

RECLAIMING HERITAGE: URHOB0 ARTEFACTS IN WESTERN INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEED FOR CULTURAL REPATRIATION.

Akpobome Diffre-Odiete

Southwestern Edoid Multicultural Institute

Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

akposdiete@akporeufuoma.org

Abstract

This paper examines the overlooked case of Urhobo cultural artefacts dispersed across Western institutions and argues for their repatriation within the broader context of colonial-era acquisitions and decolonisation. While Benin bronzes have gained international attention in repatriation discourse, Urhobo artefacts remain marginalized despite their profound cultural significance. Sacred Iphri figures housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Brooklyn Museum, in New York, and ukiri drums displayed in the British Museum, in London, represent not merely artistic objects but repositories of Urhobo spiritual knowledge and cultural memory. Furthermore, these artefacts continue to be commodified through Western auction houses. Drawing on successful repatriation precedents, particularly following France's President Macron's 2017 declaration and the Sarr-Savoy Report, this study demonstrates how returning Urhobo artefacts would restore cultural sovereignty, provide educational resources, stimulate local tourism, and allow proper ritual contextualization. The paper addresses challenges including infrastructure constraints, security concerns, sacred-secular nature balance, and ownership disputes, and emphasizes that cultural repatriation represents not merely a transfer of objects but a rebalancing of global cultural exchange toward equity and mutual respect. The Urhobo people can heal historical wounds and enrich global understanding of their sophisticated artistic and spiritual traditions at local educational institutions by reclaiming their dispersed heritage.

Key Words: Cultural Sovereignty, Restitution, Urhobo Artefacts, Heritage, Spiritual Knowledge, Ritual Contextualization.

Introduction

Bienkowski (2015) delves into the divisive nature of the restitution of cultural heritage materials. He observes that this concept was mentioned or alluded to in historical European treaties from the mid-seventeenth century. This paper discusses the colonial foundation of the acquisition of artefacts by Western museums, the two sides of the divide over their restitution and repatriation, and the increasing number of successful returns. The present calls for and acts of repatriation of cultural materials are a global phenomenon. However, our focus is the often-overlooked Urhobo cultural treasures that remain dispersed across Western institutions.

The Urhobo people of southern Nigeria have artefacts that currently reside in prominent Western collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Brooklyn Museum in New York, which both house sacred *iphri* figures, and the British Museum in London where an Urhobo *ukiri* (drum) is displayed far from their cultural context. These artefacts are not merely artistic objects but repositories of Urhobo spiritual knowledge and cultural memory. Beyond museum collections, Urhobo artefacts are routinely trafficked through Western auction houses and galleries, as seen on platforms like Tribal Art Gallery and Duende Art Projects.

Unlike the Benin art works, which have received significant international attention in repatriation discussions, Urhobo artefacts remain largely absent from these critical conversations despite their profound cultural significance. This neglect represents a double marginalization—first through colonial acquisition and now through exclusion from repatriation discourse. This paper seeks to address the question of the practical cultural implications of the restitution and repatriation of African artefacts, particularly Urhobo cultural materials, and the potential impacts of these actions on the cultural heritage landscape of African and Western societies. This question allows for an exploration of the historical consideration and cultural significance of the artefacts.

Restitution and Repatriation

Some of the key words used in this paper are “restitution” and “repatriation.” Restitution is a legal concept that gained broader attention from UNESCO discussions in the 1960s about the trafficking of antiquities, and it indicates the reversal of possession of an object to its

rightful owner “*as a result of an analysis of property rights*” (Bienkowski, 2015, p. 432). Similarly, repatriation, which has been a subject of discussion since the 1980s, means the return of objects to their rightful communities or countries, “*based on ethical considerations*” (Bienkowski, 2015, p. 432).

