Art Repatriation: Rethinking the Wider Implications

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Abstract

Artworks of African origin bear tales of a unique and invaluable cultural heritage that has earned continuous worldwide respect and admiration. Africa has shared this rich historical and cultural heritage with humanity as several years after symbolic cultural artifacts were looted from parts of Africa to western countries, many of the artworks remain displayed in museums in parts of the world other than Africa where they sustain continual global attention. This situation has made room for much deliberation and debate that has led to several appeals that artworks be returned to their countries of origin in Africa. The call for the repatriation of cultural property to Africa has been made for many decades with little success to show for it. Although, the call which began subtly has recently become louder with clamors from individuals, civil society organizations, ethnic groups, and governments. Amidst the clamor, it is noteworthy that the subject of repatriation is an intricately delicate one. Conversations about the subject have unearthed challenges that have to be surmounted for the successful repatriation of artworks. This is mainly the subject of the discourse in this paper where discussions have been raised to consider the willingness and preparedness of all the parties involved. The questions raised so far have been carefully analyzed and described through the study of relevant literature and interviews. Herein, certain recommendations are highlighted by the study. The paper concludes that the repatriation of artworks is important today because the artworks would serve as constant reminders of a rich past upon which a more productive future can be strengthened. Additionally, repatriation does not have to be an end to sharing of cultural wealth among countries of the

world. Instead, it could be a process of restitution that would enhance stronger cultural ties and through cultural exchange, promote world unity.

Keywords: Repatriation, Restitution, Clamor, Artefacts, Unity.

Introduction

Artefacts all over the world are tangible material culture, an integral part of the societies they emerge from. These include the very artworks that are relevant for cultural identification, history, and growth of a people. Africans have for centuries depicted their culture in its entirety in artworks.

Subjects of religion, political affairs, economic advancement, medical success, social activities, and traditional education inter-alia have been largely expressed in African art.

From a historical stand point, Neo-imperialism between (1844-1914) describes a period of colonization by European powers. The main feature of this period is an unprecedented pursuit of overseas territorial acquisitions. European powers at that time focused on expanding their territories through conquest and exploiting the resources of the countries they conquered. During the era on neo-imperialism, western powers conquered almost all of Africa. This period exposed an ongoing of tussle among great world powers and an economic desire for new resources and capital.

The imperial rule by Europeans over Africans remained so until after the end of World War II. About this time, independence movements in Africa gained momentum, the period after the war saw a situation where major Europeans powers became weakened. Between 1950-2000 most of the African continent became independent. The independence however came at a steep price.

As the people of Africa began to clamor for their independence, they became increasingly unwilling to enforce respect for international law, this led to several punitive expeditions around the continent. Even though for many years, the African continent had enjoyed global attention because of its relations with

foreigners in different spheres of cultural, diplomatic, and trade relationships, there were reprisal attacks from the west where there were incidents of perceived and utter disobedience. The ancient kingdom of Benin, now part of modern-day Nigeria suffered through one of such punitive expeditions. In February 1987, because of the murder of the British consular mission to Benin in January of the same year, the Oba's palace was burnt, and its sophisticated array of artworks was looted to England.

These artworks numbering at least three thousand (3,000) known as the Benin Bronzes were stolen. Worthy of mention is the significant mask that was used as the symbol for the FESTAC 77. Its artistic complexity talks about the strengths, conquests, and resourcefulness of a Queen-mother of Benin Kingdom-Queen Idia-who was the mother of Oba Esigie who reigned as King between 1504-1550. The Queen Mother was a warrior, conqueror Queen and reformer who was highly intelligent, zestful, innovative, and yet feminine to the core. After her death, Oba Esigie commissioned the guild of brass casters *Iguneromwon* and the guild of Ivory carvers *Igbesawan* to produce a queen mother (Iy' Oba) bronze head and the hip mask in her honor as a woman of valour and to immortalize her in the kingdom. The mask and other artworks are reportedly held in leading museums around the world, while the remaining loot was sold to private collectors and galleries across Europe and the United States.

