

Berlin Postkolonial e.V.
Uhlandstraße 7
13156 Berlin
Germany

Bundeskanzlerin
Dr. Angela Merkel
Bundeskanzleramt
Willy-Brandt-Straße 1
10557 Berlin
Germany

Open Letter

Subject: Restitution of cultural objects and human remains from Africa

Berlin, 18/12/2017

Dear Dr. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany,

with great interest we have noted the speech given on 28 November 2017 in Ouagadougou by the French President Emmanuel Macron, in which he stated that he was no longer "able to accept that a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries is in France". We welcome the fact that the French Government, in cooperation with the African countries concerned, wants to enable a "temporary or permanent restitution of the African heritage" within the next five years. We also pay tribute to Emmanuel Macron's announcement of restoring human remains from a colonial context of injustice to Algeria.

France is responding to the intensifying and critical debate on colonial heritage, which concerns the other countries of the Global North as well. After all, it is not only French museums and private collections that have come into possession of hundreds of thousands of cultural objects and tens of thousands of human remains from all regions of Africa as a result of colonisation. The number of African artifacts in the major ethnological museums of North America and Europe is so high that more than 90% of all cultural treasures have never been shown. The amount of human remains from Africa is so great that, according to the museums, even 100 years after their acquisition, it has still not been possible to determine where and how they came into the collections.

At the same time, especially the ritual objects and the remains of their ancestors are sorely missed by members of the African source communities.

Germany has a key role to play in this situation. For it is not only here that the greatest number of museums with cultural treasures and human remains from all parts of the African continent can be found. In 1884/85, at the invitation of the French Republic and the German Reich, the infamous Africa or Congo Conference took place in its capital Berlin. The rules for the almost complete division of Africa among the European colonial powers were negotiated, thus creating the preconditions for the systematic appropriation of African cultural objects and human remains.

At the beginning of the European Cultural Heritage Year 2018, which will be entitled "Sharing Heritage", we would therefore like to ask you, in your capacity as German Head of Government, to take a stance on the historic initiative of the French President. In the 100th year after the end of German colonialism in Africa, the Federal Government must not remain silent on the subject of restitution of ritual objects and ancestral remains from a colonial context of injustice.

Without a transparent, transnational and critical examination of the colonial heritage, trustful cooperation between people of African and European descent will continue to be impossible.

With kind regards

Mnyaka Sururu Mboro & Christian Kopp
buero@berlin-postkolonial.de

Further Signatories:

AfricAvenir International
Antirassistisch-Interkulturelles Informationszentrum ARiC Berlin
Arbeitskreis Panafrikanismus München
Arca-Afrikanisches Bildungszentrum
Artefakte/Anti-Humboldt
Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag (BER)
Deutsch-Afrikanische Gesellschaft (DAFRIG)
FuturAfrik – Forum für Globale Gerechtigkeit
Hamburg Postkolonial
Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD-Bund)
IDB | Institut für diskriminierungsfreie Bildung
Interkulturelles Frauenzentrum S.U.S.I.
Joliba – Interkulturelles Netzwerk in Berlin
Köln Postkolonial
Mainzer Arbeitskreis Südliches Afrika (MAKSA)
Netzwerk Rassismus- und Diskriminierungsfreies Bayern
OvaHerero, Mbanderu and Nama Genocides Institute (ONGI)
Solidaritätsdienst International (SODI)
Southern Networks for Environment and Development (SONED)
...

Millicent Adjei (Hamburg), Aischa Ahmed (Berlin), Prof. Dr. Iman Attia (Berlin), Josephine Apraku (Berlin), Prof. Dr. Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (Köln), Prof. Dr. Heike Becker (Kapstadt/Berlin), Dr. Jule Böhnkost (Berlin), Andreas Bohne (Berlin), Dr. Anna-Maria Brandstetter (Mainz), Clementine Burnley (Berlin), Tahir Della (Berlin), Hamado Dipama (München), Prof. Dr. Lars Eckstein (Potsdam), Ginga Eichler (Berlin), Jahn Georg Fischer (Berlin), Olga Gerstenberger (Berlin), Prof. PhD Lerke Gravenhorst (Ahrensburg), Dr. Noa Ha (Berlin), Adina Hammoud (Berlin), Mareike Heller (Berlin), Dr. Anja Henebury (Zürich),

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