Colonisation and the violent acquisition of African artefacts

The Berlin Conference (1884-1885) marked the united efforts by European countries to map out the borders of African indigenous nations for colonisation and exploitation purposes. The European countries that participated in colonialist activities against other peoples, particularly Africa, include the British, French, Scandinavians, Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, and Germans. Colonisation granted the European powers the aptitude to classify the world (Sarr & Savoy, 2018) and acquire the cultural objects of the peoples under the subjugation of colonialism. The acquisition of these artefacts took place through “aggressive looting and illegal” possession of a “massive number of cultural objects under force of arms or unequal exploitative terms” (Apoth & Mehler, 2020, p.ix). Ironically, scholars, including art historians also played different roles in the inappropriate acquisition of art. Austrian, Belgian, French, Dutch, and German art historians were involved in Nazi art looting, as they forged documents to show false origin of looted artwork and helped create private collections for Nazi officials (Subotic, 2023). President Emmanuel Macron of France acknowledged that African artefacts were “pilfered” and “destroyed” by colonial European countries (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 27).

An instance of the bloody acquisition of African artefacts by European powers is the case of the Benin bronzes. The popularly called Benin bronzes are artworks that were from different materials such as brass, bronze, wood, ivory and leather. They were made between 1300 and 1897 by local royal artisans. Europeans first encountered them in the 14th century when Portuguese navigators visited Benin. The Benin kingdom thrived in the slave trade and other merchandise with the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Swedish. However, by 1892, the kingdom's wealth dwindled due to the abolition of the slave trade. Consequently, the Oba (king) of Benin closed the doors of his kingdom to the Europeans. In 1897, the British army invaded Benin and looted the altar tusks and several hundreds of other royal ivory and bronze artefacts from the palace. The local altars and the palace were burned with fire, and Oba

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi was exiled. Photographs of British soldiers acquiring Benin artefacts were taken and have been displayed with pride in European museums. This manner of display of the brute acts in London, Berlin or Vienna, show a symbolic death to the African people (Wood, 2021). Other communities across Africa, including Urhobo, also experienced violent looting and forceful collection of cultural artefacts.

The looted African artefacts, which were acquired under “morally reprehensible” conditions, including rape, ruse, spoilation, and forced consent (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 29) were scattered all over the Western world. The Sarr-Savoy Report on the *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a new Relational Ethics* notes that majority of objects present in European ethnographic museums were acquired within the colonial framework (Sarr & Savoy, 2018).

After the 1897 Benin Expedition, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of Britain “gifted” some 200 items of the Benin artefacts of Nigeria to the British Museum and sold the rest. The materials continue to be exhibited in the British Museum, London; Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Berlin; Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; Museum of Ethnology, Hamburg; Dresden Museum of Ethnology, Dresden; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia; National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden; Museum of Ethnography, Leipzig; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; and other places outside of Africa.

Urhobo Artefacts in Western Institutions: The Overlooked Cultural Heritage

Unlike the Benin bronzes which have garnered international attention, Urhobo artefacts remain largely invisible in repatriation discourse despite their significant cultural value and problematic acquisition histories. The Urhobo people, one of Nigeria's major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region, possess a rich artistic tradition that includes carved wooden figures, masks, and ceremonial objects that embody their spiritual worldview and cultural identity.

A preliminary survey reveals that Urhobo cultural materials are dispersed across prestigious Western institutions. Urhobo artefacts are currently held in various Western institutions, including universities, museums, and

private galleries where they are sometimes auctioned for sale. Many of these artefacts are prominently displayed online, with prices ranging from €480 to €1,550. On 29 June 2020, Al Jazeera published an article titled “Auction of 'stolen' Nigerian treasures goes ahead in Paris,” reporting the auctioning of a "major Urhobo statue" valued at €900,000 (\$1 million). *Iphri* sculptures of Urhobo origin are still in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum, both in New York. Additionally, in September 2019, an Urhobo *ukiri* (drum) was observed at the British Museum. Beyond museum collections, Urhobo cultural materials are also exhibited in Western academic institutions, as seen in the collection of the Pacific Lutheran University (see <https://www.plu.edu/africanartcollection/personal-objects/water-masquerade-staff-1/learn-more-water-masquerade-staff-1/>).

