

The “Gomen Affair” (1970-2020): the long history of protests and claims against trafficking Kanak objects

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In the 1970's, numerous architectural Kanak sculptures were exported from New Caledonia. Some of them were exhibited in 1974 in the Numuga Gallery in Auvergnier (Switzerland).

Since then, articles in the New Caledonian daily press have been documenting the affair. On 20 September 1975, *La France australe* dedicated its front page to the 'looting of the Caledonian heritage'. Photographs of 20 items were published to invite the readers to contact the newspaper if they happened to have seen these objects or be their lawful owners. On 23 September 1975, the clergyman Tidjine reached out to the newspaper to say that a spire and a frontdoor had disappeared from Do Néva. In 1976, Luc Chevalier, then director of the New Caledonian museum and permanent delegate to the commission of monuments and sites, took this affair to court. He called it the 'Gomen Affair', referring to the village of origine of some objects.

On 17 June 2015, an auction of 27 Kanak objects was scheduled by Aguttes in Basel (Switzerland). A few days before the auction, Philippe Germain, New Caledonian government's president, sent a mail to Aguttes in order to cancel the sale and to seize the items. Aguttes did not cancel the sale, but adjourned it. It was scheduled again on 4 April 2017 in Neuilly-sur-Seine (France), with only nine objects to sell. They were bought by private collectors, to to what were "disappointing prices" according to the auction house.

Those objects are the only material artefacts that have ever been requested for repatriation by the government of New Caledonia. They differ from the other objects scattered around the world which are considered as 'ambassadors' of the Kanak cultures. The daily press articles, both from the 1970's and the 2010's, show the tricky status of these objects. This case study shows the remaining difficulties around restitution since 1970, and the need for some territories and peoples to be given a voice at the international scale in order to be heard and recognised.



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History of laws to preserve material heritage in New Caledonia:

- Decree (10 March 1938): inventory and protection of all the Kanak objects with historical, archaeological, or artistic interest
- The general secretary in New Caledonia requested to create a list of objects that cannot legally leave the territory (1975)
- Decree n° 1208 (29 July 1994) concerning the products which require an administrative authorization to be exported; the museums' department within the New Caledonian government is in charge of 'antiquities more than 100 years old' (JONC 11 August 1994; JONC 29 December 1994)
- Decree n° 97-435 (25 April 1997) in Paris for the publication of the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property; as French territory, New Caledonia became part of the Convention
- Deliberation n° 216 (8 November 2006) concerning commodities which are prohibited from importation or exportation or require an administrative authorization
- Decree n° 2019-1021/GNC (23 April 2019) concerning the exportation of cultural goods from New Caledonia, in application of the Deliberation n° 216 (8 November 2006)



Sources:

Daily press published in New Caledonia in the 1970's (Museum of New Caledonia's archives)

Daily press published in Hexagonal France and in New Caledonia in June 2015 and in April 2017

Catalogues: *Chefs-d'œuvre de l'art kanak* (Aguttes, 2015); *Chefs-d'œuvre d'art kanak. Collection de B.* (Aguttes, 2017)
Castets-Renard, Céline (dir.), Nicolas, Guylène (dir.), *Patrimoine naturel et culturel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2015.