

## **Introduction: Issues of Restitution and Repatriation of Looted and Illegally Acquired African Objects in European Museums**

The colonizing missions of the French, British, Scandinavians, Dutch, Belgians, Portuguese and Germans in Africa witnessed the aggressive looting and illegal acquisition of a massive number of cultural objects under force of arms or unequal exploitative terms. Since then, requests for the return and restitution of such objects from state and private museums in Europe have been met, time and again, with imperialist and racialized statements such as ‘the treasures are better protected in Europe’; ‘the treasures are seen by more persons in Europe than if they were to be returned to Africa’; ‘scholars still need to work on them’; ‘manuscripts are too old to travel’; ‘African museums do not have the security and environmental conditions that European museums have’; and ‘legal difficulties around deaccessioning’ among other rebuffs. Engaging in constructive talks about returning objects is an arduous task with varied hydra-headed political, legal, ethical, economic, socio-cultural and human rights ramifications. Cultural objects that are under such restitution demands are not limited to only African objects or by Africans or African countries. There are inter and intra-European as well as Euro-Asian and Euro-American demands.

The renewed attention being given to the repatriation of African artefacts and remains acquired in the contexts of legalised racial violence parallels, and cannot be dissociated from, issues surrounding the resurgence in the advocacy for justice against incidents of police brutality and other racially motivated crimes on Black lives. Thus, the key intent of the published papers in this special volume can be likened to the activism of the formidable #BlackLivesMatter social movement which champions various strategies against the inhumane racial injustices that confront peoples of African descent globally. The ideologies that underlie the #BlackLivesMatter also buttress the quest to free and regain the looted African objects that are currently held in Euro-American museums. Counter movements such as #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter, drum home the fact that the struggle for the repatriation of African cultural objects will inevitably encounter Euro-American museum gate keepers with entrenched views who would seek to derail these efforts. Nevertheless, as a social and intellectual movement and practice, the calls for the return of looted art works back to their recipient communities, exemplified in the collective papers in this volume, demonstrate that these issues can no longer be racially erased, dismissed or ignored in contemporary discourses and practices in museology and African studies.

Until recently, scholars have shied away from intellectually debating restitution, return, reparation and repatriation issues of such controversial objects on the African continent. French President Macron’s speech on his promise to return such objects in French museums to their respective countries in Africa and the report of the commission (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/french-restitution-policy-macron-1399429>) he set up has provided an impetus. However, the return,

repatriation and restitution of looted art from Africa sent or sold to European museums by agents of European colonizing missions are the interrogative centre stage of this special issue meant to garner frameworks for resolution. The issues of stumbling blocks to requests, processual stalemates and the continuing bid by European museums to erase and deny African people's human rights and direct access to looted creative and spiritual works of their ancestors, beg for continuous scholarly debates within the Africa continent by both African and international professionals and stakeholders. Such a quest is at the core of the papers in this Special Issue of CJAS. These select papers are the proceedings from a workshop on the above theme that was held at the University of Ghana in December 2018 under the auspices of the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA).

### **The Scope of this Special Volume**

Opening the conversation is Wazi Apoh and Andreas Mehler's contribution "Mainstreaming the Discourse on Restitution and Repatriation within African Studies, Heritage Studies and Political Science". Following this is Thomas Laely's paper entitled "Issues of Restitution and Repatriation of Looted and Illegally Acquired African Objects in European Museums" which explores a current trilateral museum research and exhibition partnership between Africa and Europe as a case study. Laely analyses the premise and modalities of the engagement between the partner institutions involved and further elaborates on knowledge generation and dissemination as well as the preconditions and requirements of larger long-term partnerships. As a former Deputy Director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, he keenly observes that museums are no longer merely the interpreters of a past heritage but also have their place in contemporary history and debates where they actively shape ever-evolving cultures that are grounded in both local and global concerns. Next, Dag Henrichsen, a scholar from the Basler Afrika Bibliographien and the University of Basel, explores a case study in his paper entitled "Demands for Restitution—a Recent Phenomenon? Early Histories of Human Remains Violations in Namibia". Henrichsen uses a general framework of restitution to link acts of African protest and resistance by focusing on pre- and early colonial violations by European scientists, missionaries and settlers in Namibia with regard to the desecration of gravesites and other spaces imbued with spiritual meanings. His aim is to tease out local and everyday contexts in which these violations took place in order to highlight aspects of local agency, which often gets lost in provenance research. Importantly, Henrichsen argues that these early violations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century continue to inform current restitution claims by Namibian stakeholders.