Also, in the Ashanti region of Ghana in 1874, the Ashanti people suffered through a punitive expedition carried out by British troops. They looted several gold treasures and artworks from the palace of the Asantehene (King of Ashanti). These cultural treasures were largely auctioned off with the rest of them obtained by private collectors and leading museums across Europe part of the looted artefacts is a nearly life sized gold head that the Government of Ghana requested for in 1874 and it is still yet to be returned by the British Government.

From a global view with global affirmations the fact remains that the art of Africa remains unique, they are beautiful tell-tale master pieces and serve as constant reminders of the rich cultural past of Africa upon which an even richer future can be built.

In recent times, the quest for entitlement ownership and the heavy ongoing repatriation debate evidently points out that Africa has shared with the rest of the world an undeniable perhaps desirable wealth of culture. Several centuries later, Africa has grown and become more populated, yet many of its historical artworks remain outside the continent.

It is well known that nine to ninety five percent of Africa's heritage is held outside of Africa. African countries have made efforts to have their cultural artefacts repatriated. Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Egypt, and Senegal have all sought restitution of their artworks from the west. Organized societies and government officials have made calls for repatriation, some protests have been made and the calls are strengthened to return Africa's heritage in the West to Africa. Still, very little has happened so far in terms of restitution. A 2018 report commissioned by President of France, President Emmanuel Macron States that 'Given the Shameful Manner in which African artefacts were taken and the collapse of the colonial empires that enabled the looting, it is time for European institutions to reevaluate claims of restitution".

The issue of repatriation is important. It is also a delicate and emotive matter especially for Africans. It is bothersome that African art is on display elsewhere (outside Africa) and the display of art from elsewhere cannot be linked significantly to the history or culture of its immediate environment.

The west had repeatedly hidden behind the common defense that by taking these great works of art from Africa, they have been saved for the world to continually admire instead of being burned or destroyed during the various wars they were looted from. If there is admittance to the fact that these artefacts were taken, then repatriation can be part of taking steps in the direction of righting wrongs against Africa. It would be an acknowledgment of injustice and the raid of cultural heritage. It could be as well an enabling of endless possibilities towards a future that Africans can create stemming from a relief that could come of cultural and historical restitution. Pleas for the return of cultural objects have been on for decades, the calls have been on because Africa does not want its unborn generation to be robbed of their past, it is so that they can be taught and share in the history of their countries.

The ongoing conversations about repatriation have mainly been made on the terms and time frames suitable to European political nations. This situation has not allowed for enough conversations to drum up support for the adequate preparation of artefacts when wholesome repatriation takes place.

Practically, a time frame could be set up and worked with for talks, time and the process and preparation needed at both ends. The return of illegally taken cultural property to its original custodians is quite important work and should be undertaken as such. Even as the process is complex and protracted, if committed to, the cause of repatriation can thrive.

As discomfiting as it is, it is true that some western museums and libraries justify their possession of African artefacts. It is referred to as an act of benignity. It Is not hidden knowledge that the collections in their possession have uncomfortable histories tied to the violence of colonial rule, the west still tries to tell the world that they have saved dying knowledge and are custodians/conservers of natural and cultural treasures of the world and such claims only serve to take the concerns of repatriation on a different trajectory because people have been disposed of their history and philosophies and whether or not this is acknowledged, it has real life implications for them.

Another reason given by museums and libraries is that they are making texts and images of these artefacts available to the world by digitizing and making descriptive manuscripts of them. The problem with this approach is that such books and images are still beyond the means of majority of people who need them as sources of knowledge, inspiration, and objects of worship. The digitalized manuscripts and images would be only useful to people who understand the language they are expressed in, those who have an internet connection and those who can travel and access them firsthand.

Sadly still, is the unhidden truth that in western ethological museums where Africa artefacts are kept and interacted with by the rest of the world, Africans continue to be misrepresented as primitive people supposedly saved and enlightened by the west. Where attempts are made to shed light on the original

purpose or meaning of specific artworks, they naturally emanate from a western point of view.

Repatriation seems to be a long way forward; it is a crucial way to take if the injustice experienced by African nations is to be addressed guilelessly. The restitution of artefacts to Africa can serve as great means of cultural enrichment while promoting peace, empathy, and collaboration among people of the world.

