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Looted and illegally acquired African objects in European museums: issues of restitution and repatriation in Ghana

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Abstract

Ghana's post-independence governments have made a number of requests for the return of looted and illegally acquired Ghanaian cultural objects in the collections of European museums. While the majority of those requests were denied, a few were honoured. This paper assesses three of the demands and the aftermath of their return. It also examines the preparedness of heritage institutions and museums in Ghana in relation to issues of restitution and repatriation. The paper identifies the numerous challenges confronting the museum and heritage sector in Ghana and concludes by calling on policy makers, traditional authorities, universities and the government of Ghana to deepen public awareness of cultural heritage, invest more in museums and heritage institutions to function well and revisit earlier demands that were denied.

Keywords: Ghana, museum, heritage, looted Ghanaian cultural objects, restitution, repatriation

Looted and Illegally Acquired African Objects in European Museums: Issues of Restitution and Repatriation in Ghana

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Abstract

The discourse on repatriation and restitution of looted and illegally acquired African cultural objects in European museums back to their African places of origin has been on-going for some time now. This contribution, based on empirical evidence and drawing on concrete cases, sketches the practical, professional, ethical, economic, socio-cultural and legal issues surrounding the achievement of the safe return, settlement and usage of cultural objects in the Ghanaian context. Ghana's post-independence governments have made a number of requests for the return of looted and illegally acquired Ghanaian cultural objects in the collections of European museums. While the majority of those requests were denied, a few were honoured. This paper assesses three of the demands and the aftermath

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of their return. It also examines the preparedness of heritage institutions and museums in Ghana in relation to issues of restitution and repatriation. Through active participation in museums, observation, and analysis of the literature, data was collected for this research. The paper identifies the numerous challenges confronting the museum and heritage sector in Ghana and concludes by calling on policy makers, traditional authorities, universities and the government of Ghana to deepen public awareness of cultural heritage, invest more in museums and heritage institutions to function well and revisit earlier demands that were denied.

Keywords: Ghana, museum, heritage, looted Ghanaian cultural objects, restitution, repatriation

Résumé

Le discours sur le rapatriement et la restitution des objets culturels africains pillés et acquis illégalement dans les musées européens dans leurs lieux d'origine africains est en cours depuis un certain temps déjà. Cette contribution, basée sur des preuves empiriques et s'appuyant sur des cas concrets, esquisse les questions pratiques, professionnelles, éthiques, économiques, socioculturelles et juridiques entourant la réalisation du retour, de l'installation et de l'utilisation en toute sécurité des objets culturels dans le contexte ghanéen. Les gouvernements du Ghana après l'indépendance ont fait un certain nombre de demandes de restitution d'objets culturels ghanéens pillés et acquis illégalement dans les collections des musées européens. Bien que la majorité de ces demandes aient été refusées, quelques-unes ont été honorées. Cet article évalue trois des demandes et les conséquences de leur retour. Il examine également l'état de préparation des institutions du patrimoine et des musées du Ghana par rapport aux questions de restitution et de rapatriement. Grâce à une participation active aux musées, à l'observation et à l'analyse de la littérature, des données ont été recueillies pour cette recherche. L'article identifie les nombreux défis auxquels le secteur des musées et du patrimoine est confronté au Ghana et conclut en appelant les décideurs politiques, les autorités traditionnelles, les universités et le gouvernement du Ghana à approfondir la sensibilisation du public au patrimoine culturel, à investir davantage dans les musées et les institutions du patrimoine pour que ces derniers fonctionnent bien et à revoir les demandes antérieures qui avaient été refusées.

Mots clés : Ghana, musée, patrimoine, objets culturels ghanéens pillés, restitution, rapatriement

Introduction

The discourse on repatriation and restitution of looted and illegally acquired African cultural objects in European museums back to their African places of origin has been on-going for some time now. In theory, this idea and agenda of repatriation of material culture has long been a subject of concern to Africans. However, as has been discovered in the Ghanaian context, the practical, professional, ethical, economic, socio-cultural and legal issues surrounding the achievement of the safe return, settlement and usage of these cultural objects is a challenging task for both the repatriating and receiving museums. It is, indeed, a mission that demands national and international diplomatic negotiations and working within reasonable ethical and legal frameworks. Issues of repatriation and restitution have become a dilemma due to the entangled complex histories surrounding the concerned heritage. There is thus no straightforward or shortcut solution to the answer for repatriation of the material. However, what is required is a continuous dialogue and education on the African continent among Africans, and outside the continent between relevant African, European and American institutions and authorities in seeking workable solutions.

