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Commentary

Restitution beyond the museum: Introductory comments to a report on the MIASA/ACT workshop "Inspiration and Reciprocity: Transferring insights and perspectives on restitution matters from Africa to Europe"

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Just under two months after the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA)/Africa Centre for Transregional Research (ACT) workshop "Inspiration and Reciprocity: Transferring insights and perspectives on restitution matters from Africa to Europe" in September 2024, 350,000 African artefacts and manuscripts were discovered in the archives, museums, and botanic garden that comprise the University of Cambridge Museums, the University Library, and affiliated departments and institutes at Cambridge (Prickett, 2024). Such "discoveries," and how they are subsequently handled, underscore the enduring scale of displaced African heritage and ensure that debates on restitution, alongside related questions of reparations and restoration, will not abate in the near future. To date, restitution claims involving former British and French colonies are better known, a reflection, perhaps, of the scale and visibility of their imperial projects. And certainly, French President Emmanuel Macron's highly publicised 2017 declaration signalling willingness to see cultural patrimony returned to former French colonies, and his subsequent commissioning of the Sarr-Savoy report, marked a turning point by bringing these debates to public attention in an unprecedented way. It also catalysed and intensified discussions in other less known contexts, such as the German (Kalibani, 2021).

The 2024 MIASA workshop in Freiburg is the second MIASA has convened to critically engage restitution debates. The first workshop, "Issues of restitution and repatriation of looted and illegally acquired African objects in European museums", held in 2017 (the same year the Sarr–Savoy report was published), took Macron's announcement as an impetus to delve into the debate on the African continent. Papers were published in a special issue of Contemporary Journal of African Studies (2020, Vol. 7, Issue 1). The Freiburg workshop extends this trajectory by engaging restitution within the German context, explicitly seeking to foreground and transfer insights generated from African perspectives into German academic and policy discussions. As the workshop report notes, prevailing German views on restitution largely ignore the "historical–political background of 'collecting', the expectations and effects of restitution in African societies, as well as the challenges and opportunities facing African museums and university collections". Addressing this gap is both timely and necessary. Because CJAS privileges African-centred knowledges, and is thus an active site for shaping restitution discourse from African-centred perspectives, the journal is pleased to present the reflections emerging from this second workshop.

The workshop programme (appended to the report) suggests discussions were slanted heavily towards the restitution of cultural objects. This emphasis is, of course, not unusual. Across restitution debates, and even within the Sarr–Savoy report, material artefacts feature prominently as tangible embodiments of history, identity, and cultural memory. Yet, they are not the only forms of heritage displaced from African shores. Alongside Masai armlets, an Asante necklace, 116 objects looted from Benin Kingdom, natural history specimens and even human remains, the Cambridge findings included extensive manuscript collections, among them Arabic and

Ethiopian texts, as well as 200,000 medieval Jewish manuscripts and books taken from a synagogue in Cairo. Documentary materials such as these represent a less visible, though equally significant, dimension of colonial extraction. Their relative absence from mainstream restitution discourse points to an imbalance in how different forms of heritage are valued and contested.

Archival records, in particular, occupy a crucial position. Archival legislations in many jurisdictions generally provide the right of replevin, enabling the recovery of displaced records. This principle underpinned Kenyan archivists' pursuit of the so-called "migrated archives" held in the United Kingdom, eventually making copies for the Kenyan national archives. As Sarr and Savoy noted in their report, archives created during the colonial period play a central role in reconstructing historical memory. Indeed, their interlocutors consistently emphasised not only the restitution of museum objects held in French museums, but also "on the need for a serious reflection on the question of archives" (pp. 41-42). In other words, we must expand what "reciprocity" means beyond "return" to reflect a truly two-way street that embodies solidarity—knowledge sharing not mere exchange; co-curation of exhibitions and so forth from conceptualisation to installation; shared authority over processes, to name but a few (Adomako Ampofo 2024).

After all, restitution is not merely about "return" but also about the epistemic justice that was so well articulated long ago by Fanon and Ngugi and more recently by scholars such as Ndlovu Gatsheni. Scholars such as James Lowry and Nathan Mnjama (one of the Kenyan archivists sent on the mission of recovery) have aptly described this displacement as one of the "unresolved injustices of colonialism" (Mnjama & Lowry, 2017). Its consequences extend beyond symbolic redress. The continued inaccessibility of these records to

African scholars, institutions, and publics shapes the conditions of knowledge production itself, influencing what histories can be written, whose voices are heard, and how societies imagine their pasts and futures. Despite this, archival restitution continues to receive comparatively limited attention; even the Sarr–Savoy report confined its scope largely to archives held within museum contexts.

It is therefore noteworthy that, despite its primary focus on objects, the Freiburg workshop made space for archival perspectives. While the report itself offers limited detail on this aspect, an ACT interview with the archivist conducted at the time highlights the critical role archives play in restitution processes. Archival records provide the evidentiary basis for provenance research, enabling claims-making and substantiating demands for return.

Ultimately, whether in the form of artefacts, archival records, or oral traditions, these materials are interconnected strands of historical memory. Their recovery and recontextualisation are essential not only for addressing past injustices but also for enabling decolonial knowledge production and shaping more equitable intellectual futures. We see the workshop report as part of an ongoing conversation rather than a concluded one and as an invitation for further reflection and action.

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