarrassed when the issue is even mentioned and therefore are not in a position to teach the general public about the issues involved.

When will African States ratify the important international conventions that relate to artefacts? *The Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970 has* so far been ratified by 32 States from the African Continent.

The *Unidroit Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects 1995* has been ratified by 11 African States. These conventions can help us recover some of our artefacts stolen or looted since 1970. Though these conventions are not retroactive, they do not ban recovery of artefacts stolen before their entry into force.

Should Macron succeed in returning some of the African artefacts in France, he would be finally fulfilling the demands of several UNESCO and United Nations resolutions on cultural property which Western States and their museums have been regularly disobeying for decades. (9) Nor have Western States paid much attention to Athens International Conference on the "Return of Cultural Property to its Country of Origin. (10)

Whatever may be the final assessment of the performance of Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017, as far as concerns the restitution of African artefacts, we believe he performed creditably. He found the right words to convey the need to return African artefacts. His choice of phrases could have come from any of us who are deeply committed to this matter. What remains is the actual implementation of his lofty promises.

Macron has put Western States and their museums to shame. Whilst the French President is talking about returning our artefacts, others are busy trying desperately to devise ways and means of postponing the return of the artefacts that natural justice requires. We have the so-called Dialogue Group on Benin proposing a strange scheme whereby some of the looted Benin artefacts would be displayed in Benin City but ownership of the artefacts would be with Western museums. And they find some Africans to approve of such a ridiculous and insulting proposal. There are also the Humboldt Forum scholars in Berlin who are busy propagating a theory of inventive ignorance which throws a mantle of amnesia and doubt around African artefacts, suggesting that there is a lot to be researched about the artefacts that would require resources and time. The idea here being to postpone any discussion of restitution. To achieve this aim, they are willing to throw doubt not only on the knowledge acquired by their predecessors but also on what they themselves are proposing. In a general atmosphere of acknowledged ignorance, relating to the makers of the artefacts as well as their place of origins, restitution would be pushed into a distant future.

With the declared intentions of Macron, we sincerely hope that Austria, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Switzerland, and other Western countries will also consider returning finally African artefacts taken away during the colonial era. Macron is proposing what the Western States should have done many decades ago. This is a great reconciliatory gesture which will reduce some of the pains and the feelings of deprivation caused by colonialism and imperialism if it is implemented. We cannot be peoples of culture without our cultural artefacts.

'At this time when the museum is opening its doors to the public, I keep wondering to what extent the mighty and powerful will go in their arrogance and violation of our imagination. We are being invited to day to celebrate with the former colonial power an incontestably magnificent architectural monument as well as our own decline and the complicity of

those, African political representatives and institutional authorities who consider that our cultural objects are better kept in the beautiful edifices of the North than under our own skies.

In our opinion, the Musée du Quai Brady is built on a deep and painful paradox since almost the totality of the Africans, Amerindians, the Australian Aborigines whose talents and creativity are being celebrated, will never cross the doorstep of the museum in view of the so-called selective immigration. It is true that measures have been taken to ensure that we can consult the archives via Internet. Thus, our works of art have a right of residence at a place where we are forbidden to stay'. Aminata Traoré, former Minister for Culture, Mali. (11)

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Notes

1. Leiris letter to Zette, September 19, 1931 cited at p.163 in *Phantom Africa* by Michel Leiris, translated by Brent Hayes Edwards, Seagull Books, 2017, ISBN: 978 0 8574 2 3771. With this recent English translation of *Afrique Fantôme* by Michel Leiris, first published by Gallimard, Paris in 1934, English readers have now the possibility to appreciate the significance of this historic book by Leiris. Anyone interested in the restitution of African artefacts or colonialism will do well to read this major work which is available also in German, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian: The German translation of the French original, *Afrique fantôme* is entitled, Michel Leiris, *Phantom Afrika - Tagebuch einer Expedition von Dakar nach Djibouti 1931-1933*, Band 1 und Band II, 1980, Syndikat Autoren-und Verlagsgesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main. The Portuguese version is entitled *A África Fantasma*, 2007, published by Cosac Naify, Sao Paulo, Brasil. The Spanish edition is entitled: *El África fantasmal*, by Tomás Fernández AZ and Beatriz Eibar Barrens, 2007, Ed. Pre-Text's. The Italian edition is entitled, *L' Africa fantasma* by Aldo Pasquali, Rizzoli Editore, 1984.