The Restitution Process

The process of restitution and repatriation of artefacts of Nigerian origin has undergone several stages, from discussion to debates, and to actual return of these objects. Initially, Western institutions in possession of these cultural objects were reluctant to engage in the discussion of their repatriation to their places of origin. Consequently, the movement of restitution and repatriation of the objects faced several challenges.

Intellectual, Political, and Cultural Challenges to Repatriation Efforts

For long, scholars avoided being embroiled intellectually in debating restitution, reparation and repatriation of African objects, until the speech of French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017, on his intention to return some objects in French museums to Africa. His speech and actions provided an impetus for the debate on restitution and reparation (Apo & Mehler, 2020).

The call for restitution of African artefacts has resulted in debates, criticisms, and other challenges. One position holds that the objects should merely be circulated and loaned to museums across African countries, while another view is that Africans should oversee the care and management of the objects of cultural heritage (Sarr and Savoy, 2018).

Furthermore, critics of the repatriation movement argue that museums in the United States and Europe are better and safer for the items than those in Africa (Iwu, 2024). For instance, Wood (2012) argues that the National Museum in Lagos and the provincial museum in Benin City,

both in Nigeria, do not meet the criteria of security or preservation. This was a follow-up to the production of a document by some major museums in Europe and the North American continent, who came up with the idea of “universal” or “encyclopedic” museum, producing the so-called Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. The document argues against the call for restitution and repatriation of cultural materials to Africa. It states that as far as museums that keep these objects serve people of all nations, it would be unfair to narrow the focus of museums by returning the objects to Africa. Nevertheless, critics of the concept of “universal” museum argue that for institutions to be regarded as “universal”, they had to be universally constituted or universally accountable. Furthermore, the mere possession of the objects could not result in universal holding rights in perpetuity (Bienkowski, 2015, p. 439).

However, the awakened international call for the repatriation of African cultural objects stirred schism in parts of Africa. In Nigeria, there were strong divisions and political debates over the rightful ownership and control of the Benin artefacts. The schism was between the federal government of Nigeria, the government of Edo State, and the Royal Palace of the Oba, from which the objects were looted in 1897.

The division about the hosting of the Benin artefacts slowed down repatriation efforts until an agreement was signed and joint declarations made by the warring parties to forge collaboration and cooperation in the management of a new museum, the Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) that is being built in Benin city (Oriakogba, 2022). Likewise, other African countries are working, making preparations to receive their cultural objects from Western museums.

Legal and copyright challenges

Jackson (2021) reviews the legal framework for the protection, restitution, and repatriation of materials of cultural heritage, which includes a series of major historical international conventions. These legal frameworks began in the late 19th century. The Hague *Convention on Laws and Customs of War on Land* of 1899 established the idea that cultural property should be protected during armed conflict. Moreover, under the United Nations Charter (1945), member states with colonised territories agreed to ensure due respect for the “culture of the people concerned” as “cultures within cultures” (Knowles, 2018, n.p.). The

UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* (1970) seeks to prevent the trade of cultural heritage and made provisions for restitution (Jackson, 2021). Furthermore, the *Convention on Stollen or Illegally Exported Cultural Property* of the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT, 1995) expands pathways for the restitution of cultural artefacts.

Bienkowski (2015, p. 432) recommends that museums should acknowledge their “key purpose as a locus for a discourse over the values and meanings of objects to different communities.” He encouraged them to “set aside the fetish of perpetual ownership of objects and to open up that ownership for discussion, and to be prepared to act on the consequences of such discourse.” Such openness paves ways for positive outlook to the host institutions holding these cultural objects.

The activists of the restitution process

People of different backgrounds have been involved in the efforts for restitution and repatriation of artworks to their places of origin. These activists include writers, scholars, artists, historians, art historians, museum professionals, and the governments of the affected communities. Lynn Nicholas's *Rape of Europa* (1994) became a foundation for many heirs of artwork who joined the efforts of restoration, especially of Nazi loots. In his 1997 publication, *The Lost Museum*, Hector Feliciano further supplied ideas for legal claims for restitution of Holocaust looted art. In the case of Africa, some efforts have been going on for long, however, Sarr-Savoy's 2018 report, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics* was a major game player in the restitution of art in recent times.