Is Repatriation Worth It?

While the issue of repatriation is still a sore topic and it is still contentious in some places, the fact that several conversations regarding it are being held attests that the debate is becoming increasingly recognized and high profile enough to be getting the attention of the world and its leaders. Some states, museums and ethnographic institutions are publicly indicating interest to participate in the repatriation of artefacts to Africa. While some of the commitments lack enthusiasm and efforts are slow, these conversations are gathering a momentum that reflects positively a growing movement.

In this context however, it is too early to get excited as getting the west to return the artefacts is only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is food for thought; there are implications that we must be realistic about. These implications have led to the ensuing questions.

What Happens after Repatriation?

What plans are in place for the restoration of cultural history after reclaiming cultural artefacts?

How can the detailed processes of transportation, restoration, preservation, and conservation ensue?

What measures can be taken to protect from theft and degradation the high value artefacts upon return?

In another one thousand years, would these artefacts still serve generations unborn?

What level of preparedness exists for the process of reinvention that is likely to come about with connecting reclaimed artefacts with present day society?

How can repatriated cultural property be managed to contribute to an ever-evolving future?

Because today's society is consumed with concerns of growth and development it is pertinent to discover how repatriated artefacts could contribute to advancement. Giving people evidence by exhibiting repatriated African art in Museums, cultural sites and providing public history of the past would mean, the past can be seen in the present. This accessibility can further respect and help dispel ethnic, religious, political, and social divisions that exist as results of a colonial experience. The fear of the unknown that permeates society due to lack of a proper understanding and evidence about the past could be allayed. The power of healing and a sense of belonging which is a possibility after repatriation are worth trying for.

What Can Be Done?

When cultural artefacts are returned, there is a matter of urgency for the beginning of another conversation. One that is primarily concerned with how prepared Africa is to collect cultural property to construct a comprehension of the past that can help the present and future.

This would not only be about having material basis to preserve the past, it would be a continuous process of using construction, assembling artworks, interpreting practices and holding up a standard to support culture.

One major excuse impeding repatriation is that African countries lack the capacity to adequately hold, care for and preserve the artefacts if they are returned. The truth, through unpopular is that African nations are and have been managing their own heritage and have done so since pre-colonial times till present. Undoubtedly, so much more needs to be and should be done to improve the potentiality of African countries to hold and care for the artefacts that they clamor for. It is important to understand that the African cultural heritage is a practical one; it is not purely a static collection and exhibition of artworks. They are used to make the past visible to contemporary members of the society. More importantly, African art is functional they are mostly utilitarian. They are used for religious worship and connecting to a spiritual world, symbolize political authority, depict social activities, serve historical purpose, are a means of effective economic

exchange, a source of livelihood and help in enforcing acceptable morals and values.

There are strong indications that African countries are making efforts to provide impressive institutions as potential homes for repatriated art, including Senegal's Museum of Black Civilizations completed in December 2018 and founded to tackle the issues of cultural devaluation. In Togo, the Palais de Lomé a former colony of German and French power has been transformed into a space for cultural heritage. There is also Congo's National Museum to house cultural property and the planned Benin Royal Museum in Nigeria. While this ongoing and a laudable feat, it is essential that proper care is taken to conduct necessary research to ensure that the institutions turn out with the capability to provide the services for which they are constructed. African consultants with specific areas of expertise including lawyers, security personnel, art historians, art conservators, collectors, curators, artists, critics, and architects should be sought after for advice. They should be part of a team that creates guidelines and projects feasible timelines and deliverables. The institution in discussion should upon completion have the capacity to provide space, required temperature and lighting, security, preservative, and conservative services as well.

The private sector and individuals can offer support on these projects as this may not be achievable by Government alone. Private Museums and private art collectors can also support by providing sites for possible use as likely homes for repatriated cultural heritage. Research has it that Yemisi Shyllon a Yoruba Prince from Nigeria's Southeast is one of Africa biggest art collectors. He has recently opened a private museum in Lagos, Nigeria that houses over one thousand art works donated by him. Part of the artworks includes treasures that date far back to the 16th century Benin Kingdom.

