AMS dating of cultural heritage goods: some ethical questions

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Toronto - June 23, 2012:
- Resolution passed at the 13th International Congress of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA):

In view to limiting the looting and to conserve the African cultural heritage, SAfA urgently requests, for ethical reasons, that $^{14}$C dating laboratories no longer run dates for dealers, auctioneers or individuals on archaeological or ethnographic items of historical significance or on samples taken on such materials.

En vue de limiter le pillage et de préserver le patrimoine culturel africain, la SAfA demande instamment aux laboratoires de datation par la méthode $^{14}$C de ne plus pratiquer de datations, pour des raisons éthiques, sur des objets (ou échantillons provenant d’objets) archéologiques, ou ethnographiques d’importance historique, pour le compte de marchands, de salles de ventes ou de particuliers.
Historical background

- Looting of archaeological and ethnographic artefacts from emerging countries and conflict zones is encouraged due to their commercial value

- Guarantees of authenticity: pedigree or "scientific" dating

⇒ sufficient to reassure the buyer
1980: Bernard de Grunne’s catalogue
publishing archaeological African terracotta

1981: First public stances taken in the “Africanist” domain
Historical background: TL dating

1991: Walter van Beek & Nigel Evans, *African King*, 52’

1991: Pressure from UISPP / PAAA / SAfA Council to forbid TL dating on looted objects by “academic” laboratories
AMS dating

Since ca. 2009: start of using $^{14}$C dating by the art market due to the development of non-destructive AMS

Since 2011: intensification following the “Dogon” exhibition at Musée du Quai Branly, and the scientific dating performed at ETH
AMS dating

2011: *African Memory in Danger*
symposium organised in Geneva

→ 2012: resolution at the SAfA
The “enhancement” of cultural heritage by AMS $^{14}$C dating:
Ethical questions and practical proposals.
*Radiocarbon* 59 (2): 559-563.
AMS dating

Use of AMS dating to increase the market value of items

Two aspects

1. The AMS $^{14}\text{C}$ dating of object acquired from looting, or from the illicit trade, and coming from war zones and/or emerging countries;
Use of AMS $^{14}$C dating to increase the market value of items

Two aspects

1. The AMS dating of object acquired from looting, or from illicit trade, and coming from war zones and/or emerging countries;

2. The problem of dating “anonymous samples” by academic laboratories, particularly related to the subcontracting of samples collected by third-party laboratories not equipped for AMS $^{14}$C dating themselves and who provide no provenance information other than the sample inventory number.
Decision

Need for more than a resolution: need for a strong decision by the laboratories to adopt an ethical policy… on two points:

1. Stop the dating of archaeological and ethnographical artefacts from emerging countries and conflict regions for collectors, dealers and auctioneers;

2. Systematically request from the applicant a binding written commitment that the dating applied for does not concern an object from emerging countries and/or conflict regions.
A continent is robbed of its heritage

A big part of the African history archives is lost for future generations for the benefit of some collectors and speculators.
For further information:

http://ua.unige.ch/memoireafricaine/publication/

Merci / Thank you!