Several people have been involved in the campaign for the restitution of the Benin artefacts. The Benin Dialogue Group was created in 2006 to advance discussion on the sharing of Benin art through loans and common exhibition projects (Stahn, 2022). However, no major breakthroughs were made until 2019 when a meeting was held in Benin which envisaged the building of a new museum in Benin to house materials that would be repatriated from Western countries (Stahn, 2022). Local artists have equally been involved in the calls for the restitution of Benin arts. Peju Layiwola used mixed media of clay, calabash and layered copper to demonstrate the looting of Benin artefacts during a 2014 event. The work

titled, “Resurrecting the Disappeared: A Recontextualisation of 1897” was an attack on the centenary celebration of Queen Victoria's ascension, which coincided with the death of Oba Ovonramwen, the king of the Benin people during the British invasion. In 2021, Layiwola participated in the exhibition, “RESIST! The Art of Resistance” at the Rautenstrauch-Joest- Museum in Cologne, with a performance titled, “I have come to take you home,” with reference to the Benin artefacts.

At the international level, African and Africanist scholars equally contributed their efforts to the restitution and repatriation efforts. Dan Hicks's *The Brutish Museum: the Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020) has been described as a work of public activism on the subject (Zetterstrom-Sharp, 2021). Hicks is a professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford. Another scholar who is actively involved in the decolonisation of British museums is Julie Hudson, a curator of African collections at the British Museum. She had worked tirelessly in the efforts of restitution of the Benin artefacts, and presently, she is a member of the Advisory Team of MOWAA.

Repatriation in Practice: Outcomes, Benefits, and Challenges of Cultural Restitution

Successful restitution and repatriation of some African Artefacts

The discussion on the restitution and repatriation of African artefacts has resulted in progressive and successful return of some objects. African governments and institutions have made several efforts to have their cultural objects returned from Western countries, and the institutions holding these artefacts have made practical efforts to return some of them. The announcement of President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 on plans for the restitution of African cultural objects to Africa paved way for restitution of African artefacts in recent times. Thereafter, the Sarr-Savoy Report on *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics* was published. In July 2020, the French government announced plans to prepare a bill on the return of cultural objects to give concrete form to the Sarr-Savoy Report. A deposit agreement was signed between France and the Republic of Madagascar in November of that year for the return of royal objects.

Foreign institutions, including museums and universities in Europe and the USA have therefore started to repatriate artefacts to Nigeria. The Ethnographical Museum in Berlin (Germany) and the University of

Aberdeen in Scotland announced plans to return Benin Bronzes by 2022. In 2021, the Jesus College at the University of Cambridge voluntarily returned an ancient *Okukor* bronze to the Nigerian government. Furthermore, in August 2022, the Horniman Museum agreed to return 72 artefacts to Nigeria. In October 2022, the National Gallery of Art (NGA), the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art (NMAA) and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum held a joint ceremony in Washington, DC, to mark the return of 31 Benin Bronzes from their respective collections to Nigeria. Less than a year later, in June 2023, the Smithsonian Institution adopted an ethical return policy that holds that issues of fairness could trump any legal title it might possess, and plans to return 29 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. More cultural artefacts have been returned in 2024 and 2025.

The Need for Cultural Repatriation of Urhobo Heritage

Scholars in Urhobo studies and cultural activists of Urhobo are yet to actively participate in the discussion and processes for the restitution and repatriation of their artefacts in foreign museums and other institutions. This paper is a wake-up call to them to grasp the opportunity of museum decolonisation, get involved in the cultural repatriation of Urhobo artefacts abroad, and establish shrines at appropriate Departments at Delta State University, Abraka, and other institutions in Urhobo land where they could be subjects of intellectual discourse and practical learning for students.