Cultural heritage is so dynamic in nature that its restitution from wherever it is, requires the application of a multi-and inter-disciplinary approach and perspective in dealing with it. This is more especially so when dealing with looted and illegally acquired African cultural heritage located in the various museums in Europe. As Virginia Dominguez has pointed out:

“Cultural heritage,” intersects in intriguing ways with issues of history and time, materiality and property, “soft power” and “cultural policies,” universalism and particularism, nation-ness and border crossing, wealth and poverty, tourism (both for the tourists and the toured), responsibility and authority, community and recognition, ruins and hope (2017:120).

Numerous valuable Ghanaian cultural heritage resources of diverse nature reflecting the people's history, culture and traditions, intelligence, creativity and craftsmanship, technological knowledge and skills, belief systems, ideology, social organisation, and spirituality, among others, have been lost to Europe and other western countries. However, this state of things may not persist for much longer, judging by the clamour for restitution currently taking place. These cultural materials demonstrate past achievements of Ghanaians and form a basis for the development of the present and the future, confirming the identity of the nation and its people. It is important to note that only a few of these Ghanaian collections in Western museums are exhibited with the majority in storage. While they serve as economic wealth for these museum in the West, the source nation and communities suffer untold economic and non-economic losses. The looted and illegally acquired cultural heritage materials are in the form of archaeological, ethnographic and historical collections, arts and crafts, specimens, and in some cases, human remains.

Since Ghana's independence, negotiations for the return of Ghanaian cultural objects outside the country have occurred. In most cases, these demands for the restitution and repatriation of looted and illegally acquired Ghanaian cultural heritage whose locations were known, have been denied or ignored. However, there are also a few successful cases where the requests have been honoured. This paper presents three cases of demands for restitution and repatriation made by the Asante, the Ahanta and the Koma, supported by the Government of Ghana.

The Asante demand for looted gold items

Accounts of British colonial expedition to Asante abound in the literature (e.g. Arhin, 2000; McIntyre, 1962; Spiers, 2004; Ukpabi, 1970). Often omitted in these accounts is the fact that the British expedition to Asante encouraged the looting of Asante cultural objects. Recently, Opoku (2018) has provided vivid photographs of a number of looted Asante gold artefacts stolen during these expeditions and currently located in museums in Britain and America such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, and the Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery. Both Otumfuo Nana Opoku Ware II and Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II the late and current Asantehenes respectively, have, with the support of the Government of Ghana, made requests to the British Government for the return of these looted cultural treasures taken away from Kumasi during the British invasion of Asante in 1874. The requests have been declined (Opoku 2018). According to Opoku (2018), this is not surprising, particularly when a former British Museum Director David Wilson (1977–1992) is cited as having stated that, “Trustees and the Government of my country have said that on no account will they return objects held by the British Museum to their country of origin, save under the terms provided for the British Museum Act of 1963”. This is despite the fact that while western museums can exhibit high quality African artefacts, African museums on the other hand have none. As Opoku (2018) notes:

“our efforts for the restitution of looted African artefacts are not primarily concerned with past events; we are not interested in apportioning blame for European massacres and other atrocities in Africa. We are concerned with the present glaring imbalances between African States and Western States regarding the numbers of quality artefacts that their museums can display. Western museums can easily mount magnificent exhibitions of African cultures whereas our own museums would not even dare to think about such displays. The best art objects that Africa has produced have been taken to the West”

A typical example of this imbalance between African museums and Western ones was evident in an exhibition that was mounted in April 2018 by the Dallas Museum of Art in the United States of America. The exhibition titled, “The Power of Gold: Asante Royal Regalia from Ghana” brought together over 250 objects, including crowns, sword ornaments, ceremonial furniture, textiles, pectoral disks,

weapons, a state umbrella, musical instruments, and jewellery made of wood, silk, brass, iron, and gold, an exhibition inspired by the Museum's collection. The Power of Gold was the first American museum exhibition dedicated to Asante regalia in over 30 years, and explored the unique role and impact of gold on the development of the Asante society, economy, and arts (Dallas Museum of Art, 2018). Ironically, none of the museums in Ghana can afford to mount such an ambitious and elaborate exhibition. This variance is simply because such collections are not available.

