

Emmanuel Macron Says Return of African Artifacts Is a Top Priority



President Emmanuel Macron of France after his speech to students on Tuesday at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. Credit...Philippe Wojazer/Reuters

By Anna Codrea-Rado

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The return of African artifacts will become “a top priority” for France during the next five years, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, vowed during a three-day trip to Africa.

“I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France,” he told a group of students during a two-hour speech on Tuesday at the University of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. “African heritage can’t just be in European private collections and museums.”

“African heritage,” Mr. Macron said, “must be highlighted in Paris, but also in Dakar, in Lagos, in Cotonou,” referring to major African cities. “In the next five years, I want the conditions to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa.”

Issues relating to the economy, migration and education were at the forefront of Mr. Macron’s tour to Burkina Faso, Ghana and Ivory Coast, and his trip has been met with hostility: French

news media reported that before Mr. Macron's arrival in Ouagadougou, three civilians were injured by a [grenade that was thrown at French soldiers](#).

Dr. Rachel King, lecturer in cultural heritage studies at University College London, said that while the French leader's announcement was welcome, it raised questions about how France would implement a plan of restitution.

"We should pay attention to how national institutions like the [Musée du Quai Branly](#), France's pre-eminent ethnographic museum, proceeds with loaning or returning African objects to their countries of origin in the next few years," she said in an email.

Mr. Macron also spoke to the students of his commitment to improving France's historically tense relationships with African nations. "I am from a generation that doesn't come to tell Africans what to do," he said.

Dr. King said this was a marked departure from attitudes held by previous French leaders, referring to a speech by [Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007](#) in which he suggested that Africa had failed to embrace progress.

Debate over the restitution of colonial objects has rumbled on in France for a number of years. In March, a group of lawmakers wrote an open letter to the president at the time, François Hollande, [requesting the return of artifacts taken from Benin](#) during French colonial rule in West Africa.

Dr. King said that Mr. Macron's statement also begged "the question of whether his updated priorities for restitution will entail supporting infrastructure for object storage and curation in African museums, and if so how French heritage experts will go about offering this support."

Following his speech, Mr. Macron, on Twitter, emphasized his position on restitution, writing that "African heritage cannot be a prisoner of European museums."