The repatriation of these artefacts would allow for their recontextualization within living Urhobo cultural practices. Unlike Western museum displays that often present these objects as static artistic achievements, their return would permit their reintegration into local educational contexts. As Urhobo communities establish cultural centres and museums, such as the Urhobo Cultural Heritage Centre at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho, and the Urhobo Historical Society (UHS)'s head office in Okpara Inland, these artefacts could serve as centrepieces for cultural revitalization rather than decontextualized specimens of "primitive art" in foreign institutions. Indeed, the Bruce Onobrakpeya art Centre in Agbarha-Oto has ample space to host returned works.

As global museums reconsider their colonial collections, the case of Urhobo artefacts reminds us that repatriation must extend beyond the most visible examples to include all cultural materials acquired through

colonial exploitation. The ethical imperatives that drive the return of Benin bronzes should equally apply to the sacred and ceremonial objects of the Urhobo people.

The benefits of the restitution and repatriation of Urhobo and African Heritage materials

To address the question about the practical cultural implications of the restitution and repatriation of African artefacts and the potential impacts of these actions on the cultural heritage landscape of African and Western societies, one would have to consider several key arguments. Restitution leads to restoration and reinforcement of cultural heritage for African communities. The repatriation of Urhobo artefacts can help to restore and reinforce the cultural identity of African communities, and foster national pride. Western museums display the cultural items as mere objects of art for appreciation, whereas, Urhobo people hold them as historical documents, as mnemonic devices to reconstruct history, and as ritual objects of Urhobo spirituality. This divergent worldview contributes to the reason African and Africanist scholars continue to re-echo decolonisation and the restitution of items of African cultural heritage.

Repatriation of heritage objects causes restructuring and decolonisation of museums. The restitution of artefacts forces Western institutions to confront their histories of violent acquisition and the ethical implications of holding on to items that are culturally significant to their rightful owners.

The restitution and repatriation of objects of Urhobo cultural heritage could bring about impactful revitalisation of local cultural heritage. African governments, local artists, museums, African scholars and Africanists are working together with museums in the West to remove the challenges facing the restitution of African artefacts. This is to enable a seamless return of the objects of cultural significance to Africa. A good number of artefacts have been successfully returned safely to museums and cultural organisations in African since the beginning of the restitution and repatriation movement. These items could create impactful revitalisation of African cultural heritage. The same benefit applies when Urhobo artefacts are returned.

The decolonisation of Western museums and the repatriation of Urhobo objects could lead to development of new international legal and ethical frameworks. Critics of the restitution and repatriation movement have

cited legal challenges to the efforts of returning the cultural materials. In the UK, the Human Tissue Act of 2004 had to be effected to relax the British Museum Act of 1963, which, according to the British Museum, prevented it from returning collections other than duplicates (Bienkowski, 2015). The claims that the materials were acquired legally and the ensuing legal frameworks about returning public cultural property had earlier halted the process of restitution and repatriation (Iwu, 2024). As the legal challenges are being removed, some Western museums have taken to large-scale digitisation of African artefacts in preparation for the repatriation of the original copies, an act that has copyright implications (Oriakhogba, 2022).

Repatriation of cultural materials could boost local tourism and bring about economic development. Several museums across Africa have been or are being renovated and some new ones are being built to meet international or universal standards, in preparation for the hosting of the objects of repatriation. In Egypt, the Grand Egyptian Museum will house 100,000 pharaonic and predynastic artefacts (Iwu, 2024), the National Museum in Cameroon was renovated in 2022; likewise, the MOWAA in Benin City, Nigeria, is set to open to the public in November 2025. This development could improve African tourism and economic development, as foreign museum enthusiasts, scholars, and tourists who desire to view these objects would have to visit the museums in Africa.