The need for better funding of the arts and culture sector cannot be overemphasized. Funding for such crucial work should be given urgent action by the governments, individuals, and open society organizations. These concerns should be well considered before the projects are embarked upon and while they are ongoing. What a better way to portray the continents total commitment by

putting money and actions on the issue of repatriation where words and texts have been the order of the day for years.

Discussions in (Roberts, 2019) "Is Repatriation Inevitable"? paper portray that preserving and valuing the artefacts is one major aspect that would require detailed attention. Considering the immeasurable value of the art been sought to be returned, the need for their care and preservation takes center place. Art restorers and professionals would need to be a part of the repatriation projects in Africa. These specialists can help to provide necessary solutions to factors that could help provide unique restoration treatments and consistent conditions for the artworks. This without a doubt would be expensive and tedious, yet the irreplaceable nature of the artefacts expected should suffice for a no expense spared dedication and all hands-on deck approach to work.

The process of preservation and conservation entails this four steps procedure.
Inspection: Artefacts would undergo extensive examination by expert conservers. The examination, usually a visual one, would determine what kind of art it is, when and how it was made, its origin, function, significance, and current condition. These examinations are made successful with in-depth background in art history and artistic procedures.

Documentation: There would be the need for detailed documentation. Photo, video, and texts recording would make for comprehensive reports which would serve also as enduring records for the artefacts.

Treatment: In the event where the results of the previously done examination show that there are defects, interceptive preservation treatment would be done to repair, stabilize and sustain the artwork. During such processes, care is usually taken to ensure that the original artwork and the objective of the original artist are highly considered. For as good as it is that artworks can be restored, it is important that they are not altered entirely.

Precautionary Conservation: Artworks in general are usually subject to discoloration and a slow decline over a period. This is caused by external factors such as temperature humidity, water, fire, light (natural and artificial), chemical

substances, pests, insects, thieves, physical force, manhandling among others. Taking precaution against these factors is one way to protect the artefacts from future damage. Precautionary conservation would then be the provision of adequate security, storage and display space, policies to affect safe handling, pest and insect control, environmental regulation, sufficient lighting and use of appropriate materials and substances for the artefacts.

While agreeing with the strong arguments in favor of repatriation, one must consider that who and where exactly the repatriations are due are not easily clear cut. (Matthes, 2017) refers to a metaphysical challenge as that where it is difficult to establish fully, the descendants and inheritors of cultural groups to which certain artefacts should be returned. If the identification of individuals or communities to whom artefacts are legally owned is challenging, then there would be the lingering uncertainty that artefacts may not be returned where exactly they belong.

(Shyllon, 2013) is of the opinion that African countries and their governments have perhaps not acted as quickly as they should have to pursue the repatriation of cultural artefacts. This brings about a weighing concern on the Synergy between the modern government of the day and the traditional leaders who are the custodians of culture. The debate for repatriation of cultural artefacts is a great opportunity for African leaders at all levels to interact deeply and cooperate to prepare lists of national cultural treasures that could be traced to individuals and various ethnicities and history. A documentation of such could also contribute to material for enlightening the public about National cultural treasures.

The Role of Leaders in Repatriation

There have been incidents of conflicts between traditional authorities and modern-day democratic governments in Africa; it necessitates a need to understand the quite complicated relationship between these different sources of influence and leadership. The legitimacy of the traditional leaders is in no doubt especially as they continue to have powers to mobilize people within their locale for growth and development. The legitimacy of the democratically elected government is also not in doubt as they steer their societies onwards. Yet, the relationship between these two governments is often misunderstood and, in some cases, unrecognized.

