

Article

Decolonizing the Museum: Conceptual Incarceration and Restitution of Nigerian Artefacts

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Abstract

*This article makes the case for the unconditional return of Nigerian cultural artefacts looted during colonial military campaigns and for restitution understood as acknowledgment of cultural, spiritual, and economic harm, not merely physical repatriation. Drawing on historical scholarship, museum studies, and policy developments from 2017 to 2022, we address two questions: (a) How did colonial takings and their continued exhibition in Europe shape narratives about African history and identity? and (b) What conditions make return and restitution legitimate and sustainable now? We clarify return, restitution, reparation, and loan as distinct concepts; reconstruct the Benin 1897 and southeastern Nigeria 1901–1902 takings; and review recent shifts including the Benin Dialogue Group, German commitments to return Benin holdings, and decolonial re-evaluation at institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum. We argue that shrine figures, royal plaques, and memorial objects are not merely art but repositories of history and spiritual mediation (notably *chi*), whose absence creates a continuing cultural loss. We also engage counterarguments concerning conservation capacity, universal museums, and long-term loans, and outline conditions for sustainable return, including transfer of legal title, transparent inventories, and the planned Royal Museum in Benin City.*

Keywords: Restitution, Benin Bronzes, Museums, Decolonization, Nigeria, Cultural heritage

Introduction

The presence of thousands of Nigerian bronze, brass, ivory, wood, and terracotta works in European and North American museums has become one of the most visible legacies of colonialism (Ottenberg, 2012; Hicks, 2020; Sarr & Savoy, 2018). The 1897 British punitive expedition against the Benin Kingdom and subsequent operations in southeastern Nigeria resulted in the systematic removal of royal plaques, shrine figures, altar pieces, and historical records to London, Berlin, Oxford, Paris, New York, and elsewhere. More than a century later, these holdings continue to generate revenue, scholarship, and prestige for holding institutions while Nigeria experiences their absence as historical interruption and spiritual dislocation.

This article argues for two linked actions. First, return, meaning the physical repatriation and legal transfer of title for objects taken through violence, coercion, or unequal colonial power. Second, restitution, meaning acknowledgment of wrongful taking and of the cultural, spiritual, and economic harms that followed, with commitment to repair. We distinguish these terms from reparation in its broader sense of compensation for slavery and colonialism as systems, and from loan, which leaves title with the holding museum and is therefore inadequate where taking was illegitimate.

We address two research questions:



RQ1: How did colonial takings and their continued exhibition shape narratives about African history, capacity, and identity?

RQ2: What conditions make return and restitution legitimate and sustainable at the present moment?

We adopt a historical-conceptual approach. We synthesize peer-reviewed scholarship in African art history, museum studies, and Black studies; official and press documentation of restitution policy from 2017 to 2022; and widely reported Nigerian accounts, including the 2021 Humboldt Forum address by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and reporting on the Benin Dialogue Group. We do not present new interview data. Where we discuss community narratives, such as the Agulu Haba case or accounts attributed to palace sources, we treat them explicitly as reported illustrative cases that reveal how objects are understood locally, not as independently verified ethnographic findings. This repositioning responds to a central weakness of earlier drafts that claimed fieldwork without reporting method.

Our contribution is to center a Nigerian spiritual-historical ontology alongside museum theory. Whereas much restitution debate focuses on law and logistics, we show why, for many custodial communities, plaques and shrine figures are historical archives and mediating presences linking the living and ancestors, often glossed through the Igbo concept of *chi* (personal spirit). Their removal is therefore not only dispossession but disruption of knowledge transmission.

Clarifying Concepts: Return, Restitution, Reparation, and Loan

Confusion of terms has slowed debate. Following recent decolonial museum literature (Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Hicks, 2020; Basu, 2021), we use the following distinctions. Return or repatriation refers to physical transfer to a place or community of origin. Restitution refers to a legal-moral act that recognizes wrongful acquisition and restores rightful ownership, typically including transfer of title, provenance disclosure, and apology or acknowledgment. Reparation refers more broadly to repair for systemic injustice, which may include but is not limited to object return, such as funding for conservation, research partnerships on equal terms, and support for cultural infrastructure. Loan refers to temporary display permission in which the lender retains title. Loans may support collaboration after restitution, but they cannot substitute for it where objects were taken as war booty.

