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Archaeological heritage in the Shabè region and challenges of enhancement: the example of the "Etoo" fortified site

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Abstract: The conservation and enhancement of archaeological heritage in African countries, particularly in Benin, present significant challenges for researchers. The general lack of awareness among Beninese populations regarding this heritage, coupled with its minimal integration into development and cultural policies, has led to increased degradation and, in some cases, the irreversible destruction of millennia-old relics. These artifacts bear witness to civilizations once thought extinct but remain vibrant within contemporary societies. The ETOO fortified site in the Shabè region exemplifies an archaeological site whose patrimonial value warrants preservation and promotion. This study addresses the following questions: What are the stakes involved in enhancing archaeological heritage in Benin? What heritage enhancement plan is suitable for the ETOO site in the Shabè region? How can enhancement strategies be explored through cinema and audiovisual media? The methodology combines empirical research, archaeological survey reports, and a specialized literature review, as well as a study of cinematographic and audiovisual productions on similar heritage sites in Africa and elsewhere. The objective is to present the potential of this archaeological site for heritage enhancement, identify associated threats, and reflect on the importance of archaeological heritage in territorial development plans. The article begins with a brief overview of archaeological realities in Africa, followed by an examination of the status of archaeological heritage within Beninese legislation. The third section introduces the ETOO fortified site. The final sections discuss the site's patrimonialization and analyze its potential for enhancement.

Keywords: *Archaeology, Benin, Cinema and audiovisual media, Heritage, Shabè.*

1. Introduction

Archaeological heritage generates significant global interest, particularly in the Western world, due to its critical role in reconstructing human history. From the most prestigious excavations uncovering millennia-old histories in Egypt, Greece, and Italy, to more modest endeavours, archaeological heritage, whether as immovable sites or artifacts intended for preservation and exhibition in museums or interpretation centres, remains a mystery to some and a source of curiosity and wonder for others.

The West has made significant advancements in utilizing archaeology as a tool for understanding human history. Equipped with highly sophisticated laboratories, devices, and advanced technologies for analysing excavation artifacts, the West also benefits from highly specialized fields contributing to archaeological research and valorisation. However, archaeology has also emerged as a science that has significantly advanced the understanding of African history, a history long dismissed due to the absence of written records.

Devisse (1982) highlights archaeology's contributions to the understanding of the West African Sahel through excavation findings in countries like Mali and Senegal. Archaeology began to take its first steps in Africa towards the late 19th century and became more structured in the mid-20th century, experiencing notable growth in the 1950s and 1960s. The interest of Africa's new elite following independence in gaining a more positive understanding of African history fostered the rise of this

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scientific discipline, which could meaningfully contribute to reconstructing the past with material evidence (Sutton, 2017). Nevertheless, the development of archaeology on the continent remains highly uneven, with advanced hubs such as South Africa, intermediate hubs like Senegal, Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, and Nigeria, and underdeveloped hubs like Guinea Conakry and Guinea Bissau (McIntosh, 2017).

In Benin, archaeology faces various obstacles that seem to impede its development and limit its contributions to reconstructing the country's history. The widespread lack of awareness regarding the importance of archaeological heritage, especially within major decision-making spheres, often results in the destruction of this vital and irreplaceable heritage (Mitchell, 2017).

The methodology of this article is based on empirical research, archaeological survey reports, and a specialized literature review. Through the example of the ETOO fortified site in the Shabè region, the article seeks to first explore the role of archaeological heritage within African cultural heritage as a whole, and Beninese heritage in particular. It also aims to propose strategies for enhancing this archaeological site to demonstrate how this often invisible and underappreciated heritage can serve as a lever for development.

1.1. Archaeological Heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa

Archaeology has experienced uneven development across the continent, resulting in highly varied realities of archaeological heritage from one country to another. The scale of archaeological excavations in South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Ethiopia, and other nations, and the resulting heritage, cannot be compared to what is found in countries like Benin. Archaeological excavations are often conducted by Western archaeologists, whom Sutton (2017) categorizes into two groups: universalists and Africanists. Universalists carry out excavations worldwide, including in Africa, adhering to universal principles in their research.

