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Review: ‘Dahomey’ dissects the restitution of Beninese artifacts, with poetry at its heart

Mati Diop’s lyrical documentary, screened at the Lenfest Center for the Arts, tackles the restitution of 26 stolen artifacts in 2021, centering the perspectives of the artifacts themselves.

A spectator watching the Beninese artifacts be moved

By Aamina Mughal • April 28, 2025 at 9:01 AM

No clear answers exist about what a truly postcolonial world looks like as different countries and communities continue to navigate decolonization.

Director Mati Diop's "Dahomey" does not shy away from this ambiguity. In fact, it embraces and relishes in the gray areas. In the end, the film's lack of resolution is what makes it so triumphant.

Screened at Columbia's Lenfest Center for the Arts on April 17, "Dahomey" is a documentary following 26 artifacts that were stolen by France's Musée du quai Branly and journeyed back to Benin in November 2021. These artifacts are just a few of the thousands that were stolen during France's 1892 invasion of the Kingdom of Dahomey, which exists within modern day Benin. A Q&A between Diop and Maureen Ryan, SoA '92, a film professor at the School of the Arts, followed the screening.

Diop tells the story through the artifacts themselves, offering a different perspective on the repatriation of these stolen objects. The film centers the voice of Artifact No. 26, who—through voiceover—describes the process of its violent alienation from one's homeland. Artifact No. 26's booming voice recites words written by Haitian poet Makenzy Orcel and translated into Fon for the film.

"There are thousands of us in this night," Artifact No. 26 said, immediately imbuing the film with a sense of hauntedness.

"Dahomey" is an exploration that weaves together multiple threads: the artifacts themselves, the students who debate the repercussions of restitution, and patrons and curators of the museum that the artifacts are transported to. At the same time it blends French, Fon, and English in order to explore the question of repatriation with as many linguistic tools as possible.

Perhaps most compelling are the moments of debate that are interspersed throughout the film. The film shows an open forum of Beninese students from the University of Abomey-Calavi as they grapple with this complex history. While the students discuss restitution itself, they also discuss topics such as education and exhibition. Does repatriation show progress if it's set in motion by France's

political motives? Are the artifacts still relevant to a changed country? The inherent tension in these questions debated by the students encapsulates the contradictions that exist within decolonization itself, as does their lack of resolution.

The film is both an intellectual examination of repatriation as it is a personal one. At the same time that students debate the efficacy of gestures like repatriation, Artifact No. 26 poetically recounts his journey from Benin to Paris and back, making the film cerebral as well as tender and surreal. The duality between these distinct tones is intentional; Mati Diop described how she sees the film to be an intermediary between poetry and politics.

This tension found throughout the film extends to the process of making it given that it was partially funded by French institutions. When questioned about this, Diop likened French funding of films about the African continent to reparations. The tension in this relationship and also in Diop's own identity as a French-Senegalese filmmaker interests her. The film is full of these cross-sections that also give way to generative discussion.

The film merges the intimacy of a moment with global context. There are scenes where the audience hears only the internal monologue of the artifacts paired with shots of people around the country going to the museum in Benin where the artifacts end up.

"I really wanted the film to be both very impactful and accessible to anybody, to the people, but also to be very introversive from the eyes of the statues," Diop said.

The dual perspective of object and spectator offers the audience several complex viewpoints to understand the question of repatriation and restitution. Diop does not tell anyone how they should feel about these topics, but rather aims to holistically understand all the sides of this complicated issue.

The film centers the act of restitution rather than the process of it. It is not concerned with how France decided to repatriate the artifacts, but rather the implications of this act for the Beninese people, and history itself.

The camera in this movie is distant, and unobtrusive, allowing life to pass before it. But Diop chooses to put the camera in unique places—the inside of a shipping crate or outside watching a woman dream. In this way, Diop creates intimacy without placing a harsh lens on the situation.

The cinematography of the film, which consists of many long, slow shots, similarly gives each scene weight. Everything in this movie must be mulled over and examined in the viewer's mind.

The film's open ending leaves the movie with a sense of potential. While no one knows what the future holds in terms of repatriation, the audience gets to see young Beninese people as well as conservators who have worked on this project simultaneously decide what that future might look like. At the same time, the narrative is haunted by the history of violence wreaked on Benin that can't be undone.

In this way, the film is really about self-determination when the framework of colonization is so deeply ingrained in a nation's history. To tell a story this complex, with this many contradicting perspectives, Diop goes beyond conventional methods of storytelling.

The film explored a rich history, but Diop connected its themes to the present by dedicating the screening to Mahmoud Khalil, SIPA '24—a Palestinian activist who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement on March 8 at his Columbia-owned residence and remains in detention.

"The film was not only made in urgency to document and to archive, but also to provide a space for free speech, to exist under a context of censorship and repression to all kinds of protests," Diop said prior to the screening.