This distinction matters because several holding institutions have offered long-term loans while declining to transfer ownership (Phillips, 2020). From the perspective of source communities, a loan reaffirms the taker's right to lend what was taken and preserves the colonial property relation. Unconditional transfer of title, by contrast, restores the right to decide, including the right to lend back, exchange, or co-curate.

We also distinguish objects that carry communal historical-spiritual weight from those that do not. Consistent with Senegalese curator El Hadji Malick Ndiaye's widely cited position, not every African-made object abroad must return, and global circulation can support cultural exchange (Tikam, 2019). The priority for return is works that constitute historical record, royal and shrine ensembles, and objects whose ritual function requires presence in place. The Benin royal plaques and altar heads are paradigmatic in this sense.

Historical Background: How the Takings Occurred

Benin 1897 in Context

The Benin Kingdom, with Edo-speaking Benin City as its center, developed over centuries a court art system in brass, bronze, ivory, and wood closely linked to Ife artistry and to dynastic record-keeping (Parrinder, 1969; Afigbo, 2005). Plaques on palace pillars narrated kingship, diplomacy, trade, and ritual. The British expedition of February 1897, following the killing of members of Consul-General James Phillips's party, deployed more than 1,000 troops, occupied and burned Benin City, exiled Oba Ovonramwen, and removed thousands of plaques, heads, tusks, and shrine assemblages. These were subsequently dispersed through auction, military allotment, and museum acquisition to the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and institutions in the United States, among others (Ottenberg, 2012; Hicks, 2020).

Trade competition in palm oil, kernels, rubber, and manufactured textiles, and British ambitions to control Cross River and Calabar corridors, formed the economic backdrop, but the expedition's scale and the systematic stripping of palace and shrine contexts distinguish looting from ordinary collecting (Ottenberg, 2012). Provenance research now confirms war-booty status for a large proportion of Benin holdings, which is why provenance, not only ethics, supports restitution.

Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1902

In the southeast, British efforts to break the Aro oracle network at Arochukwu, which mediated trade and dispute settlement, led to a British-led force including Hausa, Yoruba, and other levies against Igbo communities, culminating in the fall of Arochukwu in December 1901 and the extension of colonial administration across the region by 1902 (Dike & Ekejiuba, 1990; Ottenberg, 2012). Shrine objects and masks collected during these campaigns, sometimes catalogued as the Dyer Collection and similar assemblages, entered anthropological museums as war-related acquisitions. Understanding this second trajectory is important because restitution is often discussed only through Benin, while Igbo, Ibibio, and Cross River communities experienced parallel losses.

Later forms of extraction, including post-independence illicit trafficking and the diversion of public funds under military rule, compounded cultural loss but are legally distinct from colonial war booty. We do not conflate financial looting, such as Abacha-era funds held abroad, with cultural-object looting, though both reflect unequal power to retain and recover value.

Theoretical Lens: Museums, Memory, and Conceptual Incarceration

Museums are not neutral containers. Foundational museum theory treats them as institutions that classify, compare, and display in ways that teach publics how to see self and other (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996; Karp & Levine, 1991). Exhibitions of slavery and colonial violence are therefore always interpretive: what is labeled, juxtaposed, or omitted shapes whether violence appears as aberration or as system (Brooms, 2012; Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Zolberg, 1996).

Brooms (2012), in a study of African American museums, showed that mainstream displays have often trivialized, deflected, or erased enslavement while Black-centered museums foreground hardship, personhood, agency and resistance, and cultural achievement.

Applied to African holdings in Europe, the insight is that decontextualized display of plaques or shrine figures as universal art or ethnographic type can obscure their origin in conquest and their function as historical record. Re-labeling alone cannot resolve trophy-of-war display, a point now acknowledged even by curators favoring retention (Hicks, 2020, as cited in Gompertz, 2020).