Africanist archaeologists conduct their excavations exclusively in Africa, striving to establish a distinct identity for African archaeology. African archaeologists face significantly greater challenges than their Western counterparts in accessing adequate resources for conducting excavations. They are often powerless against the recurrent destruction of archaeological heritage during large-scale public works, which are usually carried out without preventive archaeological measures. However, public works are not the sole cause of the destruction of archaeological heritage. Armed conflicts also facilitate both the looting and destruction of numerous archaeological remains, despite legal provisions aimed at protecting heritage during times of conflict. For instance, the destruction of the mausoleums in Timbuktu, northern Mali, in 2012 by armed groups caused great consternation within the international community. Similar alarming situations have affected other countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, with the destruction of humanity's treasures (Brun and Triboulot, 2017).

The looting of archaeological heritage, which is increasing on the global black market through the illicit trafficking of cultural goods, is facilitated by the lack of documentation and the difficulty of tracing looted objects back to their original sites. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) considers the looting and destruction of Africa's archaeological heritage an irreparable loss to the continent's history. To address this urgent issue, ICOM has been compiling a Red List of frequently looted African archaeological items since October 1997 to curb their circulation on international markets. These items include:

- Nok terracottas from the Bauchi Plateau and the Katsina and Sokoto regions in Nigeria;
- Terracottas and bronzes from Ife in Nigeria;
- Stone statues from Esie in Nigeria;
- Terracottas, bronzes, and pottery from the Niger Valley in Mali;
- Terracottas, bronzes, pottery, and stone statuettes from the Bura system in Niger and Burkina Faso;
- Stone statues from northern Burkina Faso;
- Terracottas from northern Ghana (Komaland) and Côte d'Ivoire;
- Sao terracottas and bronzes from Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria.

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ICOM's Red List serves as an important tool in combating the looting and illicit trafficking of Africa's archaeological heritage.

Benin is not exempt from these challenges, as its archaeological heritage is poorly understood, protected, and promoted. Nevertheless, the country is rich in archaeological sites that merit study to enhance historical sources through material culture. A notable example is the underground village of Agongointo, fortuitously discovered in 1998 by the Danish company DANISA during road construction. This discovery revealed underground caves that served as refuges during conflicts, dating back to the 16th century. Despite its significance, the site faces serious conservation challenges requiring substantial investment for restoration. More recently, the "Crossroads of Empires" project, conducted from 2011 to 2015 by a multicultural (Europe, Africa) and multidisciplinary research team in the Niger Valley in northern Benin, documented about 800 sites, including detailed excavations at over 30 locations. These efforts revealed evidence of human occupation spanning 2,500 years.

Archaeological research in Benin is regulated by legislation to ensure proper excavation practices and the conservation and promotion of discovered artifacts.

1.2. The Role of Cinema and Audiovisual Media in Enhancing African Archaeological Heritage

Cinema and audiovisual media play a pivotal role in documenting and promoting African archaeological heritage. Through these platforms, broad audiences can be informed, sensitized, and mobilized to address issues related to heritage conservation and development. Furthermore, cinema and audiovisual content support archival initiatives, encourage economic development via cultural tourism, and fortify cultural identity.

The effectiveness of these media has been demonstrated on several heritage sites, including the Great Zimbabwe complex and the Nubian pyramids of Meroe. In these instances, cinematic and audiovisual projects have successfully communicated the historical significance of such sites to the public. Given their wide reach, cinema and audiovisual media are particularly well-suited as educational tools for local communities, helping them understand the importance of preserving and promoting their heritage.

Notable examples highlight the impact of these media. The Manuscripts of Timbuktu underscores the potential of audiovisual storytelling to draw attention to the destruction of ancient manuscripts, emphasizing the urgent need for preservation (Zola, 2008). Such projects demonstrate how audiovisual technologies can serve as vital tools for visual conservation, especially in instances where archaeological sites face threats from erosion or armed conflict. By recording oral histories and documenting sites, cinema and audiovisual media establish enduring archives for future research and cultural reference. They also serve as conduits for financial investment. For example, documentary films produced by National Geographic, such as Great Zimbabwe: Secrets of the Lost City, have helped secure international funding for these threatened sites.

In terms of cultural identity, cinema contributes to both the rehabilitation and reinforcement of African heritage. Analyses of traditional narratives within cinematic works reveal the extent to which film can serve as an avenue for cultural reappropriation (Ouma et al., 2020). Diawara (1992) contends that African cinema allows for the restoration of previously erased histories and the reconstruction of collective memory. Films such as Timbuktu by Abderrahmane Sissako epitomize these dynamics, drawing connections between material heritage and broader identity issues. Moreover, audiovisual narratives serve to bridge generational gaps, rendering African heritage both accessible and meaningful to contemporary audiences.