2. [Emmanuel Macron Says Return of African Artifacts Is a Top Priority ...https://www.nytimes.com/.../arts/emmanuel-macron-africa.html](https://www.nytimes.com/.../arts/emmanuel-macron-africa.html)

[Will French Museums Return African Objects? Emmanuel Macron ...https://news.artnet.com/art.../french-president-promises-restitutio](https://news.artnet.com/art.../french-president-promises-restitutio)
[Emmanuel Macron Says Return of African Artifacts Is a Top Priority ...latest.news.real-english.com/.../emmanuel-macron-says-return-of...](https://latest.news.real-english.com/.../emmanuel-macron-says-return-of...)
[What restitution experts have to say about President Macron's pledge ...theartnewspaper.com/.../restitution-experts-react-to-president-ma...](https://theartnewspaper.com/.../restitution-experts-react-to-president-ma...)
[Ce qu'il faut retenir du discours de Macron au Burkina Faso - Les Echoshttps://www.lesechos.fr](https://www.lesechos.fr) > Monde > Afrique - Moyen Orient

3. [Dr. Kwame Opoku writings about looted cultural objects – Museum ...https://www.toncremers.nl/.../dr-kwame-opoku-writings-about-lo..](https://www.toncremers.nl/.../dr-kwame-opoku-writings-about-lo..)
[Columnist: Kwame Opoku, Dr. - Modern Ghanahttps://www.modernghana.com/author/KwameOpoku](https://www.modernghana.com/author/KwameOpoku)
[Arts of Nigeria In French Private Collections - Modern Ghanahttps://www.modernghana.com/.../arts-of-nigeria-in-french-priv...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../arts-of-nigeria-in-french-priv...)
[Would Western Museums Return Looted Objects If ... - Modern Ghanahttps://www.modernghana.com/.../would-western-museums-retur...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../would-western-museums-retur...)
[A History of The World With 100 Looted Objects Of ... - Modern Ghanahttps://www.modernghana.com/.../a-history-of-the-world-with-100-looted-objects-of...](https://www.modernghana.com/.../a-history-of-the-world-with-100-looted-objects-of...)

<https://www.modernghana.com/.../a-history-of-the-world-with-1..>

4. [From Benin to Quai Branly - Dr. Kwame Opoku - AFRIKANET.info](#)
www.afrikanet.info/archiv1/index.php?option=com...task...
[The Logic of Non-Restitution of Cultural Objects from Musée du quai Branly ...](#)
www.afrikanet.info › Home › African Art
[What Are They Really Celebrating at The Musée Du Quai Branly, Paris?](#)
<https://www.modernghana.com/.../what-are-they-really-celebratin..>
[More Dogon artefacts are in the Musée du Quai Branly than in Mali's](#)
[...www.elginism.com/...musee-du-quai-branly...museum/.../3944](http://www.elginism.com/...musee-du-quai-branly...museum/.../3944)
[Musée Du Quai Branly changes name | Pambazuka News](#)
<https://www.pambazuka.org/.../musée-du-quai-branly-changes-n..>

5. It has been a long tradition in France that the president encourages the construction of an imposing cultural project that will be named after him when he passes away. So, Georges Pompidou had the Centre Pompidou named after him, Francois Mitterrand had the Bibliothèque Nationale named after him, with some calling the Louvre Pyramid, Pharaoh François' Pyramid. Jacques Chirac had the Musée de Quai Branly named after him.

6. See Le Monde online for the full text of Macron's speech at Ouagadougou on 28 November, 2017.

Le Monde.fr

[\[Document\] Le discours d'Emmanuel Macron à Ougadougou ...](#)
www.jeuneafrique.com/.../document-le-discours-demmanuel-ma
[Présidence de la République: Accueil](#)
www.elysee.fr/

7.K. Opoku, [Can An English Artist Use Classical Nigerian Art Image As He Likes ...](#)
<https://www.modernghana.com/.../can-an-english-artist-use-classi>.

8. K. Opoku, [Reflections On The Cairo Conference On Restitution: Encouraging Beginning..](#)
<https://www.modernghana.com/.../reflections-on-the-cairo-confer..>

9. [nigerian treasures | No Humboldt 21](#)
www.no-humboldt21.de/information/nigeria_treasures/

K. Opoku, [Declaration On The Importance And Value Of Universal Museums ...](#)
<https://www.modernghana.com/.../declaration-on-the-importance..>

10. See annex.

11. Aminata Traoré, *Ainsi nos œuvres d'art ont droit de cité là où nous sommes, dans l'ensemble, interdits de séjour* » Droit de cité - 23 juin 2006 - L'Obs tempsreel.nouvelobs.com
› Culture "droit de cité", par Aminata Traoré - Connaître l'histoire coloniale ... ldh-toulon.net/droit-de-cite-par-Aminata-Traore.html

« Nouveau millénaire, Défis libertaires »

<http://1libertaire.free.fr/ArtPremierInterditSejour.html>

<http://www.afrikara.com> (Translation into English by Kwame Opoku) Those who can read French would benefit from reading the whole statement by Aminata Traoré, one of the most formidable intellectuals of our times. Traoré's statement made in 2006 when the Musée du quai Branly was opened is to date the most powerful statement made on behalf of the African peoples in their quest to recover their artefacts looted/stolen or acquired under dubious

circumstances during the colonial period. See [From Benin to Quai Branly - Dr. Kwame Opoku - AFRIKANET.info](http://www.afrikanet.info/archiv1/index.php?option=com...ta) www.afrikanet.info/archiv1/index.php?option=com...ta