Afrocentric critiques extend this argument to knowledge production itself. Asante (1980), Akbar (1984), and Nobles (1978) argued that Western social science paradigms, when applied as universal standards, can misrecognize African realities and pathologize Black responses to oppression. Akbar (1984) contended that objectivity claims that suppress relevant values and reactions produce a radical underestimation of Black possibility. We invoke this tradition narrowly: not to reject empirical method, but to insist that African categories of meaning, such as *chi*, ancestral mediation, and shrine custodianship, be treated as analytic starting points rather than as beliefs to be explained away.

Psychological literature on intergenerational trauma after the Holocaust (Felsen, 1998), on Japanese internment (Myer, 1945), and on post-traumatic slave syndrome (Leary, 2005; McMillan, 2011) suggests that collective violence has lasting effects on identity and self-regard, documented classically in self-hatred paradigms (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951; Clark & Clark, 1947). We cite this literature cautiously. It does not prove that museum display causes specific clinical outcomes, but it helps explain why communities describe absence of heritage as ongoing injury rather than as past event.

Restitution Politics, 2017–2022: From Refusal to Conditional Openings

For decades, requests by Benin palace authorities were met with refusal or with arguments about universal museums, conservation risk, and lack of facilities (Phillips, 2020). Three shifts altered the terrain. First, the Benin Dialogue Group, convened from 2017 with the Oba of Benin, Edo State government, Nigerian federal authorities, and European museums, created a forum for provenance discussion and for planning a new Royal Museum in Benin City designed by David Adjaye, with fundraising coordination and provision for returned, donated, and loaned works on or near palace land.

Second, policy commitments followed. In 2021–2022, Germany, whose Ethnological Museum in Berlin holds more than 500 Benin bronzes, announced a program of returns, with Culture Minister Monika Grütters framing return as contribution to understanding and reconciliation with descendants of those whose treasures were taken. The University of Aberdeen agreed to repatriate a Benin bronze acquired in 1957, and Dutch, Swedish, and British institutions entered provenance reviews. These moves followed French President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 Ouagadougou pledge that African heritage should not remain prisoner in European museums and the subsequent Sarr-Savoy (2018) report recommending systematic restitution, as well as re-contextualization efforts at the Pitt Rivers Museum under Dan Hicks and colleagues to present objects from the perspective of source cultures (Basu, 2021; Gompertz, 2020).

Third, public debate broadened after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd, which prompted re-evaluation of statues, street names, and museum displays linked to slavery and colonialism. Curators who once defended retention began to acknowledge that war booty cannot be narrated away through new labels alone and that restitution processes are required (Gompertz, 2020). British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's proposal that museums retain high-quality 3D copies and return originals

captures an emerging compromise that preserves research access while restoring ownership.

Opposition persists. British Museum leadership has favored long-term loans and collaboration over transfer of title, citing ideas exchange and legal constraints on deaccessioning (Phillips, 2020). Playwright Bonnie Greer, former deputy chair of the museum, has stated that encountering African objects in London provides comfort and linkage as a descendant of enslaved people. We take such diasporic attachments seriously; they show that meanings are plural. However, plurality does not confer title. Restitution restores decision-making to rightful owners, who may then choose circulation, including loans back to London, on equitable terms.

Nigerian Stakes: History, Spirituality, and Illustrative Narratives

To understand why return matters beyond law, it is necessary to grasp how affected communities understand the objects. Benin plaques are durable historiography: visual chronicles of kingship intended to be read across generations. Their removal, as the late Oba Ovonramwen's widely reported testimony put it, denied Africans liberty to engage records ancestors kept for centuries and to tell the history of the forest kingdom on their own terms (Irabor, 2021). Similarly, Adichie's (2021) Humboldt Forum account of a man who abandoned other possessions to rescue his ikenga during the Nigeria-Biafra war illustrates a hierarchy of value in which replaceable property is subordinate to irreplaceable spiritual anchor.