1.3. Archaeological Heritage and Beninese Legislation

Law No. 2021-09 of October 22, 2021, on the protection of cultural heritage in the Republic of Benin, which replaces the 2007 law, does not explicitly define archaeological heritage. In contrast, the French Heritage Code defines it in Article L510-1 as "the remains, goods, and other traces of human existence, including their context, whose preservation and study, particularly through excavations or discoveries, allow for the reconstruction of human history and its relationship with the natural environment." Similarly, the International Charter for the Management of Archaeological Heritage,

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adopted at ICOMOS's 9th General Assembly in Lausanne in 1990, defines archaeological heritage in Article 1 as "the part of our material heritage for which archaeological methods provide fundamental knowledge. It includes all traces of human existence and encompasses places of human activity, abandoned structures and remains of all kinds, whether on the surface, underground, or underwater, as well as associated materials." Archaeological heritage, therefore, reflects the historical occupation of a territory through material traces. The tangible nature of archaeological objects is a major asset for reconstructing African history, which Western historians long denied.

Archaeological excavations in Benin are regulated to ensure proper oversight by the relevant authorities. The law on cultural heritage protection specifies in Article 96 that the soil and subsoil belong to the state, requiring notification and state approval for any actions that may compromise their integrity. Article 97 mandates prior authorization from the Ministry of Culture before conducting excavations or surveys to uncover material evidence of prehistory, history, etc. Competent services within the Ministry oversee and control excavations (Article 98).

Excavation permits require submitting a report to the authorities within a month of completion. Archaeologists must also preserve and declare objects from their excavations (Article 99). Collections from accredited researchers with interests in prehistory, history, ethnology, etc., must be deposited in national museums. Although the legislation is clear, the lack of human and material resources hinders its effective enforcement. Public ignorance of legal provisions and archaeological heritage complicates its preservation, often leading to irreversible destruction during private construction projects. Moreover, preventive archaeology is rarely considered during public works.

The irreversible destruction of archaeological heritage, whether by the public or state entities, could be mitigated if municipalities took a greater interest in such heritage, facilitating its identification and integration into public projects.

1.4. The ETOO Fortified Site: An Archaeological Heritage in the Shabè Region

The Shabè region, located in the Collines Department of Benin, boasts a rich and diverse archaeological heritage. However, it remains largely unexplored by archaeologists seeking material evidence to contribute to the reconstruction of its settlement history (Labiyi, 2008). Agani and Hamadou (2019) conducted an archaeological inventory of fortified structures in the Shabè region using a methodology that combined archaeological surveys with cross-referencing oral and written data. This inventory highlights the richness and diversity of fortified sites and enabled the identification of five categories of fortified structures:

- Earthen walls at ShabèIdadu;
- Dry stone walls at Fiditi, OkéIgboé, Agba in ShabèIdadu, and other locations;
- Barriers made of thorny and stinging plants (Acacia pennata and Mucuna poggei) at Igbo-Ilaka and Ikinmon;
- "Warrior mannequins" believed to have been used as deterrence devices;
- Concentric buildings (IléAlakaba).