Turning our attention to the West African situation, Zacharys Gundu, a professor of Nigerian archaeology, attempts to identify the different genres of looted Nigerian materials in Europe and North America in his contribution "Looted Nigerian Heritage: An Interrogatory Discourse around Repatriation". Here, factors

that have continued to exacerbate the looting of the country's cultural resources are identified. He further suggests possible strategies for the repatriation of these looted treasures in the light of French President, Emmanuel Macron's stance on the return of African cultural materials held illegally and unjustly in France. Patrick Effiboley's paper, entitled "Reflections on the Issue of Repatriation of Looted and Illegally Acquired African Materials in Western Museums," offers a contribution from the perspective of the victims of Western modernity. As a scholar from the University of Abomey-Calavi, Republic of Benin, he presents the different terminologies used to express the movements of African cultural heritage from the cradle to its dissemination around the world. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the case of the cultural objects from the Republic of Benin whilst analyzing the typology of African heritage in Western museums in order to open-up new ways of dealing with the repatriation/restitution/return of African cultural heritage.

Aba Eyifa Dzidzienyo and Samuel Nkumbaan, both scholars of archaeology and heritage studies at the University of Ghana, sketch out 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. Their paper entitled "Looted and illegally acquired African objects in European Museums: Issues of Restitution and Repatriation in Ghana", reveal that from the post-independence era, Ghanaian 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 some of the demands and the aftermath of their return. It also examines the challenges and preparedness of heritage institutions and museums in Ghana in relation to issues of restitution and repatriation. Pearl Lamptey and Wazi Apoh's paper entitled "The Restitution Debate and Return of Human Remains: Implications for Bioarchaeological Research and Cultural Ethics in Africa", examines the discourse and practices associated with bioarchaeology. They relate this discourse to the issues surrounding the repatriation of human remains and discuss the implications of engaging in the bioarchaeological analysis of human remains to be repatriated and on the cultural rights of societies. By exploring the case of remains from Begho, they posit that the complexity of the nature of acquisition and return of human remains requires a holistic comprehension from multiple points of view rather than from a single subjective viewpoint. Hoebuadzu and Opeku's paper review the "Role of Ghanaian Chiefs and Queens in Sustaining Heritage Traditions within Issues of Restitution and Return of looted Royal Objects". Being a reigning queen and chief, respectively, they offer the perspective of traditional Ghanaian rulers on the issue of restitution as custodians of cultural heritage. We must point out that the paper is not an academic text since it does not engage with the scholarly literature in depth. However, we have deliberately included it as an example of the voices of traditional authorities in this debate and a window to understanding the perspective of historical rulers whose royal materials were looted.

While the restitution debates usually centre on European museums and their ethnographic collections, the papers in this volume attempt to investigate the restitution, return and repatriation issues in a manner that allows them to intersect with broader attempts at redressing colonialism and coloniality discourses in a post-colonial sense. This collection of articles is one of the first endeavours to unite voices on restitution matters from quite different backgrounds: disciplinary-wise, from different African and European countries and with diverging positional backgrounds. In addition to providing the framework for processing and understanding of what is at stake on the theme, the various chapters in the volume will provide readers with further discussions necessary for scientific debates.

### **Acknowledgement**

MIASA <https://www.ug.edu.gh/mias-africa/>, graciously funded the international workshop which was at the origin of most papers in this collection. We also acknowledge the financial support received from MIASA for the review and editing process of this special issue. We highly value the strong contributions of two reviewers of the entire collection of articles and the professional editing services at CJAS.

Professor Wazi Apoh and Professor Andreas Mehler

***Guest Editors***