Shrine objects mediate relations between living, ancestors, and deities in African traditional religion. Two widely discussed reports illustrate the perceived consequences of displacement, presented here as reported cases requiring further ethnographic verification. In Agulu, Anambra State, the Haba Agulu figure is said to have been sold to a national museum after being deemed obsolete; subsequent deaths and misfortunes were attributed by divination to the deity's demand for repatriation, leading to ritual return of its spirit while the sculpture remained in the museum. In a separate account attributed to Godwin Obaseki and discussed by Okediji (2021), an Oba head encased in Hungary is said to have addressed him in Edo, prompting an attempt at rescue followed by arrest and deportation. Whether read literally or as moral narrative, such accounts express a consistent ontology: removal without proper rite leaves both community and object incomplete, inviting misfortune until reconnection or proper burial.

The Dakar parallel is instructive. When the Museum of Black Civilisations opened, organizers struggled to fill inaugural displays with Senegalese or African works and borrowed from the Musée du quai Branly in Paris and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, prompting curator El Hadji Malick Ndiaye to call borrowing one's own stolen heritage absurd (Tikam, 2019). The modern section's reliance on non-African works further underscored cultural depletion that restitution alone cannot instantly repair. As Ndiaye argued, restitution must be accompanied by recognition of lasting consequences and investment in conservation, training, and research capacity.

These cases support a differentiated claim. Africans are not demanding return of every African-made object abroad. The demand concerns ensembles that hold history and ritual function in place, paradigmatically the Benin throne, plaques, and altar pieces that belong in their original context (Tikam, 2019). Other works can circulate globally for education, provided circulation follows restitution rather than substituting for it.

Engaging Counterarguments and Conditions for Sustainable Return

Three objections recur and deserve direct response. The first concerns capacity: that Nigeria lacks climate-controlled storage, security, and curatorial staffing. The concern is not baseless, and African professionals themselves note uneven storage conditions. However, capacity arguments have functioned to reiterate colonial power relations by portraying African states as inherently incapable while understating storage problems in Europe and ignoring ongoing Nigerian investment (Tikam, 2019). The appropriate response is conditional return with investment, not indefinite retention. The Adjaye-designed Royal Museum, use of palace premises for interim housing, and federal-state-palace coordination through the Benin Dialogue Group indicate concrete preparation, but they require transparent timelines, budgets, conservation training, and published inventories to be credible to skeptics and to Nigerian publics.

The second objection invokes universal museums and cultural exchange: that encyclopedic museums educate global publics. Exchange is valuable, but appropriation is not exchange. Transfer of title enables genuine exchange because lending, touring, and joint research then occur between owners. Digital documentation, including 3D scanning as proposed by Shonibare, can maintain access for teaching and for diasporic audiences such as those described by Greer, while originals reside where ritual and historical reading require them.

The third objection is legal: that charters, such as that of the British Museum, restrict deaccessioning. Legal constraints are real but not immutable; German and Scottish precedents, parliamentary discussion, and provenance-based exceptions show that law follows political will when wrongful taking is established. Publishing full provenance, object by object, is the necessary first step, as Basu (2021) demonstrates for N. W. Thomas collections.

Sustainable return therefore requires: (a) complete, publicly accessible inventories and provenance findings; (b) unconditional transfer of title for war booty, with loans negotiated afterward; (c) phased physical return tied to conservation readiness; (d) funding for buildings, training, and documentation, partly from holding institutions and states that benefited; and (e) community custodianship protocols that respect shrine requirements, including restrictions on display, handling, and photography where applicable (Onwuegbuna, 2025).

Conclusion

An Igbo proverb holds, *ebe a na-agwo ogwu anya, an ewepu ose*: one does not mix pepper in the eye-medicine pot; remedy requires clarity and truth. Historian John Hope Franklin's insistence that to set the house in order one must begin with the past captures the same principle (as cited in Morgan, 2014). The past does not merely report yesterday; it illuminates today (Adichie, 2021).