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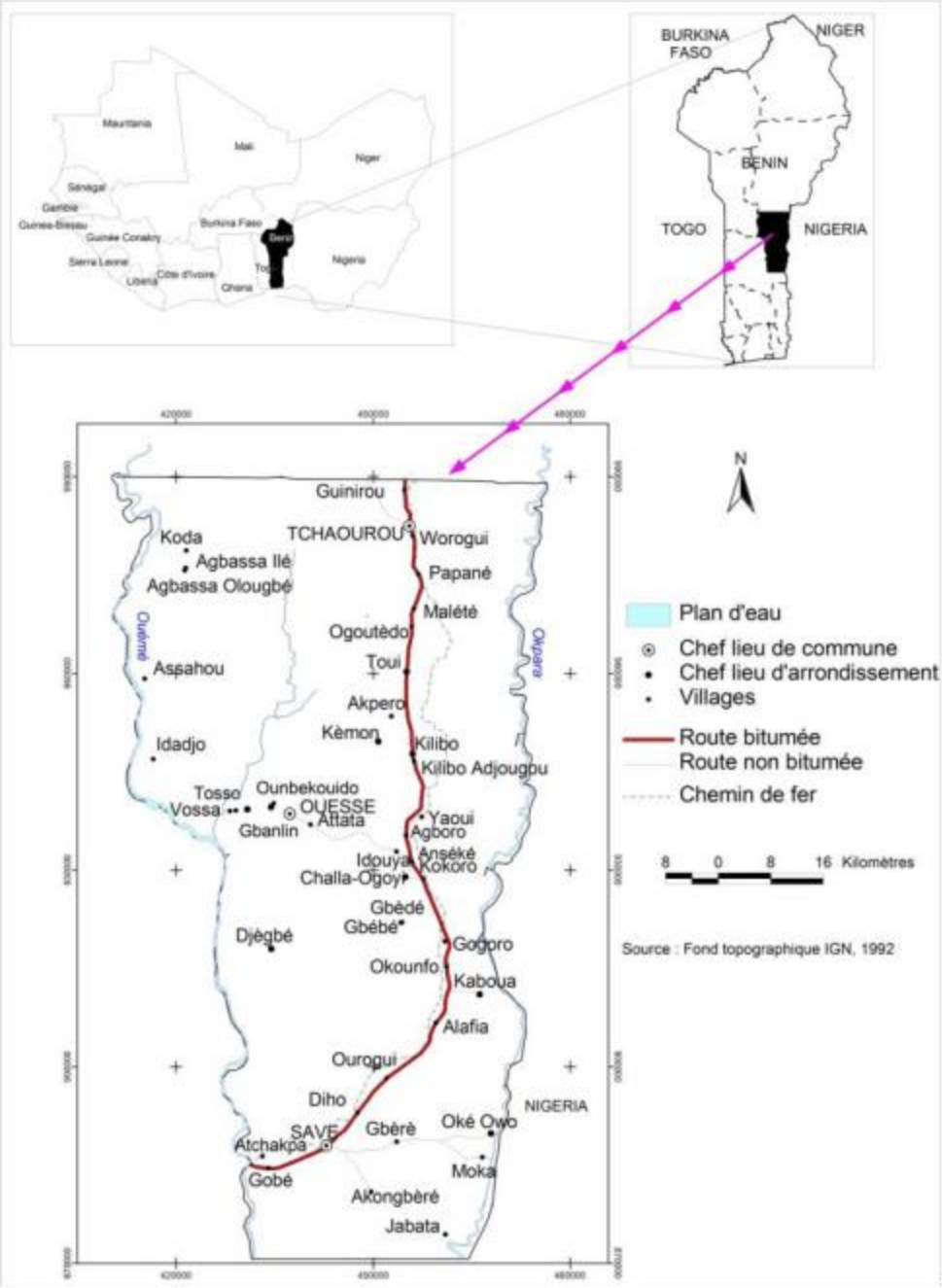

Figure 1:
Map of the Shabè Region in the Republic of Benin.
Source: Mardjoua Barpougouni and Nestor Labiyi, 2019.

In this article, our focus is on the Etoo fortified site located in the village of Yaoui, within the Kilibo district of the Ouèssè commune, in the Collines Department.

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Figure 2:
Section of dry stone wall at the Etoo site.
Source: Labiyi Nestor, 2017.

N'Dah et al. (2015) published the results of a reconnaissance survey conducted at this archaeological site during a mission held from August 30 to 31, 2014. This multidisciplinary survey assessed the richness of the Etoo site's remains. Combining archaeological surveys with the collection of oral tradition data, their findings revealed abundant vegetation on the site, despite significant human presence. Dominant plant species include the baobab, rônier, and shea trees. The ETOO site, comprising a group of hills named Etchokofonfèka, Ibadan, Ogoudadja, Abèokuta, and Agboo, served as a refuge. Its rocky outcrops functioned as natural fortifications, protecting local populations from invaders. This practice is widespread in the Collines Department. For example, in the Idaatcha region, the Yaka hill also served as a refuge during raids by the slaving kingdom of Danxomè.

Additionally, the use of thorny plants such as "èwon," found on the site, illustrates a further protective strategy employed by the region's populations. Thorny or stinging barriers served as defensive fortifications, much like in the Idaatcha region, where they limited enemy invasions and restricted access to sacred sites, such as Igbo Erémou.