The Ahanta Demand for Their King's Head from The Dutch

The second example for restitution examined here relates to human remains, specifically to the demand for the return of the head of an Ahanta chief who was said to have killed two European intruders on his land. The chief was hanged and his head was cut off and sent to Holland. The Dutch government responded positively after negotiations were made and the required processes duly followed. The return was well published in both the national and international media with various captions in 2009 (Popham 2009, The Telegraph, 2009).

King Badu Bonsu II of Ahanta's head was discovered gathering dust in a laboratory in the Leiden University Medical Centre in 2002 by Arthur Japin, a Dutch author researching for *The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi*, his historical novel about nineteenth-century Africa. Preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, King Badu Bonsu II's head had been there since its arrival in the late 1830s from the Dutch controlled region of what was then called the Gold Coast and is today Ghana. The head was taken by Maj. Gen. Jan Verveer in 1838 in retaliation for Bonsu's killing of two Dutch emissaries, whose heads were displayed as trophies on Bonsu's throne (The Telegraphy, 2009).

Arthur Japin revealed his discovery during a dinner at The Hague at which were present the then Ghanaian President, John Kuffuor, the Dutch Queen Beatrix and other dignitaries (Popham, 2009). After hearing the story of the head, the former President instructed the Ghanaian embassy to secure the release and return of the head to Ghana. After much lobbying and negotiation, the Dutch government finally allowed the release and the head was finally returned on July 24 2009, 171 years after being illegally 'exported'. It has since been kept at the 37 Military Hospital in Accra as a way of honouring the late chief while a decision is taken on an appropriate, national burial (Kokutse, 2009). Whatever decision is taken by the descendants and the people of Ahanta, of critical importance here is that the head has been repatriated to re-humanise, re-contextualise and honour the chief in a culturally respectful manner.

This case also brings to the forefront issues relating to Ghana's preparedness for the repatriation of the remains of identified and unidentified individuals. Possibly, national facilities such as the University of Ghana's Anatomy and Pathology museums at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital need to be considered for the preservation

of repatriated human remains pending final determination by their owners (see **Fig. 1**). These two museums need to be well resourced to be able to accommodate repatriated human remains. In that way, relations can still have access to them in their own country and memories of them and their stories will be kept alive.



Fig. 1: Preserved human parts for teaching and learning at the Anatomy Museum, University of Ghana (Photo by Gertrude Eyifa-Dzidzienyo)

The Demand for Koma Terracotta Figurines

The third case is from Koma. Koma Land, is well known for its magnificent and detailed anthropomorphic and zoomorphic terracotta figurines, has been a subject/site of studies from the perspectives of history, archaeology and art history from the 1980s (Anquandah 1986, 1987, 2002; Berns 1993; Cocle 1991; Insoll & Kankpeyang 2010; Insoll et al. 2013). Koma Land spans the borders of five administrative regions of Ghana — Upper West, Upper East, Savannah, North East, and Northern regions. The name “Koma” is derived from one of the current ethnolinguistic groups in the region. The contemporary Koma are not directly connected with the makers of the terracotta figurines as they do not have any knowledge of their makers and how they were made. The terracotta figurines from Koma Land, Northern Ghana have been dated to the 6th – 14th century AD (Insoll et al. 2016). There is no written history or oral tradition about the producers.

Ben Baluri Saibu, a native of Yikpabongo, one of the villages within the Koma archaeological region, recounts that he reported the presence of the figurines in 1984 to the Department of Archaeology (now Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies) at the University of Ghana, the Upper East Regional Museum and the National Museum of Ghana. He was then a law student of the University of Ghana, and on visiting the Museum of Archaeology in the Department. Seeing artefacts on display, and realising that similar objects were to be found all over his village, brought samples to the Department the following semester. At about the same time, Franz Kröger, a German anthropologist conducting research in northern Ghana, also notified the Department of Archaeology of the discoveries (Anquandah and Van Ham, 1985:7; Kröger, 1988). As a result of these reports, staff of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB) made a preliminary visit to

the area in 1984 (Kankpeyeng and DeCorse, 2004:102) and confirmed the presence of the figurines in Yikpabong and its neighbouring communities. Undoubtedly, some of the terracotta pieces that were accidentally discovered must have been sold to antique dealers.

In 1985, a team led by the late Professor James Anquandah of the Department of Archaeology conducted scientific test excavation at the village of Yikpabongo. The contextual and provenance information when published instigated further interest by antique dealers in the art pieces, leading to wide spread looting of the sites. It is, however, likely that looting of the sites started ahead of the scientific investigations of 1985 (Anquandah, 1998: 64; Nkumbaan, 2015:5).