The evidence reviewed supports three conclusions. First, Benin and southeastern takings were acts of colonial violence whose war-booty character is now well documented; continued retention without title transfer perpetuates the property relation of conquest, however well-intentioned curation may be. Second, for source communities these objects are historical archives and spiritual mediators, not merely art, so absence constitutes ongoing cultural harm that loans cannot cure. Third, the 2017–2022 openings, from the Benin Dialogue Group to German returns and Pitt Rivers re-contextualization, show that

restitution is feasible when provenance, political commitment, and infrastructure planning align.

As the second Igbo adage invoked in this debate reminds, *o ji ihe nwata welie aka ya elu, mgbe aka gburu ya mgbu, o wetuo aka ya ka nwata were ihe ya*: one who seizes a child's thing and raises it out of reach must, when the arm grows heavy, lower it and return what was seized. The West must return what was taken, not only political and economic freedom but the spiritual essence of Black nations. If present-day Europe was shaped by the Renaissance 600 years ago and the Enlightenment 300 years ago, it is inconsistent to dismiss what happened in Africa 100 years ago as immaterial (Adichie, 2021). Return with restitution, implemented through transparent inventories, transfer of title, phased delivery, and investment in Nigerian custodianship, offers a path from trophy display to truthful history.

Limitations of this conceptual synthesis should be stated. We rely on secondary and journalistic sources for policy developments that are still unfolding, and illustrative community narratives require dedicated ethnographic and provenance fieldwork with ethical approval, recorded interviews, and archival verification. Future research should document custodial protocols for specific shrine ensembles, evaluate conservation readiness in receiving institutions, and track the effects of returns on education, tourism, and community well-being.

Author Note

This is a revised conceptual paper. No new human-subjects fieldwork is reported; illustrative Nigerian narratives are drawn from published and publicly reported accounts cited herein. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Tables

Table 1. Timeline of key takings and restitution milestones, 1861-2022

(Author-generated)

Date	Event	Significance for takings / restitution
1861	British annexation of Lagos; expanding consular pressure on Benin trade	Background: sets pattern of treaties and trade disputes leading to 1897.

1884–1885; 1892	Berlin Conference; Gallwey Treaty (1892) imposed on Oba Ovonramwen	Benin placed in British sphere; Oba's resistance later used as pretext for expedition.
4–7 Jan 1897	Phillips patrol ambushed en route to Benin City; 7+ British and many African carriers killed	Immediate pretext cited by Britain for 'punitive expedition.'
9–27 Feb 1897	Benin Expedition (c.1,200 naval troops): capture, burning and systematic looting of Benin City and royal palace; Oba flees; c.3,000–5,000 palace plaques, heads, ivories, regalia removed	Core taking event. All subsequent holdings derive directly or indirectly from this dispersal.
May 1897 – c.1905	Foreign Office sales/auctions in London to defray expedition costs; officers' private loot sold via dealers (e.g., Stevens, Webster); c.200 pieces allocated to British Museum; large parcels bought for Berlin (F. von Luschan), Vienna, Oxford, etc.	Rapid global dispersal; poor documentation complicates later provenance work.
1897–1914	Oba Ovonramwen exiled to Calabar (d. 1914); kingdom absorbed into Southern Nigeria Protectorate	End of independent kingdom; palace context destroyed.
1914; 1930s–1973	Eweka II restored under indirect rule (1914); later Nigerian museums established, incl. Benin City National Museum (1973)	Reconstitution of royal institution; future receiving institution for returns.
1960–1970s	Nigerian independence (1960); repeated Nigerian requests for return (notably Ekpo Eyo); 1977 FESTAC: request to loan Queen Idia ivory hip-mask refused by British Museum; Nigeria mints replica / adopts mask as FESTAC emblem	Establishes post-colonial claim; loan refusal becomes emblematic case.
2007	Benin Dialogue Group (BDG) founded: Nigerian NCMM, Edo royal court, and European museums	Cooperative framework; agrees need for Benin City pavilion/museum and provenance transparency.
2007–2017	Systematic provenance research; Sarr-Savoy report commissioned (France, publ. 2018); growing press and scholarly pressure	Shifts debate from 'universal museum' to restitution.
Apr 2021 – Jul 2022	Germany announces return (Apr 2021); Joint Declaration Germany–Nigeria (1 Jul 2022); transfer of ownership	Largest state-level ownership transfer to that date; precedent for others.