The ETOO site is, therefore, a refuge combining natural defenses (hills, thorny plants) with anthropogenic constructions such as earthen and dry stone walls, augmented by fortification pits. Archaeological evidence, including scattered ceramic shards, anthropogenic mounds, and entire pots—sadly destroyed by farmers upon discovery—attests to the site's archaeological significance.

Serious excavations at the site could contribute significantly to understanding human settlement in the region, shedding light on the history of Shabè occupation and their interactions with neighboring populations and beyond. Furthermore, a heritage study of a refuge site like ETOO could reveal the

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resistance and defense strategies developed over centuries of occupation and document an important aspect of the slave trade in the region.

The prospect of patrimonialising the ETOO fortified site is emphasized by Mardjoua and Labiyi (2019), who reviewed initiatives aimed at enhancing knowledge of this site and its historical importance to the Shabè region. The works of Mouléro (1964), Labiyi (2008), Agani (2015), and Assogba and Labiyi (2017), alongside growing interest among archaeologists and historians, provide a solid foundation for its recognition as heritage. Since 2019, the annual Symposium of Yaoui, organized by the Association of Residents and Natives of the locality, has bolstered the site's prominence.

Beyond festive and sociocultural activities, this event includes an international colloquium, creating a synergy between community celebration and scientific discourse. This platform fosters reflection on historiography, socio-anthropological studies, heritage potential, and the socio-economic challenges of the territory, thereby driving development. Integrating scientific colloquia into community gatherings might seem unusual, but it is justified by the contribution of humanities research to development.

The findings of research serve as a basis for decision-makers to plan and implement development actions. The archaeological and historical research interest in the ETOO site in recent years has laid the groundwork for tourism planning, which could generate new dynamics for the territory and the region.

1.4.1. ETOO Fortified Site: A Process of Heritage Recognition Initiated?

Riegl (1984), in his work *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, identifies three values associated with heritage: the "commemorative or memory value," the "historical value," and the "antiquity value." Riegl's foundational studies (1903) on the patrimonialization of historical monuments have significantly contributed to establishing the framework for the heritage-making process. Subsequent researchers have elaborated on criteria and key steps for transforming an object or site into heritage. Leniaud (1992) likens patrimonialization to a process of "appropriation" and identifies three main values of heritage:

- Market value, linked to the non-usual usage of the object;
- Scientific value, reflecting researchers' interest in the object, thereby making it a subject of study;
- Communicative value, whereby the object becomes a medium for communication.

The study of patrimonialization seeks to explore the process by which an object, site, ritual, or celebration becomes heritage. As Davallon (2002) asks, "How is heritage created?" Vernières (2011) defines patrimonialization as "the transition from potential heritage to recognized heritage as a collective good, characterized simultaneously by its economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions." Thus, patrimonialization is fundamentally a process of recognition, elevating an object or site from indifference to acknowledged significance.

Davallon (2006) describes the patrimonialization process through six key steps:

- Discovery of the object as a find,
- Certification of the object's origin,
- Establishment of the object's original context,
- Representation of the original context through the object,
- Celebration of the discovery via visits and exhibitions,
- Commitment to transmit it to future generations.

From these steps, Davallon identifies four major patrimonialization acts:

- Identification of the object,
- Authentication of its historical link,
- Declaration of its patrimonial status,
- Public dissemination of its new status.

This process involves specific criteria, dedicated actors, and logical stages. Central to this process are actors motivated to promote the object, the justification of its heritage value, and the dissemination of this value to the public.

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The ETOO fortified site aligns well with this heritage recognition process. Its commemorative, historical, and antiquity values are validated through surrounding traditions and archaeological surveys conducted on-site. Although more definitive scientific evidence from excavations is awaited, the patrimonialization of the site has begun. Archaeological and historical research results enhance its knowledge base, its scientific value is being established, and its heritage status could be reinforced through integration into local, national, and international tourism programs. However, effective tourism promotion requires preliminary work on the site's conservation, development, and enhancement.

1.4.2. Toward a Valorization Plan for the ETOO Fortified Site

The valorization of a cultural heritage site, whether archaeological or otherwise, involves ensuring its identification in a cultural heritage inventory, conserving it, and creating added value. Although the ETOO site has undergone archaeological inventorying (Agani and Hamadou, 2019), it requires a comprehensive heritage inventory, development plan, management plan, and valorization plan. The heritage inventory collects and documents information on the site, forming the first critical step in the valorization process. The development plan designs and implements mechanisms to make the site accessible, functional, and comprehensible to the public.