‘A l’heure où celui-ci ouvre ses portes au public, je continue de me demander jusqu’où iront les puissants de ce monde dans l’arrogance et le viol de notre imaginaire. Nous sommes invités, aujourd’hui, à célébrer avec l’ancienne puissance coloniale une œuvre architecturale, incontestablement belle, ainsi que notre propre déchéance et la complaisance de ceux qui, acteurs politiques et institutionnels africains, estiment que nos biens culturels sont mieux dans les beaux édifices du Nord que sous nos propres cieux...

Le Musée du Quai Branly est bâti, de mon point de vue, sur un profond et douloureux paradoxe à partir du moment où la quasi-totalité des Africains, des Amérindiens, des Aborigènes d’Australie, dont le talent et la créativité sont célébrés, n’en franchiront jamais le seuil compte tenu de la loi sur l’immigration choisie. Il est vrai que des dispositions sont prises pour que nous puissions consulter les archives via l’Internet. Nos œuvres ont droit de cité là où nous sommes, dans l’ensemble, interdits de séjour’.

ANNEX

Conclusions of the Athens International Conference on the Return of Cultural Objects to their Countries of Origin Athens, 17-18 March 2008

Conclusions of the Athens International Conference on the Return of Cultural Objects to their Countries of Origin Athens, 17-18 March 2008 Experts on the issue of the return of cultural objects to their countries of origin, who participated in the first International Conference held in Athens, on 17th and 18th March 2008, within the framework of the meeting co-organized by the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, in the presence of the Member States of the Committee have reached the following conclusions: •

It is important that UNESCO organise international conferences, so that experts intensify their study of the issue of the return of cultural property to its country of origin, in order to produce viable and realistic solutions; •

Cultural heritage constitutes an inalienable part of a people’s sense of self and of community, functioning as a link between the past, the present and the future;

- It is essential to sensitize the public about this issue and especially the younger generation. An information campaign may prove very effective toward that end;
- Certain categories of cultural property are irrevocably identified by reference to the cultural context in which they were created (unique and exceptional artworks and monuments, ritual objects, national symbols, ancestral remains, dismembered pieces of outstanding works of art). It is their original context that gives them their authenticity and unique value;
- The role of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation must be strengthened through the necessary means, resources and infrastructure. Effort should be

made to encourage mediation either through the Committee or by other means of alternative dispute resolution;

- Requests and negotiations for the return of cultural goods can work as a vehicle for cooperation, collaboration, sharing, joint research and economic promotion;
- In recent years a clear tendency towards the return of cultural objects to their countries of origin has been developed on legal, social and ethical grounds. The return of cultural objects is directly linked to the rights of humanity (preservation of cultural identity and preservation of world heritage);
- Museums should abide by codes of ethics. On this basis, museums should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of important cultural property to its country or community of origin. This should be undertaken on ethical, scientific, and humanitarian principles. The cooperation, partnership, goodwill and mutual appreciation between the parties concerned could lead to joint research programs and exchange of technical expertise

Conférence internationale d'Athènes sur "Le retour des biens culturels à leur pays d'origine"

Dans le cadre des activités du [Comité intergouvernemental pour la promotion du retour de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine ou de leur restitution en cas d'appropriation illégale](#), la Grèce a accueilli une conférence internationale pour les juristes, professionnels des musées et experts dans le domaine du retour des biens culturels, les 17 et 18 mars 2008 au Nouveau Musée de l'Acropole à Athènes.

Cette conférence était la première d'une série organisée par l'UNESCO et ses États membres pour servir de forums de réflexion et d'échanges sur la question du retour des biens culturels et pour améliorer la compréhension de ses enjeux. Cette réunion fût également l'occasion de réfléchir aux moyens de renforcer l'action du Comité intergouvernemental.

Cette première conférence internationale a réuni un nombre limité de professionnels de haut niveau impliqués dans des discussions ayant conduit au retour et à la restitution de biens culturels. La première journée a été consacrée à la présentation de cas particuliers de retour par ceux qui y ont participé. Le deuxième jour, les discussions se sont tenues autour de quatre ateliers thématiques liés au débat sur les retours.

Les Actes de la conférence ont été présentés par Madame Elena Korca, Directrice des antiquités au Ministère de la culture de la Grèce, lors de la 15ème session du Comité intergouvernemental pour la promotion du retour de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine ou de leur restitution en cas d'appropriation illégale qui a eu lieu du 11 au 13 mai 2009 au Siège de l'UNESCO à Paris. Son rapport a fait l'objet d'une publication sous forme d'Actes officiels dans un numéro spécial de la revue de l'UNESCO Museum International (n° 241-242).