When modern day government at different levels has disjointed relationship with the people as is sometimes the situation, traditional leaders are to serve as a bridge between. Part of the price the African continent is paying for modernization is that traditional leadership is looked upon as an anachronism, sort of a leadership style meant for the pre-modern days. It is noteworthy that over the years, traditional government has proven through political cultural practice that is highly adaptable to the times. Democratic governments today are incorporating traditional leaders into governance procedures by giving them certain administrative responsibilities, causing them to play crucial roles in economic, social and cultural transformative agenda, employing them as successful intermediaries for conflict resolution, using them to provide local support for government development plans, to provide sustainable communication between local people and the government, using them to impact justice customarily as people in local areas may find customary courts more appealing, cheaper and much more comprehensive. The traditional rulers also play the role of peacekeeping between the government and its people. There have been collaborations in some aspects of society between traditional governments and modern democratic government. Whereby, provisions have been made for joint medical outreaches, skills acquisition programs, government loans and grants for economics expansion, talent hunts and competitions to enhance and hone creative skills and educational empowerment schemes. Such alliances make way for the well-being for the society economically and socially. In Africa, traditional leaders represent their people, not in the modern sense of government representation that involves elections for a leader to emerge. Traditional representation is based more on cultural grounds of social and moral ideas of representation. It is a unity of religious beliefs, inheritance, a shared history, sacred traditions, and social relationships. It can be likened to a direct democracy. Rather than an elected representative democracy. Any leader in such a position of influence sits in a very sensitive seat where culture and tradition compel one by morals and values to put the interests of the people foremost. Traditional leaders in many African countries also serve as spiritual leaders, their people revere them, look up to them and have high expectations of them more especially for personal and communal progress. Consequently, traditional leaders require the will and support of their people to make meaningful impact. Leadership cannot be forced on them without dire consequences.

Modern democratic governments also require the support, election, and acceptance of the people to make positive impact on society. It, therefore, behooves both forms of government to form a powerful authority that can in all instances, achieve high levels of balance and development. In the absence of cooperation, local, state, national and even international resources can suffer the effects of being pulled in many different directions with little or no success upon the societies that stand to benefit. History records that traditional leaders played and continue to play a very important role in African societies. These leaders would without a doubt play vital roles if cultural properties are repatriated to Africa. One thing is clear; there are no limits to the powers and abilities of both governments within their spheres of influence, yet each form of government has a place to function. This means working together for the success of repatriation.

Information in the media and members of populace indicate complicity on the parts of both the traditional and modern leaders in looting the public revenues and properties for personal gain. Consequently, leaders are losing esteemed trust before the very people, they owe leadership services. As part of the backlash, youth and young adults abuse their leaders and allow themselves to be used negatively, also for personal gains, in severe cases, the leaders of both forms of government and the youth have come under attack with some gruesome consequences.

The implication of these activities is that traditional leaders who serve in revered roles as representatives of the ancestors, custodians of culture and guardians of scared religious sites and rites are fast losing the value of their status and respect in the eyes of the populace. The lack of respect is not only directed at traditional leaders but also at modern democratically elected leaders who have not been able to successfully bridge the widening gap between the quality of the service rendered and the expectation, needs of the people that elected them to serve. The gap in the expectation of the electorate and government performance winds through many aspects of the society including the issue of repatriation and restitution. In line with the international laws and practice, export, import and control over antiquities are affairs within the purview of modern government to be exercised on behalf of cultural institutions and people. Hence, the expectations of the populace that the traditional government and modern governments can

synergize and ensure long lasting efforts at imploring the return of highly valued cultural artefacts. Where it is perceived that a significantly sincere working relationship exists between the governments towards negotiating and facilitating the repatriation of African artefacts, it could go a long way to restore and regain confidence in both governments. In the past there have been disagreements about the rightful entity to take possession of repatriated and yet to be repatriated artefacts. Both traditional and modern governments have asserted their rights in this regard. The discussions herein allude to the fact that such controversies are avoidable and futile. Mostly in the light that traditional leaders/institutions and the government of the day belong to the same societies.

International conventions place value on cultural properties in recognition of the nations they belong to, they are not recorded on the basis of individual or ethnic ownership. The UNESCO 1997 convention in its article 1, defines cultural property as property specifically designated by that nation. This means that it is not individual or cultural groups alone that get recognition for cultural artefacts but a nation. This is a compelling reason enough for traditional and modern governments to work together on repatriation matters. The specific roles, influence and the experience of both governments should be put to good use in cooperating towards achieving success in getting the west to repatriate cultural property to the nations they belong to.