The use of cinema as a means of valorising the ETOO fortified site represents an approach that is both innovative and strategic. By leveraging the narrative and visual power of cinema, the complex or distant historical accounts of this site can be transformed into accessible and engaging experiences for younger audiences, who predominantly consume audiovisual content. Through documentary films and immersive audiovisual productions, it becomes possible not only to document, but also to construct visual narratives that enhance the visibility and understanding of heritage for a broad audience. For instance, cinematic recreations of the historical and cultural practices associated with the ETOO fortified site have the potential to raise awareness among local communities and attract cultural tourism.

Participatory methods that involve local communities in audiovisual production processes are essential to ensure sustainable development. These approaches foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, thereby reinforcing the long-term preservation and promotion of the site. In this context, the exploration of transmedia storytelling, notably through platforms such as YouTube and Netflix, stands out as a promising avenue of research. By integrating multiple platforms, stakeholders can expand the reach of heritage values related to the ETOO fortified site and engage diverse audiences more effectively.

The institutionalization of heritage cinema, through the establishment of dedicated bodies tasked with producing films for heritage documentation and promotion, further strengthens these endeavours. Such institutional frameworks not only facilitate continuous documentation but also create an ecosystem in which heritage films can thrive, receiving the financial and logistical support necessary to ensure their sustainability and impact. The management plan ensures efficient governance of the site, incorporating:

- Identification data such as name, type, and location;
- Descriptions of itscomponents;
- Legal and administrative frameworks governing the site;
- Evaluation of its conservation state, including physical integrity and authenticity;
- Analysis of the management system and stakeholder roles.

The valorisation of the ETOO site should follow a heritage development plan informed by a diagnostic study. This diagnostic should identify the site's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. For ETOO, the dense vegetation hindering access must be addressed through a development plan devised by cultural heritage professionals before initiating valorisation efforts.

Valorisation actions for an archaeological site vary based on the site's nature and the potential identified by cultural heritage professionals post-diagnostic. This article presents only a preliminary projection for ETOO, as no comprehensive archaeological excavations have been conducted to fully assess its heritage potential. However, existing survey results highlight the site's undeniable historical importance. A cultural valorisation perspective suggests constructing a tourist circuit around the site,

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connecting it with other fortified sites in the Shabè region to create a "Resistance Route." This route could encompass all fortified sites and locations historically linked to resistance and defence against external aggressions in the Shabè region.

Developing tourist circuits around fortified sites would offer national and international visitors deeper insights into the ingenuity of regional populations, who transformed their territories into defensive and offensive systems over centuries. This circuit could include cultural and scientific activities, such as on-site exhibitions, museums, or interpretation centres showcasing artifacts from archaeological excavations. These activities, modelled on practices in Western countries, would preserve the traceability of excavations and share findings with the public. Additionally, they would raise awareness among Beninese and local populations about the importance of archaeological heritage in reconstructing human history. A cultural mediation framework must accompany such exhibitions to enhance public understanding.

Figure 3:
Overview of an exhibition of artifacts from excavations at the ARCHEO-SAT77 Archaeological and Heritage Center in Touquin, France, © ARCHEO-SAT77, 2020.

2. Conclusion

Archaeological heritage remains largely unknown in Benin; however, the richness of this type of heritage in the country is undeniable. The ETOO fortified site is a compelling example of this underexplored aspect of Benin's cultural heritage. The International and Cultural Symposium of Yaoui, which combines scientific research with community gathering, serves as an excellent example of the role scientific research plays in development. The importance of the archaeological heritage of the Shabè region is gradually being uncovered through the pioneering work of researchers. However, the true value of these various sites can only contribute to territorial development if adequate investments accompany scientific efforts.

The goal is to achieve more conclusive results that support the planning of local development projects and promote the region's visibility. Research in Benin remains heavily dependent on external

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funding, which often prioritizes interests that do not necessarily align with those of national researchers. Archaeological research is even more constrained by this reliance on external funding, which influences research directions on the continent based on the priorities of European or North American countries that provide the most investment (McIntosh, 2017).

It is imperative that the state and local governments invest in research to ensure that the results address national development priorities as defined by local stakeholders.

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