



RECLAIMING RESTITUTION

Centering and Contextualizing the African Narrative

by Molemo Moiloa

**This summary is from an extended report
available of our website.**



www.openrestitution.africa

ABOUT AFRICA NO FILTER

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that is working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns.

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ABOUT OPEN RESTITUTION AFRICA

Open Restitution Africa is an Africa-led project seeking to open up access to information on restitution of African material culture and human ancestors, to empower all stakeholders involved to make knowledge-based decisions.

The Open Restitution Project gathers data on current restitution processes across the African continent, serves as a portal of case studies and best practice examples, and encourage a data-informed, in-depth and challenging debate on the complexities, responsibilities and ethical imperatives of restitution.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The restitution of African heritage – artefacts and human remains – is one of the vital social justice issues of our times. It is about recognising centuries of devastation of the African continent, and taking a step towards social, historical and cultural repair for Africans themselves. Its therefore without question that Africans should be – and have historically been – at the forefront of narratives on restitution of African heritage. And yet, this report, which tracks the presence of Africans in the global narrative, indicates an intolerable erasure of Africans across academia, online media and social networks. Two hundred years of records indicate that Africans have driven multifaceted strategies for their return; over this time, they have built a corpus of knowledge and narratives around heritage restitution. There are many reasons for the lack of African representation on the platforms available to the world for narrative creation and knowledge generation. However, it remains important to understand the impact of this lack, and to seek strategies to address it.

The push for the return of African heritage to the African continent has been driven by Africans. As a result, the development of how we speak about return, its ethics and global implications has been spearheaded by Africans. This report discusses in some detail the range and political influence of African narratives over many decades as the leading impetus behind heritage restitution. It tracks the fact that demands for return were already being made at the point of initial theft, but that this call was never heeded, up until the present. We see a heightened narrative drive by African heritage professionals and by independence leaders such as Mobutu Seseko, who argued for the role of restitution in enabling newly independent countries to define their identities and build their societies anew. We also see the defence by Africans to their rightful heritage and their frustration at the petty and often racist denials made by those outside of the continent, who were (and are) in possession of African heritage. This report also tracks some of the current academic research and narrative construction by African thinkers.

“The push for the return of African heritage to the African continent has been driven by Africans”

However, most central to this report is how this long history of demand, political speech and narrative building is largely ignored within contemporary media. The report uses data points gained from Google Scholar, Google Search and Twitter to identify the trends in narratives on African heritage restitution. The data indicates a substantial uptick in the rate of writing and publishing on African heritage restitution since 2016, by 300% in some academic cases, and even 600% on social media. However, when we assess the data for whether this increase has an equivalent curve of African writers and thinkers, it becomes clear that Africans are being substantially left out of the narrative. When we look at what exactly is being discussed on this topic, we also get a glimpse into the impact of the absence of African voices in the discussion – with limited emphasis on heritage restitution itself, and a greater emphasis on subjects closer to home for Westerners, such as the degree to which the Nefertiti Bust from Egypt, currently held in Germany, is equivalent to the Mona Lisa.

“When we assess the data, it becomes clear that Africans are being substantially left out of the narrative.”

By comparison, when we zoom in on the creative, professional and academic narratives emerging from the African continent – particularly among a newer crop of young practitioners – we see a very different picture. Africans are far more likely to engage in issues of decolonised museum practice and questions of repair and healing, and to focus on African-led solutions that respond to Africa-specific issues within heritage. The report concludes that it is imperative for media and academic publishing to make a concerted effort to address the dismissal of African narratives on this subject, and that it is essential to recognise the leadership role of Africans in bringing this subject to the fore. The report also finds that the vital point about inclusion of more African positions in the narrative enables a more holistic and complex engagement with some of the core reasons behind why African heritage restitution is important.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. The narrative on African heritage restitution has grown exponentially but Africans are not included.

Within academic literature alone, narrative on African heritage has increased by 300% since 2016, and by more than 500% since 1990. On subjects such as the Benin Bronzes, which have captured global attention, academic output has grown 300% but public discourse on platforms such as Twitter have grown even more, to as much as 600%. However, in the best-case scenarios, African representation in these narratives has increased by half of this, and remained stagnant in most cases.



2. Africans are being left out of their own narratives on heritage restitution.

The growth of the narratives on concerns of African heritage restitution is positive but this does not equate to equal growth of participation of Africans in the narrative. According to Google Search data, in 2020, non-Africans were 17 times more likely than Africans to be referenced or interviewed, or to author articles on African heritage restitution. Even in the case where the most prolific author engaging in a particular aspect of African heritage restitution issues was an African, according to Google Scholar data this author was only the 19th most cited in academic writing that discussed that aspect.

3. Not all African heritage is equal.

In restitution narratives, the emphasis is on social heritage restitution, and the focus is on a few artefacts and a few countries. By comparison, there is relative silence on the restitution of natural heritage, such as dinosaurs. The Benin Bronzes are more readily associated with the matter of restitution even before the large number of returns in late 2021, in comparison to Egyptian heritage for example. This is the case across academic, media and Twitter engagements.

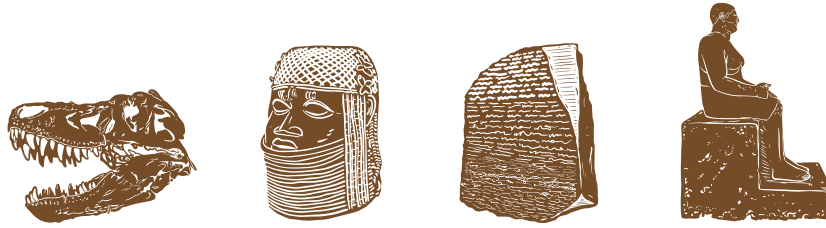
4. The narrative is dominated by non-African concerns.

Across the board, when analysing data on various African heritage restitution cases, the narrative on restitution itself remains relatively niche and academic. When artefacts under claim of restitution are discussed in the public sphere, we see themes emerging that are more related to European/Western concerns than to African restitution; for example, the Mona Lisa, Michelangelo and Etsy sales are more present in narratives on African artefacts related to restitution than is the issue of restitution itself.

5. African voices make a huge difference to the narrative on heritage restitution.

When African voices about heritage restitution are centred, knowledge creation, renewal and cultural formation become the focus of the narrative.





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