The figurines can be categorized into broad groups such as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, and include human (stylized and realistic), animals and birds (mystical and actual), combined human and animal forms, cone forms and objects modelled in clay such as gourds or stools (Insoll et al., 2016:28). See Fig. 2.



Fig. 2: Exhibition of Koma Figurines in the Museum of Archaeology, University of Ghana
(Photo by Gertrude Eyifa-Dzidzienyo)

Through the intervention of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, the Archaeology Department, the Government of Ghana and other stakeholders, Koma terracotta is on the ICOM red list and looting has drastically reduced. However, despite the numerous Koma terracotta figurines that were looted and the subsequent community education and awareness creation that minimised the looting, and despite the involvement of the community, traditional leaders, district assembly, regional minister, the ministry responsible for culture, professionals from the museum sector and academia, as well as the nation as a whole, a community museum or cultural centre where these heritage materials can be exhibited to deepen education, has not been established. It is disheartening that this heritage awareness creation and education at the local, regional and national levels have not been sustained by the government and people in authority.

Excavations from 2006 to present by Benjamin Kankpeyeng and his team have unearthed huge quantities of these objects, some of which have been analysed and scientifically studied. If the demand for the return of the looted figurines in European and American museums is honoured and they are returned, some headway can be made in reconstructing the history of the lost civilisation of Koma. With all the researched information and knowledge associated with these figurines, they can be contextualized in their source communities or region in a museum. This will aid in deepening the knowledge about values and traditions associated with them and also promote the preservation of heritage.

Although in this particular instance, there is no direct connection between the current settlers on the land and the producers of these cultural heritage objects, they are Ghanaian cultural heritage imbued with deep histories and knowledge about the environment, socio-cultural practices, trade relations, medicinal rituals and religious practices. For these reasons, a national action of setting up community museums and exhibiting them is paramount and should not be ignored. Then, when those illegally taken out of the country are also returned and exhibited in Ghana, a sense of responsibility will be engendered not only on governmental institutions but also on the local communities. Through that, general education on the values, significance and the need for heritage preservation in Ghana for its potential gains would be ingrained.

It is established that Ghana has made demands for restitution and repatriation in the past. There are also instances where successful lobbying and negotiations have seen the return of objects to the country. However, the majority of Ghanaian objects in museums and private collections in Europe and America have not been returned. In many cases, the nature of the objects is unknown due to lack of information on them. Again, the onus is on the government to support heritage institutions to begin researching on these cultural materials, including provenance research.

Roles and Responsibilities of Ghana Museums and Cultural institutions

A critical examination of the state of museums and cultural institutions in Ghana reveals that indeed, Ghana, like other African countries, has a lot of work to do. Museums in Europe and America equally have a responsibility. European institutions argue that it is better they keep cultural objects from Africa because they have the relevant and necessary facilities to preserve them for universal appreciation and understanding of human creativity. They also claim to preserve the cultural objects and make these collections accessible to the world. However, the majority of the African collections are in storage without being exhibited.

Various arguments have been made as reasons for no return including on legislations that prevent de-accessioning of collections, the lack of provenance

research, and the rights accorded by property law. Despite these underlying reasons, the collateral benefits of the African collections to African nations including Ghana is recognised, and we must do our preparatory works well in seeking restitution and repatriation of our artefacts.

For restitution and repatriation to be made successfully, European museums must give up ownership of these objects. The ownership can be established at two levels: ownership in terms of the producers of the cultural objects and registrars of the objects in Europe. Furthermore, European institutions could follow French President Emmanuel Macron's gesture and promise the return of African cultural artefacts in their museums. Macron's decision was guided by a report he commissioned that recommends that France should return to Africa art and artefacts held in French cultural institutions, and characterizes the collections as part of a system of appropriation and alienation that takes away from Africans their "spiritual nourishment that is the foundation of [their] humanity". Thus, as part of his "reset" of France's relations with Africa, President Macron in 2017 announced that he wanted to start returning African cultural artefacts within the next five years, and has since called for an international conference on the return of African artefacts (Sarr and Savoy, 2018).

Importantly, there is need for these museums to come forward with an inventory of all looted and illegally acquired African cultural objects in their collections, with or without contextual information. The inventories should be widely published for African countries to be able to identify the location of their objects. The dialogue, negotiations and processes of restitution and repatriation with all its complexities can begin from there.