Repatriation of Urhobo artefacts could lead to improved educational opportunities in Delta State. The visible and tangible presence of repatriated historical-cultural artefacts could help to improve the educational system of Delta State, where Urhobo is domiciled, by posing as accessible educational resource materials. Students of Urhobo studies, anthropology, archaeology, history, and other related subjects could easily visit a nearby campuses for ethnographic fieldwork. In this way, their learning about history, culture, and art becomes more authentic.

The return of Urhobo cultural materials could engender direct management of cultural materials by the owners. Repatriation of the artefacts will place their management directly in the hands of the rightful owners, and deepen the concept of decolonisation. Local people can then have easier and more affordable access to materials of their culture.

The restitution of these materials of African cultural heritage could

rebalance cultural narratives. The act of repatriation of cultural materials of Urhobo origin could challenge the Eurocentric perspectives about races and culture, which have dominated anthropology for centuries. The return of these objects can help to balance and portray Urhobo and African history and culture in global narratives.

Repatriation of local artefacts of Urhobo culture could stir up the dismantling of scientific racism. Repatriation of materials of Urhobo cultural heritage could help to dismantle the practice of racism in some Western museums. Museums that still hold onto collections of human remains, such as skulls of Africans, perpetuate racism. However, when such human remains are returned and buried properly, local traditions of burial can appropriately help to heal the communities and thus dispel the ongoing racial pseudoscience.

Challenges and Complexities in Cultural Repatriation

Although many people consider the restitution of cultural objects to Africa as a positive step in the decolonisation movement toward cultural justice, several potential disadvantages must be considered. The poor condition of infrastructure and conservation facilities is a challenge to the repatriation cause. The bad condition of many museums and conservation facilities in Africa is a great challenge to the goal of restitution of cultural objects. The returned objects may risk damage or deterioration if not properly maintained, and lead to the potential loss of cultural heritage. Furthermore, no viable museum has been built in Urhobo land which could host these artefacts when they are returned. At best, the items may be housed temporarily at the Bruce Onobrakpeya Art Gallery at Agbarhato or at the Urhobo Cultural House at Uvwiamuge-Agbarho.

Security concerns have to be considered. Valuable artefacts might be at risk of further looting, theft, and destruction as a result of frequent attacks from suspected Fulani herdsmen across Urhobo land. The repatriation of these objects to such unstable areas can endanger their preservation.

Furthermore, internal disputes and conflicts of ownership could arise among local kingdoms. Restitution can spark disputes within the Urhobo community over who has legitimate ownership of the artefacts, especially among the twenty-four kingdoms of Urhobo ethnic group. This could lead to tensions and conflicts over the control and display of these cultural items. This was the case of the Benin artefacts where there were disputes between the federal government of Nigeria, the state government of Edo,

and the kingdom of Benin.

Economic challenges could face the management of the returned artefacts. The handling and exhibition of artefacts require significant financial investment. However, due to corruption and disregard for the intellectual sector, governments and institutions in Nigeria might face challenges in prioritizing these expenses amid other pressing social and economic needs. Such failure could potentially lead to underfunded museums and poorly maintained collections.

It also serves a preventive note for one to pre-empt a conflict between church groups and custodians of sacred traditional art works. Foss (2004) cites a case of objection by churches to public funds being provided to keepers of traditional shrines in Urhobo land in the past. However, when secular cultural events were held by Urhobo Progress Union in Effurun, Urhobo people of all faiths congregated in solidarity. Therefore, in order to curb the challenge of religious conflict, the secularization of Urhobo sacred culture (Diffre-Odiete, 2020) could be a reasonable pathway for acceptability and sustainability of Urhobo heritage.

Consequently, dependence on external support could cause potential neo-colonialism. For local institutions to properly preserve and exhibit the returned artefacts, they may need continued external support, such as funding, training, and technical assistance from international organizations or foreign institutions. This dependence can raise concerns about ongoing foreign influence and neo-colonial dynamics. The restitution of artefacts to Urhobo communities is a complex issue that must consider local realities, including infrastructure, security, and equitable access. While the return of cultural heritage is vital for reclaiming identity and history, addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that the benefits are maximized and the potential downsides minimized.