Africa stands to gain largely if its looted artefacts are repatriated. There would be long lasting effects on all aspects of the societies to which they are repatriated. A continued allowance of timeless and priceless African artefacts to sit in the museums of other nations, robs Africa sincerely. If the artefacts are returned and are well taken care of, then properly exhibited within and outside their countries of origin but under the control of the real owners, they stand to earn good money and increase tourism in and around Africa. The creative industries would then stand a chance at realizing great potential. This would be because with repatriation, there would be need for trainings in several aspects of preservation, conservation, and precautionary measures. There could be massive employment opportunities because of repatriation. In times like now where there have been many calls for diversification of the economy of African nations, the cultural creative industry can be assisted to rise to take a place at the table, to thrive and

help grow economies. Tourism attraction and development could slowly but surely take center stage when rich historical artefacts become available to the public. In addition to travelling the world and gaining cultural experience, tourists and art lovers simulate local economies. They are one sure way to spread word about cultural business and opportunities, making way for people to learn about other countries, enjoy art expressions, and support ultimately the global economy. Taking into consideration that changes will not happen overnight, the existing government in Africa would have to undertake detailed and strategic planning. The will to and a workable timeline to have artefacts repatriated is a good place to start. Renewed interest and research studies could be enhanced by the return of cultural artefacts. Cultural and heritage studies would become more appealing as there would be more artworks of interests and for further research. Educational interest and morale in this aspect would be boosted while more art and culture institutions such as museums and schools are likely to be established. If the artefacts repatriated will be well preserved in their countries of origin upon return, it should be considered that education and regular research are important measures to take for the preservation of the artefacts. In today's globalized world where culture is an essential element of sustainable development, it is wise to incorporate tangible historical and cultural artefacts in education. For African communities, artworks that were made to be used in everyday life will no longer be held behind glass panels, on shelves and labeled. The intent of the creator and the purpose of the artworks will come to fruition when they are returned. The art of Africa makes for hope and inspiration, encompassing food, dress, poetry, music, dance, folklore, religious rites, politics, education, livelihood, craftsmanship and ceremonies (festival, naming ceremonies, puberty rites, marriage, and funerals). They are powerful objects conveying messages with interesting ways to evoke thoughts and feelings while providing means of expression in several perspectives. When cultural property return to their places of origin and people can get to interact with them, there could be encounters with the artwork that may elicit feelings of cultural empathy. Art historians can critically juxtapose historical and contemporary artworks. They can examine values and attitude today and consider how they intersect with history. Critical appraisals that could proffer solutions to societal problems that ravaged the past, lingering today and pose a threat to the future.

Cultural boundaries are not always necessarily fully defined, cultural heritage is not only limited to tangible objects that can be seen or touched. Presently cultural heritage consists of intangible elements that have a correlation with the tangible elements. Cultural sites, towns and the natural environment are considered as part of cultural heritage. Several different cultures, identify themselves with and adapt to their natural environments. A return of historical tangible culture could help abate the rising levels of discontent and dissatisfaction that have come about because of little or no direct interaction with tangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The discourse on repatriation is a complex issue with many implications to it. One must be careful to ensure that a holistic approach is employed pivoted by cultural diplomacy while taking a closer look at the subject. If the west stands to completely repatriate artworks to Africa, it would not be the end of nations enriching one another culturally. Instead, it could be the beginning of looking inwards to do more for the betterment of the world at large. It should be looked at from a perspective of an opportunity to improve on the grey areas that are been identified in the ongoing debate for repatriation, if such approach is taken it could make for stronger cultural relations, mutual trust and respect, richer cultural content for exchange and a wholesome learning experience for tourists, researchers, and people all over the world. The act of returning artefacts to their countries of origin can grow a healthy sense of respect that can foster unity between interacting countries.

There would be appreciation and probably compensation that would come about after contact with knowledge that goes beyond what has been known. Through cultural exchange there would be available supporting knowledge for the interpretation and explanation of the important roles that have been played for years by all parties involved. Immense gains could come from the process of repatriation. The stakeholders should take advantage of the great opportunity provided by the discussions that are been made to establish and act on standard procedures for repatriation.

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