The Ghanaian government, for its part, must intensely lobby and negotiate for the return of the endless list of looted and illegally acquired cultural objects taken away from the country. Yet, examples from other African countries show that the process can be long drawn out. It took 20 years of negotiation for the Makonde Mask to be returned to Tanzania and 22 for the stolen vigango memorials to be returned to Kenya from the United States. The Obelisk of Aksum was returned to Ethiopia after almost 70 years, while the Lion of Judah monument was returned after 30 years in Rome (Dandaura et al., 2014:64).

Repatriation of Ghanaian cultural objects must be a national issue of discussion, education and consultation at all levels and all the educational institutions must actively be involved. Heritage studies should be a component of the educational curriculum in schools from the basic levels to tertiary. The universities need to be tasked to conduct research into heritage and issues of provenance research should be handled in a collaborative manner where staff from museums and cultural institutions would work with the university researchers. Such national collaborative effects will result in the establishment of provenance and context for cultural

objects, and creation of a national heritage register. An additional benefit would be generating cultural data that can serve as a springboard for development.

At the moment, the question is how prepared is Ghana to receive her repatriated cultural objects? Ghana's national and regional museums, cultural institutions and university museums are all not well-resourced. The National Museum of Ghana for example has been closed to visitors for almost four years for renovations. The regional museums which all fall under the supervision of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB), have structural problems such as leakages in the building and inadequate storage space.

There is need for the establishment of specific standards and guidelines in the management of cultural heritage to be followed by all museums and heritage institutions in Ghana. The Ghana Museums and Monuments Board should be empowered to supervise the compliance of such standards.

A key factor that affects the curation of cultural objects in museums in Ghana and other African countries is poor storage facilities. The storage and environmental conditions in Ghanaian museums are poor with inadequate environmental monitoring gadgets. There are also inadequate space and housing containers such as shelves, racks, drawers and cabinets. The storage spaces are limited, over utilised and inaccessible. Such storage conditions do not help in the long term preservation of the existing cultural objects. Hence, if the collections are increased as a result of returns received from European museums, this may pose a challenge.

To be able to receive repatriated cultural objects in museums (community, regional, national), the current storage capacity needs to be expanded and well-resourced with at least the basic required modern environmental monitoring gadgets and storage facilities. An important provision in the new storage should be an archive for all intangibles associated with the cultural objects such as digitised materials in the form of sound, voice and audio-visual recordings, and documentation (published and unpublished). Conservation laboratories and facilities also need to be provided by government where there is none and existing ones upgraded.

Training of staff from museums and other heritage institutions is very important. There is the need for a reorientation of peoples' mind-sets and their perception about certain types of cultural objects such as ritual and religious objects. The reorientation should begin with staff of museums. The colonial legacy of demonising every African ritual and religious object has to be done away with in order to be able to receive the cultural objects being demanded for from European museums. Museum curators and educators would also need training in best practices, interpretation, giving of alternative historical narrations that will decolonise the minds of museum visitors. Similarly, training in disaster management should also be given.

Ghana also needs national standards and policies on repatriation of various types of cultural objects and how they will be received and reinstated. In addition to this, there is need for a national database of all repatriated objects and this must be accessible in all the regions in the country. This will be beneficial to the people and strengthen their national pride and identities, aid in multidisciplinary research projects and exhibitions that will increase domestic and international tourism and revenue generation. These are some of the measures that the nation needs to take to be prepared for repatriation.

Conclusion

As the discourse on restitution continues, Ghana – and to a large extent African countries – need to do their homework and take nothing for granted. A case-by-case approach should be adopted for many voices to be heard with regards to what to demand for and should the request be granted, what should be done with the cultural objects. Initial requests that have been made but were denied should be revisited. A close examination of the restitution cases in Ghana reveals that as a result of inter-governmental and inter-institutional negotiations or domestic lawsuits, returns have been successful in some cases. Bilateral agreement, the use of diplomatic channels, and media pressure can still be employed for successful returns.

Policy makers, traditional authorities, universities and the government of Ghana need to budget, invest and resource museums and heritage institutions/centres to function properly. The museum buildings should be structurally fit and secured to protect cultural objects. Cultural institutions also need to be positioned and prepared for restitution and repatriation. Restitution of cultural heritage should be well promoted across the country. Ghana should also make and implement stringent laws that will prevent illicit trafficking of cultural property.

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