The Impacts of the Restitution Efforts on Western Institutions

The restitution of African artefacts to their countries of origin has both positive and negative impact on Western museums. The restitution of the items can cause cultural reconciliation and ethical leadership for Western institutions. Therefore, the act of restitution can bring healing to the owners from historical violence committed against their communities and help to bridge gaps between Western and African countries. This process

can lead to more inclusive and diverse representation of global cultures, and encourage Western institutions to adopt new and better forms of cultural exchange and collaboration with African countries. Returning artefacts demonstrates a commitment to justice and acknowledges the historical wrongs of colonialism. This can enhance the reputation of museums as ethical institutions that prioritize human rights and cultural integrity. Furthermore, restitution fosters goodwill and strengthens diplomatic ties between Western nations and African countries, which can lead to greater collaboration in areas like cultural exchanges, joint exhibitions, and academic partnerships.

On the other hand, restitution has negative impacts on Western institutions. It can cause loss of prestigious collections and perceived diminished status. Iconic pieces with significant historical and artistic value are often major attractions; therefore, Western museums may lose some of their most prized artefacts, which could reduce visitor numbers and diminish the appeal of their exhibitions. Additionally, Western museums may face a loss of prestige and influence if they are seen as losing major works. This could impact their global standing, partnerships, and ability to attract donors and funding.

Financial and operational challenges could face the restitution process. Restitution processes can be expensive and complex, involving legal, logistical, and administrative costs. Moreover, Western museums may need to invest in developing new collections to replace the returned artefacts.

Conclusion

The practice of repatriation of looted works by Western governments and institutions recreates the story of the dislocation of local cultural traditions in reverse order. The repatriation of Urhobo artefacts from Western museums and institutions represents not merely a transfer of objects, but a restoration of cultural sovereignty and identity. As demonstrated throughout this analysis, these artefacts—currently scattered across museums, universities, and private galleries in Europe and North America—were largely acquired during colonial periods through means that would be considered unethical by today's standards. The *iphri* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Brooklyn Museum, the *ukiri* at the British Museum, and numerous pieces being sold through Western galleries for thousands of euros are not just artworks; they are

repositories of Urhobo spiritual knowledge, historical memory, and cultural continuity.

The successful repatriation efforts for Benin artefacts provide an instructive model for Urhobo cultural reclamation. Just as the construction of MOWAA and works of other regions signals a new era in African cultural stewardship, Urhobo scholars, cultural activists, and community leaders must now actively engage in the international discourse on decolonization and cultural restitution. The establishment of appropriate cultural repositories at institutions in Urhobo land, would transform these returned artefacts from distant curiosities into living educational resources and cultural touchstones for future generations.

Repatriating Urhobo artefacts would correct historical injustices while creating contemporary benefits: reinforcing cultural identity among Urhobo communities, providing authentic educational resources, stimulating local tourism, and allowing for proper ritual contextualizing of objects that were never intended merely for aesthetic appreciation. While challenges regarding infrastructure, security, and ownership disputes must be addressed, the fundamental right of the Urhobo people to possess, interpret, and transmit their own cultural heritage must take precedence. This paper calls for a balance between the spiritual nature of these artefacts and their educational importance. In order to prevent a religious conflict between members of the Urhobo community that belong to different religious convictions, the storage, display, and use of the returned objects could be secularized for their historical, educational and cultural significance.

As Western institutions increasingly acknowledge the complex colonial histories behind their collections, the moment is ripe for intensified advocacy around Urhobo cultural repatriation. This process is not about diminishing global cultural exchange, but, rather, rebalancing it toward equity and mutual respect. By reclaiming their dispersed cultural heritage, the Urhobo people can heal historical wounds while simultaneously enriching global understanding of their sophisticated artistic and spiritual traditions. In this way, cultural repatriation becomes not an end, but a beginning—the restoration of agency to the Urhobo people in telling their own cultural story to the world on their own terms.

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