Bernard Mueller
Laurent Védrine



# “The Ghosts of Colonization”

## Interview with Laurent Védrine, director.




Restituting African Art, the Ghosts of Colonization. Original title : Restituer l’art africain, les fantômes de la colonisation.

“There is still a form of *omertà* in the world of museum curators.”

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**60'** – a film by **Laurent Védrine –** narration **Gaël Kamilindi** – produced by Sara Brücker for **Temps Noir**, with the support of **France Télévisions**, **TV5 Monde**, **Région Ile-de-France,** with the support of **La Procirep Angoa** – Société des Producteurs, and the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'image animée – original music **Samuel Hirsch** – 2021

This interview with Laurent Védrine by Bernard Müller took place in Paris on the 17th of May 2021 and is about the documentary entitled *Restituting African Art, the Ghosts of Colonization*. This documentary just released in April 2021 traces the dispute over colonial restitution from the point of view of one object that still has not been restituted yet, even though it originates from the same looting of the kingdom of Abomey by General Dodds in 1894 as the 26 objects which will be officially returned by France to the Republic of Benin, no later than this autumn.[1] It is the famous Gou god, a sculpture created around 1860 by the Abomey court artist Akati Ekplekendo to embody the deity of war, who received his last offerings on the eve of the fall of the kingdom whose power he embodied. This sculpture still on display in the Louvre (Pavillon des Sessions) was considered by the French surrealist poet Apollinaire as "the most graceful and astonishing object in Paris". By drawing a portrait of this voodoo sculpture, Laurent Védrine's film *Restituting African Art, the Ghosts of Colonization* relates a quarrel that continues before our eyes, and that in reality has only just begun…

With Felwine Sarr, academic and writer (Senegal), Corinne Herskovitch, art lawyer (France), Gaëlle Beaujean, head of the Africa collection, Musée du Quai Branly, Didier Houenoude, art historian (Benin), Alain Godonou, heritage curator (Benin), Bénédicte Savoy, art historian, Collège de France, Hamady Boccoum, Director of the Museum of Black Civilizations (Senegal), Gabin Djimassé, historian (Benin), Maureen Murphy, art historian (France), Marie-Cécile Zinsou, museum director in Benin.

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**Bernard Müller: We met in 2005, and you presented your film "The Obelisk of Discord" released in 2006 as part of the "Broken Memory" project[2]. At the time, you were investigating the restitution of the Axum obelisk by Italy to Ethiopia. In your latest film, which has just been released, entitled "Restituting African art – the Ghosts of Colonization", you investigate the return of Dodds' booty to the Republic of Benin, focusing on one of the objects, which is surprisingly not on the list of objects to be returned, which wasdefined following the Ouagadougou speech, 28.11.2017[3]. Can you introduce your film?**

Laurent Védrine: The working title, which I prefer, has long been "The odyssey of the god Gou". Because this film is first and foremost the story of a unique object: a cast iron Dahomean statue, representing this god of the Voodoo pantheon who is called Gou, Ogou or Ogun in the Caribbean. The object, unique and without equivalent, carries an extraordinary political dimension. It is currently on display at the Louvre Museum, which says a lot about its fame and the fascination it provokes. But it had a particular destiny from the outset, since it belonged to the king of Dahomey at the time of the conquest. This is what is known as the "regalia", in the sense that he embodied the sovereignty and power of this kingdom. And it is his journey in exile, from Dahomey to Paris, that I have tried to tell.

The issue of restitution is vast and complex. Instead of trying to synthesise everything in a kind of analytical file, I preferred to tell the story of charismatic 'heroes' whose destiny, in the background, allows us to grasp the main aspects of the debate.

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From left to right : Stéphane Martin (President of the Établissement public du musée du quai Branly – Jacques-Chirac (1998-2019), the collector Jacques Kerchache, Jacques Chirac (President of the French Republic from 1995 to 2007), the Gou statue on the day of the inauguration in April 2000 of the Pavillon des Sessions, which is located in the south of the Louvre palace, "between the Flore wing and the Denon wing, and exhibits 104 sculptural masterpieces from all over the world in the heart of one of the world's greatest museums of classical fine arts" (image: screenshot of the film "« The Ghosts of Colonization »)".

**Bernard Müller: Between these two shooting experiences, Italy/Ethiopia in 2005 and France/Bénin in 2021, what difference do you find most striking?**

Laurent Védrine: At the time, in Ethiopia, the stakes of the restitution of cultural heritage were widely understood by the population, even in small towns. The

government had made it a very effective political propaganda tool. This is probably due to the particular history of this country, which has never really been colonised. As a result, people live with manifestations of the past on a daily basis, whether they are archaeological, architectural or cultural. In Benin, colonisation, evangelisation and the massive export/destruction of cultural artefacts have deprived people of much of their history. There are few traces and for the younger generations there is a real disconnection with the past. And on the other hand, despite the official status of the voodoo religion, many people reject this cultural heritage which is sometimes considered backward.

**Bernard Müller: In more than 10 years, what has changed in the relationship with your interlocutors during the preparation of your film?**

Laurent Védrine: In France, many researchers and historians have taken up these issues, publishing articles, research and theses. Restitutions are finally in the public eye, thanks to militant campaigns and a change in consciousness, even if it means becoming a “fashionable” theme. However, paradoxically, they still come up against the timidity of museum institutions and a certain *omertà*. There are many obstacles. I was struck, on this point, by the persistence of avoidance speeches made by museum directors or curators. As was the case 15 years ago, the opportunity to return a “problematic” object continues to provoke a knee-jerk reaction, irrational fears that go far beyond the sole issue of the “works”.