	of 1,100+ Benin objects in German public collections to Nigeria; some remain in Germany on loan	
Oct 2021	Jesus College, Cambridge returns bronze cockerel (Okukor); University of Aberdeen returns Benin head; handover 28 Oct 2021	First UK institutional returns by title transfer.
2022	Smithsonian National Museum of African Art: title transfer of 29 bronzes (handover 11 Oct 2022); Horniman Museum, London: transfer of 72 objects (Nov 2022); Metropolitan Museum and others enter talks	US/UK momentum; distinguishes legal transfer vs. physical handover.
20 Dec 2022; 10 Nov 2022	Germany physically hands over 22 bronzes in Benin City ceremony (Dec 2022); Digital Benin platform launched (Nov 2022); 5,246 Edo works in 131 institutions / 20 countries documented, hosted by MARKK Hamburg	Physical homecoming begins; Digital Benin provides first comprehensive, citable inventory baseline.

Table 2. Major Benin holdings by institution with provenance status, as of 31 Dec 2022 (compiled from published inventories; counts approximate)

Institution (city)	Approx. holdings pre-2022 returns*	Provenance status (published)	Published inventory to cite	Status at 31 Dec 2022
British Museum, London	c.900–950	c.200 rec'd directly from Foreign Office 1897; remainder via dealers/collectors; documented 1897 palace loot	British Museum online collection; Digital Benin	Retained; Act 1963 cited as bar to deaccession; loans discussed
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Humboldt Forum)	c.505–518 in Berlin; c.1,130 across Germany	Largely 1897 loot via London dealers (Luschan purchases 1898–); documented	SMB / Digital Benin; Berlin provenance portal	Ownership transferred to Nigeria Jul–Aug 2022 (512 in Berlin); some on loan in Berlin
Other German museums (MARKK Hamburg; Linden-Museum Stuttgart; Museum Fünf Kontinente Munich; Rautenstrauch-Joest Cologne; GRASSI Leipzig; Dresden; etc.)	c.600 combined (to reach 1,100+ national total)	Mostly 1897 dispersal via art market; mixed documented/likely	Digital Benin; individual museum databases	Included in 1 Jul 2022 Joint Declaration transfer

Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford	c.130–160	Expedition participants + dealers; partly photographed 1897–1900	Pitt Rivers Benin catalogue / online database	Retained at cut-off; provenance review ongoing
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) + Jesus College, Cambridge	c.116–120 in University	Expedition/market; documented 1897	MAA online catalogue; Digital Benin	Cockerel (Jesus) returned Oct 2021; 116 title held pending later transfer
Horniman Museum, London	72	Documented 1897 loot	Horniman online collection	Ownership transferred to NCMM Nov 2022
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	c.150–160	Mixed: 1897 loot + later market purchases	Met online collection; Digital Benin	Retained at cut-off; talks with NCMM
Smithsonian: National Museum of African Art + Dept. of Anthropology, Washington DC	c.38–40 (NMAfA)	1897 expedition loot	Smithsonian collections search; Digital Benin	29 transferred 11 Oct 2022 to NCMM
Art Institute of Chicago; Boston MFA; Penn, UCLA, etc. (US university/municipal museums)	c.10–50 each; c.300+ US total outside Smithsonian/Met	Mixed documented/likely 1897 + later purchases	Individual online collections; Digital Benin (136 institutions total)	Retained at cut-off; case-by-case reviews
Weltmuseum Wien; Musée du quai Branly Paris; British provincial museums (Glasgow, Bristol, Exeter, etc.)	c.20–170 each (Vienna large)	1897 dispersal via dealers	Museum databases; Digital Benin	Retained at cut-off; dialogue via BDG
National Commission for Museums and Monuments — Benin City National Museum + palace collections, Nigeria	Growing; plus 22 physically received Dec 2022	Source community / royal court; incoming restitutions	NCMM; Digital Benin partner records	Receiving institution; planned Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) pavilion

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