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Statue devoted to the Gou god (vodun or voodoo) photographed in the rooms of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro at the end of the 19th

century, Paris (Image : musée du quai Branly).

**Bernard Müller: A film is in a way an instrument of dialogue, indeed the very tool of negotiation between parties who initially disagree but who know they have no choice but to find a compromise. Where is the point of contention today?**

Laurent Védrine: I don't know if my film can be considered as an argument in the bilateral negotiations between the government of Benin and France. What is certain is that some people have no interest in these stories being known. So, once the film has been shown to the general public, perhaps the discourse will change. The point of contention, in my opinion, is the status of works and the role of museums based on the European model of collecting, amassing, and general Universalist pretensions. Restitution means taking into consideration alternative narratives and accepting, finally, to renounce a monopoly of "scientific" interpretation on these objects. Now, restoring these pieces to their spiritual or cultural dimension, "reactivating" them in a way in their semiotic complexity, means questioning the way in which they are presented, rethinking the circulation of the public in these spaces, and therefore envisaging the possibility of multiple uses, beyond the gaze: touch, sound, movement of bodies, the sacred, the profane… And not only, as has been done up to now, showing these pieces in aestheticized settings. In my opinion, it is necessary that the curators also "de-fetishise" certain objects that are trapped in a triple gangue: beauty, rarity, and an obsession with preservation/restoration at all costs. With this film I also want to bring the debate more into the public arena. The debates surrounding the restitution and even more so the colonial context of the collection of ethnographic objects remain ignored by many. Specialists tend to forget this…

**Bernard Müller: While Germany is now preparing to return the spoils of the Benin**

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**City palace  to Nigeria, the situation in France seems to be frozen. Why is it that President Macron's speech in Ouagadougou seems to have had more impact in Germany than in France? In your opinion, will the Gou be returned soon?**

Laurent Védrine: 26 objects stolen by French soldiers in Abomey are to be returned to Benin in autumn 2021. A declassification law was voted for this purpose in October 2020. This list, drawn up by France, only includes works kept at the Musée du Quai Branly. However, the statue of the Gou God, even if it belongs to the collections of this museum, is exhibited in the Louvre, in a very political department (created by the former French president Jacques Chirac to exhibit masterpieces). If Gou is not on the list, one must wonder whether this omission is an accident (which I doubt), or whether a containment strategy is at work, in the sense that the Louvre (a large part of whose collections come from lootings) would be made sacred. The fear of a "Pandora's Box" would thus be contained, by letting people believe that only "ethnographic" museums are concerned by restitutions and the related debates. The god Gou, in the Voodoo pantheon, is the god of iron, and by extension the god of war, but also of machines, modernity, speed and technology.  He is also invoked today by mechanics, taxi drivers, engineers, blacksmiths, etc. It is, for example, what causes or prevents road accidents. I tend to believe that his energy, in the symbolic sense, is all the more active when he is at the heart of a debate where "the swords are crossed". And like all Voodoo gods, who are sensitive to flattery, Gou may have an interest in standing out from the crowd by remaining a political issue on his own.

In the end, from a more pragmatic point of view, everything depends on Benin's will to really put this object forward in future negotiations. Attacking the Louvre means putting a foot in the door of the Holy of Holies, which only the Egyptians have dared to do until now.

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The Abomey kingdom in the present Republique du Bénin (image: screenshot of the film "« The Ghosts of Colonization »).

**Bernard Müller: What is your next project in order to understand how objects of the past surprisingly revisit our present ?**

Laurent Védrine: I am preparing another film on the geopolitics of Egyptian antiquities. To explain how this Arab and Muslim country is now trying to re-appropriate/manipulate its pharaonic past in order to assert its place in the world, reinforcing the power of the military and decolonising Egyptological science. There is much at stake for this country devoid of geological wealth in considering the deposits of mummies and ancient objects as "oil wells". And to value the pyramidal and hierarchical political organisation of ancient Egypt, to block the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, for example... Another story that unravels the entanglement

of the past with the present…

**Bernard Müller: Thanks! How to view your film ?**

Laurent Védrine: A teaser of the film can be viewed online .

English subtitles are currently being prepared.

For a public presentation contact Temps Noir Productions



Author and director of various documentary films and radio programmes, **Laurent Védrine** studied public and international law (University of Paris II), history (books, documents, traces), anthropology (EHESS), journalism (ESJ-Lille) and beekeeping (Central Beekeeping Society).

*2017 – Jean Rouch, cinéaste aventurier – 54′ / 2013 – La Reine bicyclette – Histoire des Français à vélo – 52′ / 2011 – Le Déjeuner sous l'herbe – 53′ / 2008 – Kinshasa Beijing*

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*Story – 52′ / 2006 – L'Obélisque de la discorde – 52*

**Footnotes**

[1]
https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/vie-des-collections/actualites/restitution-de-26-oeuvres-a-la-republique-du-benin/

[2]
http://www.powerofculture.nl/en/current/2007/july/broken_memory_project.html

[3]
https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou