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RECLAIMING RESTITUTION

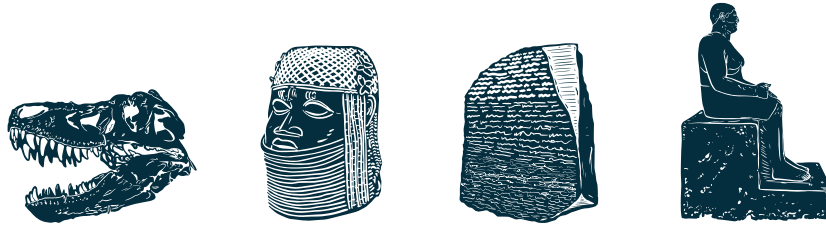
Centering and Contextualizing the African Narrative

by Molemo Moiloa

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RECLAIMING RESTITUTION

Centering and Contextualizing the African Narrative

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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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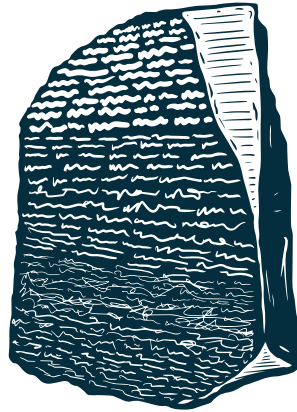


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	i
Key insights	ii
1. Introduction	4
2. Literature review	4
3. Methodology	7
3.1. Case study 1: The Benin Bronzes.....	8
3.2. Case study 2: Hawass request	9
3.3. Case study 3: The Tendaguru dinosaurs.....	10
4. Findings	12
4.1. Growth of the narrative	12
4.2. Growth of a non-African narrative	17
4.3. Who is being listened to?	19
4.4. What is being discussed?.....	25
4.5. Silence, absence and violence	29
5. Conclusion	30
Endnotes	32

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and the Benin Bronzes, 1764–2021.....	13
Figure 2: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and the Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	14
Figure 3: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	14
Figure 4: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and at least one Egyptian artefacts from the Hawass request, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	14
Figure 5: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Nefertiti, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021.	14
Figure 6: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and Tendaguru dinosaurs, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	15
Figure 7: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Tendaguru dinosaurs, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	15
Figure 8: Number of authors on Google Scholar referencing Egyptian artefacts, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	16
Figure 9: Number of authors on Google Scholar referencing Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	16
Figure 10: Google Scholar citations by number of African and non-African authors writing on Egyptian artefacts, June 2021	16
Figure 11: Google Scholar citations by number of African and non-African authors writing on Benin Bronzes, June 2021	16
Figure 12: Difference in Google search mentions of African and non-African author and thinkers (Benin Bronzes), 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	17
Figure 13: Difference in Google search mentions of African and non-African author and thinkers (Egyptian artefacts), 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	17
Figure 14: Number of African and non-African individuals named identified via Google Search on the topic of restitution and at least one of the Egyptian artefacts, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	19
Figure 16: Twitter influencers with Hicks at top left on subjects of Egyptian artefacts and restitution, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	20
Figure 15: Number of African and non-African individuals named identified via Google Search on the topic of restitution and Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021	21
Figure 17: Publications per author, African and non-African, including discussion on Benin Bronzes and restitution	22
Figure 18: Citations per author, African and non-African, including discussion on Benin Bronzes and restitution	23
Figure 19: Network Diagram of Google Scholar key words from texts on the Benin Bronzes	25
Figure 20: Network Diagram of Google Scholar key words from texts on the Hawass Request	25
Figure 21: Network diagram of Google Scholar keywords related to Tendaguru dinosaurs.....	26
Figure 22: Network diagrams of Google Search in relation to Benin Bronzes	26
Figure 23: Network diagram of Google Search keywords in relation to Egyptian artefacts.....	27
Figure 24: Network diagram of Google Search key words in relation to Tendaguru dinosaurs	27
Figure 25: Network diagrams of keywords from tweets on Twitter in relation to Benin Bronzes.....	28
Figure 26: Network diagram of keywords from tweets on Twitter in relation to Egyptian artefacts	28
Figure 27: Network diagram of keywords from tweets on Twitter in relation to Tendaguru dinosaurs...29	29

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.



1. INTRODUCTION

Demands for the return of material heritage artifacts and the human remains of ancestors have rung out from the African continent for almost 200 years – at least, according to available written records. These demands have been led by Africans who have driven multifaceted strategies and have built a corpus of knowledge and thinking around heritage restitution over this time. And yet, this African engagement is not evident when assessing the modes of knowledge generation and distribution such as scholarly research, media articles and social media discussions. There are many reasons for the lack of African representation on platforms for knowledge generation. However, it remains important to understand the impact of this lack, and to seek strategies to address it.



This research report details the extent to which African roles and positions in heritage restitution discussions are being silenced, but also looks to introduce the kinds of narratives available to us when Africans are centred within the narratives on heritage restitution. Through data mining of discursive sources across the internet, including Google Scholar, Google Search and Twitter, we come to understand the degree of the problem and its potential impacts on what is being discussed and whose positions are being valued. By considering the long history of demands for the return of artifacts and remains, and the range of critical outputs emerging on the subject – from early writing and speeches from the 1960s to newer, critical practices of academics and creative practitioners alike – we are able to begin to chart the story that is not being told.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The push for the return of African heritage to the African continent has, historically, been driven by Africans. As a result, the development of how we speak about heritage return, its ethics and global implications has been spearheaded by Africans. These discussions have impacted on the return of African heritage to Africa; they have also led to the development of international legal precedence, again driven by Africans, which has been of relevance to the heritage concerns of many other peoples of the world, including European countries. This fact is not always evident in the broader engagement in public discussions, the media or even academic research.



As soon as important historical, spiritual and ritualistic objects, as well as the remains of people, were taken from the African continent, Africans started requesting their return. Just some examples from the 1800s include: a daughter, who demanded directly of a German man caught red-handed desecrating graves “in the name of science” that her father be returned to her¹; a chief, whose village was pillaged and burned by Belgians demanded immediately after the violence that a stolen statue of spiritual significance be returned²; a community demanded back a “bought” object, insisting on the colonial authority’s intervention³ (called the “Olokun Affair”). All these cases were unsuccessful.

Though there are many cases of continuous requests for the return of artefacts and

remains to Africa, the next big wave of engagement emerged at the dawn of African independence. In 1960, the recently independent nation of Zaire made a formal request for the transfer of the “museum of Congo” in Belgium back to Zaire⁴. In 1968, Nigeria made a formal proposal to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) regarding a coordinated return of a few core objects from the Benin Bronzes⁵. In 1969, the Pan-African Cultural Manifesto of Algiers made the first Pan-African statement for return⁶. Similar cases spanned the continent around this time; some were successful, most not. In the 1970s, the pressure of African nations had grown, with the Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko making the first international request at the UN General Assembly in 1973 – which soon after tabled a resolution on heritage restitution⁷. From these efforts, Resolution 3187 on the Restitution of Works of Art to Countries Victims of Expropriation⁸ was issued, with 113 votes in favour and no dissenting votes, but there were 17 abstentions from former colonial powers in Europe, the United States, Japan and apartheid South Africa. Over the following years, similar formal steps, led by Africans, were taken within multi-lateral institutions. Expert groups, committees and further resolutions were established⁹.

The first ever African director general of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, was elected in 1974 and took the issue further. In 1978 he made a now-famous speech, denouncing the lack of movement on heritage restitution, and making a passionate appeal for the return of artefacts and human remains. This was covered by Western media, as were several other increasingly visible requests over this period. At the 1982 UNESCO conference, the Greek minister of culture, influenced by the efforts of Africans on the issue of heritage restitution, made a formal demand for the return of the Parthenon Frieze, which sparked a media frenzy¹⁰. Other demands followed at the conference, and the conference participants adopted the “Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies”, which called for the return of illicitly removed works from all contexts.

In their arguments and writing on heritage restitution, African museum professionals and academics have spent much energy attempting to convince the world – and particularly museums of the West – of the right of Africans to their own material culture and ancestors. Authors such as Eyo¹¹, Shyllon¹², Mbow¹³ and others have discussed the extent to which restitution is an ethical imperative, as well as the role that heritage and culture play in the re-constitution of new nations, post-independence. Up until the 80s, while African authors writing on heritage restitution often had to deal with racist and problematic arguments against the capacities of Africans to care for their own heritage, they also often sought to address what restitution could do for Africans, and the role of heritage and culture more broadly.

Requests for the return of such objects from state and private museums in Europe are, time and again, rebuffed with paternalist, imperialist, self-centred and racialized statements such as “the treasures are better protected in Europe”; “the treasures are seen by more persons in Europe than if they were to be returned to Africa”; “scholars still need to work on them”; “manuscripts are too old to travel”; “African museums do not have the security and environmental conditions that European museums have”; “legal difficulties around deaccessioning”; and many more. These reasons are the stumbling blocks to requests. They are also invoked to create processual stalemates and promote the continuing bid of European museums to erase and deny African agency.¹⁴

Much of the arguments of Africans have also expanded into a detailed account of what the violence of colonialism has done to the African continent and how much has been lost. Authors indicate that as much as 90% of sub-Saharan historical material culture is currently outside of the continent. This deep loss is emphasised, too, by the likes of Achille Mbembe, who points to the pivotal need for recognition of just how much was taken, and how radical its impacts have been.

What we have lost as a result of Europe's engagement with us is priceless. It cannot be "reimbursed", if you want to use these monetary terms. It is so colossal, that even if Europe wanted to give it back it wouldn't be able to. We have suffered radical loss in our engagement with Europe. That is the starting point of any deep reflection on restitution and there is no way in which we will ever recover what we have lost. We will have to live with that radical loss.¹⁵

“What we have lost as a result of Europe's engagement with us is priceless. It cannot be “reimbursed”.”

- Achille Mbembe

This loss is not just about how much was taken from the continent, but also about the racist historical narratives about Africans that were created. This includes Hegelian ideas that Africans have no history¹⁶, or that some African art was created by European peoples because it was too beautiful to be made by Africans¹⁷ – thus creating the narrative that Africa was barbaric and uncultured. This was a purposeful act of creating a people without context and land that was *terra nullius*¹⁸ and an ongoing site of destruction¹⁹. Several African writers, therefore, currently focus on new research that needs to be conducted on restituted heritage, and on the education that this makes possible for many young Africans²⁰. For many African writers, speakers and intellectuals, the process by which objects arrive “home” and become part of African society again is also a concern²¹. For them, the act of restitution is also an act of reclaiming history against the problematic narratives assigned to Africans. Restitution becomes an opportunity to tell the story of Africa differently – not simply as loss but also of creation and of possibility. As Njoki Ngumi has stated,



We're currently kind of stuck in the embroiling performances of politeness of writing letters, modulating our tones and our words for people refusing to return things that we know are ours, etcetera, etcetera, but if we were to fast-forward, even in our imaginations, to that moment when all of the things that we have asked for have come back, what do you think that could be like?²²

This rich history is becoming more visible²³ as the issue of African heritage restitution gains increasing support. But for many, history may still feel invisible, remaining at the level of public debate and academic discussion. Though the idea that Africans want their heritage back is relatively well established, it seems that exactly which Africans,

which heritage and how, remain less obvious. The Benin Bronzes are still considered the most pressing of heritage restitution issues, possibly overshadowing many other urgent concerns – including restitution needs stated by various African communities to effect spiritual, communal, and even environmental repair. And in addition, few could reference an African voice on this subject or speak to where the returned objects may go and how they are intended to be engaged in the future once returned.

These subtle distinctions and the voices and actions of Africans are important for the successful restitution of African heritage and vital to the current increase in engagement on the subject. While debate still remains on whether heritage should be returned in some contexts (expressed by, for example, the national museums of Britain²⁴), for most the current question is “which heritage, to whom, when and how?” This brings into focus not only the inevitability of return, but also the processes of ‘re-humanisation’²⁵ of human remains, reintegration, re-association, and re-learning²⁶ related to this heritage, within the African context. This is a responsibility that will naturally be up to Africans to take on. If heritage restitution is not understood within the broader scope of restitution, then it cannot possibly be in the best interests of Africans. If, in fact, this generalised sense of ambiguity or even absence of African positions and knowledges is correct, it is a significant problem that must be addressed. This research seeks to understand the degree to which the long tradition of African voices on restitution is, in fact, visible and present in the broader discussion on restitution. It looks to understand the ways in which restitution of African heritage is being engaged, and what the possible impacts of this engagement might be.

“If heritage restitution is not understood within the broader scope of restitution, then it cannot possibly be in the best interests of Africans”

3. METHODOLOGY

This research aims to begin unpacking the nature of African representation within broader engagements about heritage restitution, and to begin to understand the impacts of whose voices are most prominent in these debates. It therefore maps:

- i. The nature of restitution discourse within discussions on African heritage; and
- ii. The degree to which African voices and issues are centred in these discussions.

The research examines how debates about African heritage restitution are represented in popular media and within academia (academics are often quoted within the media), who is present, what is being said and how this is shifting.

Tweets, media articles available through Google News and academic articles available through Google Scholar were scraped (a particular form of data collection off the internet), using an algorithmic automated process. In anticipation of an increase in data



after the “Discours de Ouagadougou” by Macron in 2017 (discussed in more detail in section 4.1 below), data was collected from January 2016 to June 2021. The data was scraped based on mentions of the words “restitution” (and/or return, repatriation etc.) and “African heritage”. Because the term “African heritage” is too broad to accurately identify articles, using algorithmic systems, we used keywords focused on three primary case studies: the Benin Bronzes, the Egyptian request (informally referred to as the Hawass request), and the Tendaguru dinosaurs. The three case studies offer us a more focused entry into the restitution discussion to frame issues and map these across various fields of practice.

The dataset was cleaned to remove content such as advertisements and other unintended text, and several tools borrowed from natural language processing and discourse analysis were used to assess the various nuances in African representation in restitution discussions across Twitter, online media sites and academic publishing.

A few limitations to this methodology make our understanding of its outcomes quite specific:

- i. Data collection was limited to internet-based material from 2016 to 2021, therefore excluding any publishing from this period not on the internet, which, due to lower internet penetration on the continent, is most likely African publishing.²⁷
- ii. Similarly, identifying African authors can be difficult, for example, we could not always identify African Twitter users because some use VPNs, which obscure geographic data, especially in countries with higher internet restrictions and taxes²⁸.
- iii. Such content may include the identified keywords but it does not mean that the article or tweet is specifically about restitution of African heritage. In many cases, content may give only a casual mention to restitution, while focusing on other issues. This is very evident, for example, in our third case study of the Tendaguru dinosaurs. Still, they keywords helped us understand how African heritage is engaged generally, the degree to which restitution is present, and vitally, the extent to which Africans themselves play a role in this.
- iv. The final important consideration is that this research only scratches the surface of the subtle complexities of actual narratives emerging across these various discussion platforms. Much more work is required to develop empirical data on the ways in which certain voices inform, shift and shape the narratives on African heritage restitution, and exactly how this will affect the future of its outcomes.

“...this research only scratches the surface”

3.1. CASE STUDY 1: THE BENIN BRONZES

Benin Bronzes (hereafter referred to as “the Bronzes”) is an all-encompassing term referring to material culture (mostly in bronze, but also in wood and ivory) seized from the palace of the Oba of the Kingdom of Benin in present day Nigeria during the punitive Benin



Expedition of 1897. The Bronzes have come to represent the broader debate around restitution of African heritage from sub-Saharan Africa and have gained an almost moral significance. The iconic status of the Bronzes results from the spiritual and historical role they played in the society that created them: in royal succession and ancestral reverence, funerary rights, healing practices, and as historical record. For this reason, the Bronzes are of vital importance as material sites of being and identity²⁹. The making of the Bronzes demonstrates such creative expertise and technical mastery of the 'lost wax technique', that globally, they have played an important role in shifting the analysis of intellectual, technological and artistic capacities in African history³⁰. Their history of violent and punitive acquisition by British troops – who, in the process, destroyed a thriving kingdom – is directly linked to their standing as the icon of African restitution. This case points very directly to the violent nature by which much of Africa's material heritage was notoriously obtained, as well as the overt economic agenda³¹ of colonialism.

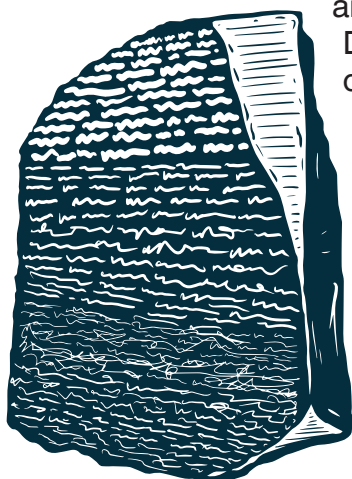
3.2. CASE STUDY 2: HAWASS REQUEST

The Hawass request is a more recent consolidation of many long-standing requests from Egypt that were renewed collectively when the new Grand Egyptian Museum was launched in 2021. The Hawass request is a coordinated campaign to renew international pressure for the return of some of Egypt's most prized heritage:

- The so-called Rosetta Stone¹ (196 BCE), kept at the British Museum;
- the bust of Nefertiti (1345 BCE), kept at Berlin's Neues Museum; the Dendera zodiac sculpture (ca. 50 BCE), kept at the Louvre Museum;
- a statue of Hemiunu, Old Kingdom (ca. 2530 BC), kept at the Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany; and
- a bust of Prince Ankhhaf (ca. 2520–2494 BCE), kept at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

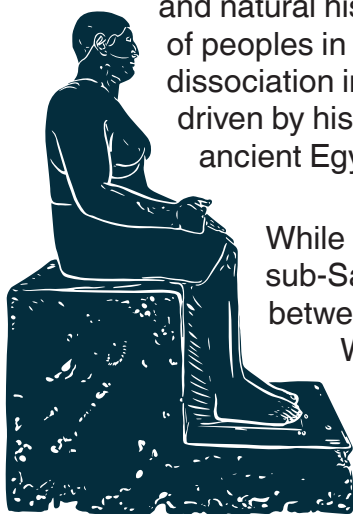
According to Zahi Hawass (the media savvy and politically controversial former Minister of State for Antiquities Affairs in Egypt) of the five pieces, only the bust of Ankhhaf and the statue of Hemiunu were taken out of Egypt legally.

The Rosetta Stone and Nefertiti bust are perhaps best known to the broader public. The stone has been valuable in the process of decoding ancient script and in improving an understanding of the structures and strategies of the language. Displayed in the British Museum since 1802, it is said to be one of the museum's most visited exhibits. The bust of Nefertiti at the Neues Museum in Berlin is perhaps even more well-known, and a popular part of visual imagery about Egypt. It brings in the highest number of visitors of any museum in Berlin, at almost 1 million per year³², and is without question the Neues Museum's biggest draw card, highlighted in their marketing material and adorning the museum's façade.



¹ Rosetta is a colonial name for Rashid, so the name is contested even though Rosetta Stone is more widely known.

The Hawass request is an important part of the larger conversation about restitution of African heritage, because it contradicts the European-driven dissociation between North or Arab Africa and sub-Saharan or black Africa. Historically, under a racist guise, European and North American museums separated Egyptology from ethnography and natural history in respect of the sites of representation for the cultures of peoples in colonised territories; this separation continues today. This dissociation in heritage between Egypt and the rest of Africa is largely driven by historical European biases that situate the original peoples of ancient Egypt separately from the rest of the continent.



While Egypt retains much more of its material heritage than that of sub-Saharan Africa³³, there is significant value in aligning learning between these two contexts. This leads us to the questions: (i) What can the continent gain from taking a collective position? (ii) Should each country develop its own clearly defined position? (iii) What role can black Africa play in the global conversation for the restitution of heritage taken from all former sites of extraction?

3.3. CASE STUDY 3: THE TENDAGURU DINOSAURS

The final case study is substantially different from the other two, and certainly the least well-known. It is no exaggeration to say that Tendaguru is one of the most important Mesozoic fossil sites in the world³⁴. More than 250 tonnes of excavated material were shipped to Germany during the colonial occupation of the area now known as Tanzania. At the Museum of Natural History in Berlin, the Tendaguru dinosaurs currently serve as the star exhibit and include the tallest mounted dinosaur in the world (the Guinness book of records certificate is mounted on the exhibition display). The dinosaurs are little known in Africa outside of Tanzania, where some work has been done to tell the history to local populations. This includes the publication of a book in Swahili entitled *Dinosaria wa Tendaguru*, 4 000 copies of which were distributed across secondary schools in 1998³⁵. Although Tanzania has no specimens from the original Tendaguru expedition, the Tanzanian government has indicated that due to a current lack of resources to maintain the artifacts, they will not be requesting restitution.

From 2016 to 2018, a research alliance, *Dinosaurier in Berlin. Brachiosaurus brancai als wissenschaftliche, politische und kulturelle Ikone*² (1906–2016), made up of a number of German experts (and no Tanzanians), conducted research into the Tendaguru dinosaurs. Their partial intention was to better understand and frame the colonial nature of the extraction of the Tendaguru specimens within exhibits. The Berlin Natural History Museum, in particular, expressed an interest in better incorporating this history into the narratives of its museum³⁶.

The Tendaguru dinosaurs are a useful counter case study, in reference to some of the complexities of heritage restitution issues. The dinosaurs are relatively unknown

2. *Dinosaurs in Berlin. and the Branchiosaurus bracai as scientific, political and cultural icon*

outside of natural history circles, and seldom referred to within the restitution arena, which tends to emphasise African cultural heritage loss over African natural heritage loss.



The dinosaurs add to a broader discussion of heritage restitution: since they are currently not planned for return (as clearly stated by even the Tanzanian government), in contrast to the other two case studies³⁷ they open a discussion of restitution that is distinctly different from return.

4. FINDINGS

The findings presented below are based on a comparative analysis of the three case studies, based on keywords: findings include authors' citations versus numbers of published items, clusters of terminology emerging, and the growth in outputs over the period of data collection. What follows is a discussion of the findings, and what they might tell us about how the restitution conversation is unfolding in public discourse.



4.1. GROWTH OF THE NARRATIVE

As discussed above, the tradition of calls for heritage restitution is well established, as is the body of knowledge around it. That said, it has grown significantly over the past few years, marked by a specific shift in 2017 after French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech, “Discours de Ouagadougou”, in which he stated that “within five years, the conditions will be met for the temporary or definitive restitution of African heritage in Africa” (see *Figure 1*)³⁸. The speech sparked some panic in France, but also some comparison in many other countries of Europe, and perhaps most importantly resulted in the formal commissioning of the Sarr-Savoy Report³⁹, which made a high profile and intensely powerful argument for broad-scale restitution. In some ways this marked moment was a response to a larger context, evident in an acceleration at the time of Macron’s speech, rather than after it. From about 2017, professional and public attention has increasingly turned towards heritage restitution and actual returns have flowed increasingly faster. As a result, this research focuses on data since 2016, in attempt to understand this shift, particularly as it marks a change in attitude towards a more affirmative response to returns that can also be assumed to be more responsive to the long history of African demands and arguments. Even so, it remains helpful to start with a broad overview of publishing on the topic of the Benin Bronzes and some reference to restitution and its synonyms, as shown in *Figure 1*.

All published content prior to Google Scholar’s launching in 2014⁴⁰ has been retroactively included in the system and therefore naturally excludes significant content, in particular historical African academic material (academic publishing and archives) that have not been digitised. Further, the publications in *Figure 1* include the keywords and are primarily “mentions” of the subject rather than specifically focused discussions on the subject. Still, it accurately demonstrates the shift, with a historical high point in 2017 and a significant increase since then, shown in closer detail in *Figure 2*. The results for 2021 were recorded in June, and so do not reflect the full outcome, which can be assumed to continue the trend, with many large-scale exhibitions with accompanying publications and a few books about the Benin Bronzes published later in 2021. The same can be concluded for all the 2021 results for the following graphs.

“African Heritage Restitution discourse has been growing - with a historical high point in 2017 and a significant increase since then.”

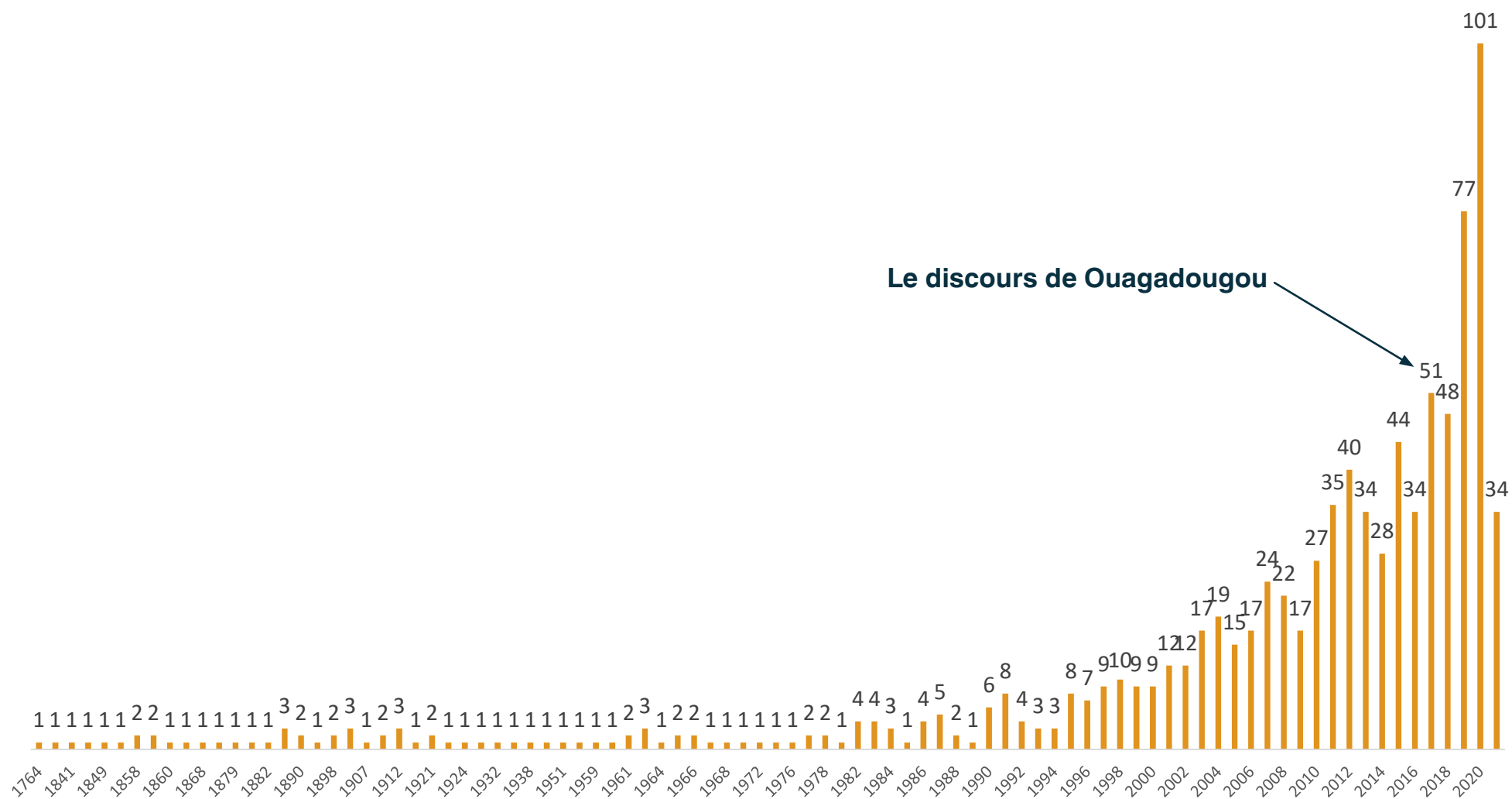


Figure 1: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and the Benin Bronzes, 1764–2021

When one considers the shift in academic publishing on the Benin Bronzes, public discussion on the topic becomes even more striking, represented in data from Twitter (see *Figure 3*). Here we have access to news articles and blogs, as well as wider public opinion. We see significant growth in discussion with a massive uptick in 2021, despite the fact that this data only represents half of the year. The high profile returns in October 2021 would have increased this substantially.

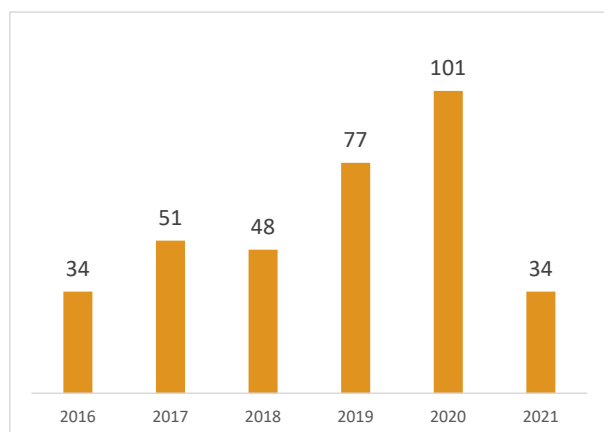


Figure 2: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and the Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

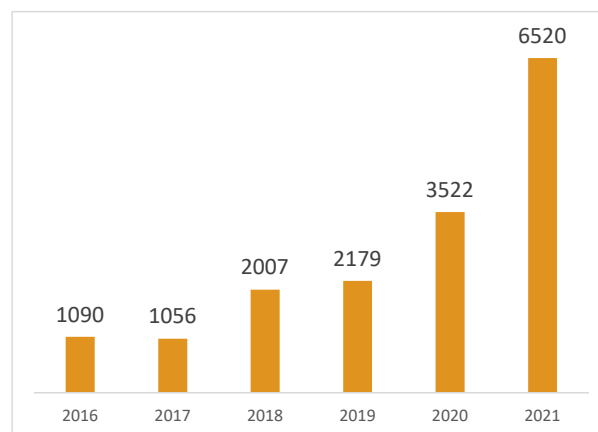


Figure 3: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

By comparison, the discussion on the topics of the five objects that constitute the Hawass request has been fairly stable within academia (see *Figure 4*). Public discussion also remains quite high, with a number of data points on Twitter – though this is dominated by discussion that is not specific to restitution. When we look at tweets on Nefertiti in particular (see *Figure 5*) it is evident that there is a significant increase in 2016 due to the controversy surrounding the Other Nefertiti, a public release of a 3D scan of the bust by artists Nora Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles to protest against the copyright interests of the German Neues Museum that houses the Nefertiti. The art project ignited much public discussion on issues of ownership and the power structures of western museums⁴¹.

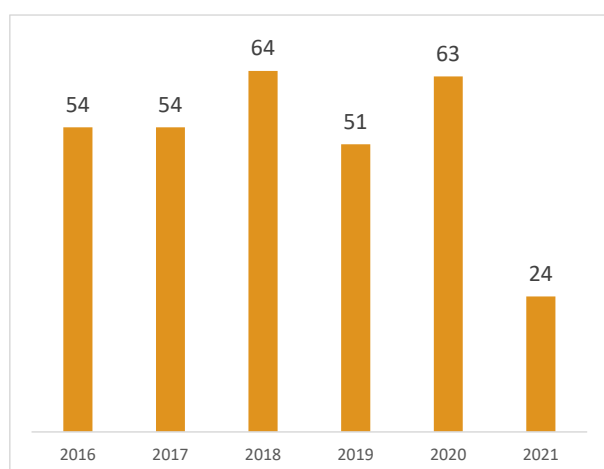


Figure 4: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and at least one Egyptian artefacts from the Hawass request, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

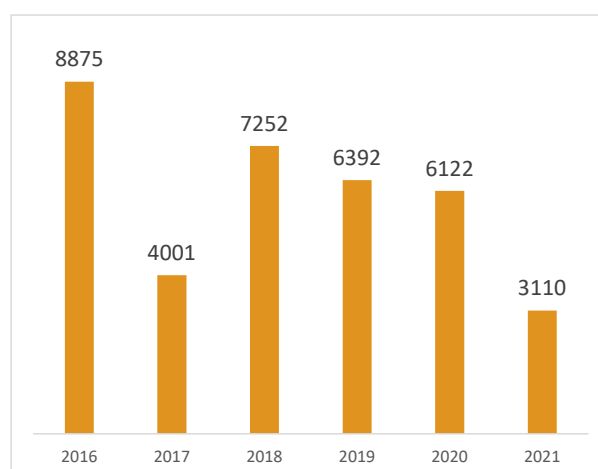


Figure 5: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Nefertiti, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021.

By comparison, discussion on the Tendaguru dinosaurs remains quite low, with only one academic publication per year since 1999 mentioning the issue of restitution of these environmental artefacts until the year 2020, which reflected two mentions (see *Figure 6*); and with no Twitter mentions until 2020 within our sample date range (see *Figure 7*). This distinctly indicates the lack of concern for restitution within scientific literature on the dinosaurs, but also a bias towards cultural heritage in broader discourse on restitution, including academic publishing. Natural science concerns such as the dinosaurs therefore remain somewhat invisible within restitution conversations. This said, Twitter indicated a slight, but noticeable increase in English language public awareness of this issue. Yet the actual data points themselves remain very low in comparison to the Benin Bronzes, with a maximum of 76 (though this number is quite high, at only halfway through the year in 2021). This is also informed by the fact that the dinosaurs are not currently under formal request for restitution by the Tanzanian government or any other relevant authority.

“There is a lack of concern for restitution within scientific literature, but also a bias towards cultural heritage in broader discourse on restitution.”

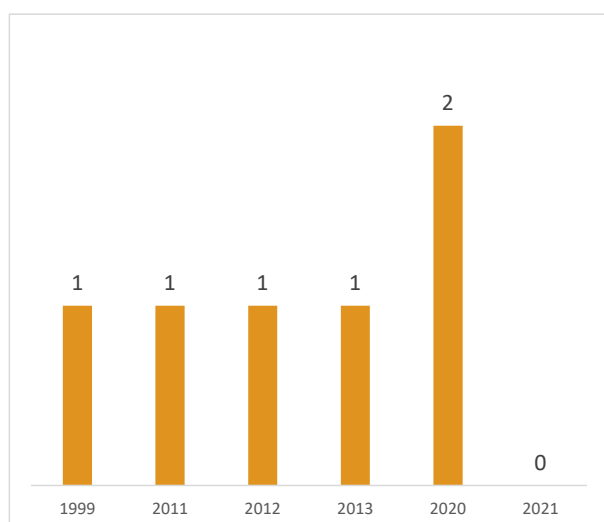


Figure 6: Number of publications listed on Google Scholar referencing restitution and Tendaguru dinosaurs, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

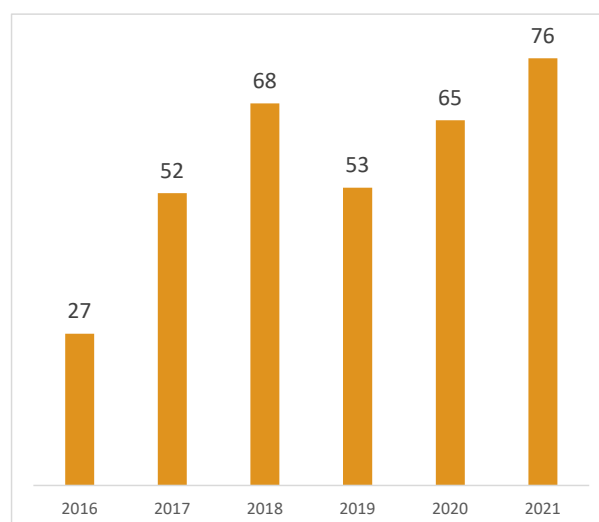


Figure 7: Number of tweets referencing restitution and Tendaguru dinosaurs, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

The overemphasis on the Benin Bronzes in the growth of discussion is evident, mostly because they were taken under obviously violent circumstances and present a very clear example of the destruction of a culture, resulting in supportive arguments from many restitution advocates. While the use of this very clear example may be groundbreaking within the broader argument, it can oversimplify the dynamics of restitution, which are often far more complex. It is worth stating that this also has the potential to silence discussion around subjects that do not as easily meet the more comfortable standards of lengthy European record, violence, royalty, and artistic merit.

4.2. GROWTH OF A NON-AFRICAN NARRATIVE

While there is evidence of growth in the discussion on African heritage restitution, data indicates that this doesn't amount to growth in the presence of African voices within this discussion. At an academic level, over the same period, we see that the upward slant in the number of authors is primarily of non-African authors, and that African representation in fact stays distinctly stagnant in the case of both Benin Bronzes (see *Figure 8*) and Egyptian artefacts (see *Figure 9*).

“While there is evidence of growth in the discussion on African heritage restitution, data indicates that this doesn't amount to growth in the presence of African voices within this discussion.”

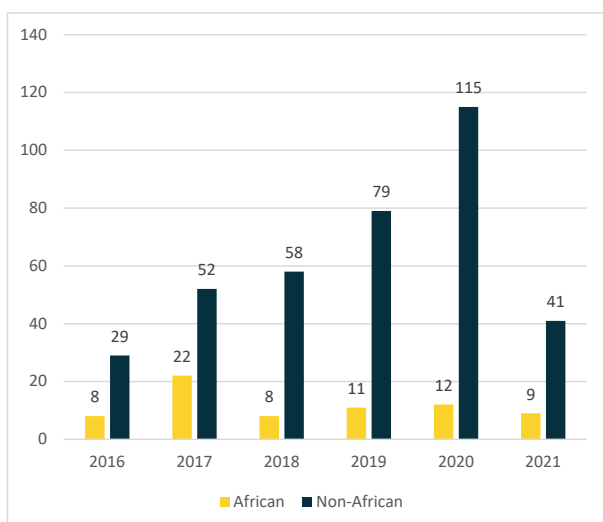


Figure 8: Number of authors on Google Scholar referencing Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

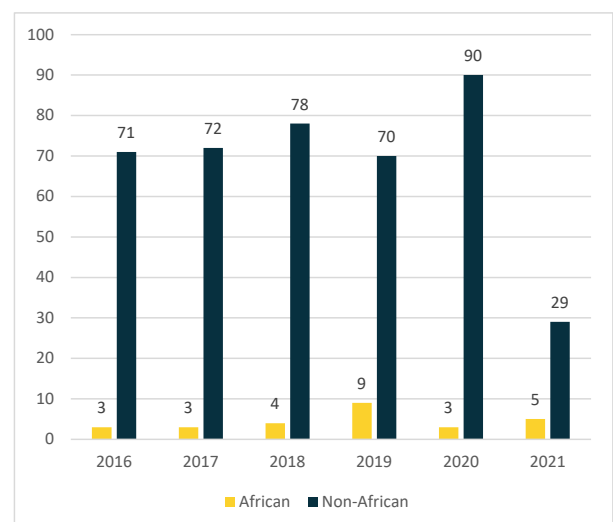


Figure 9: Number of authors on Google Scholar referencing Egyptian artefacts, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

Similarly in *Figure 10* and *Figure 11*, we note the degree to which African authors are cited in comparison with non-African scholars, which importantly includes not just academic authors but also potentially politicians and others who may be referenced in the popular media and cited.

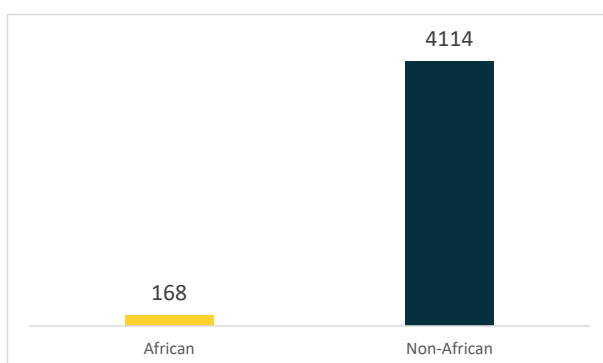


Figure 10: Google Scholar citations by number of African and non-African authors writing on Egyptian artefacts, June 2021

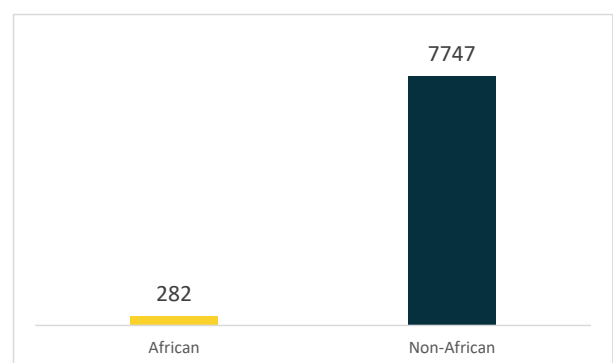


Figure 11: Google Scholar citations by number of African and non-African authors writing on Benin Bronzes, June 2021

Within scholarly writing, Africans authors account for almost 4% (168 against 4114) of publishing that discusses restitution and the Benin Bronzes (see *Figure 10*), and African authors account for just over 3% (282 against 7747) in discussions of restitution and Egyptian artefacts (see *Figure 11*), albeit that within the Tendaguru data set, African authors have not published on this topic since 2016. This may reflect the strong historical impulse from the continent itself to engage in matters related to the Bronzes and their place in the restitution dialogue, as well as the more common use of English in the context of Nigeria, rather than in Egypt and Tanzania, which likely informs these results due to the nature of the internet’s English bias as our source of data, alongside other historical and contemporary factors. Nonetheless, the inequalities between African and non-African authors across all cases remain stark.

“Africans authors account for between 0-4% of academic publishing that discusses restitution”

We see similar outcomes in general public engagement, in terms of African representation on Google search results, which might be even more alarming (see *Figure 12* and *Figure 13*). One would assume that contemporary academic publishing has a considerably smaller output and pool of individuals than those likely to be quoted in a newspaper article or writing that might reflect on historical resources from the African continent.

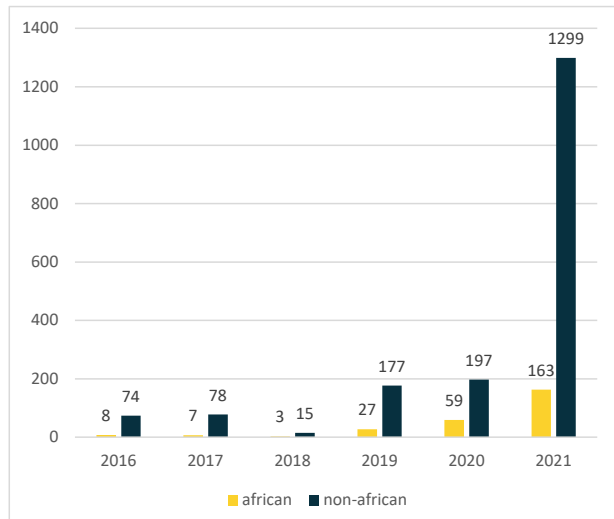


Figure 12: Difference in Google search mentions of African and non-African author and thinkers (Benin Bronzes), 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

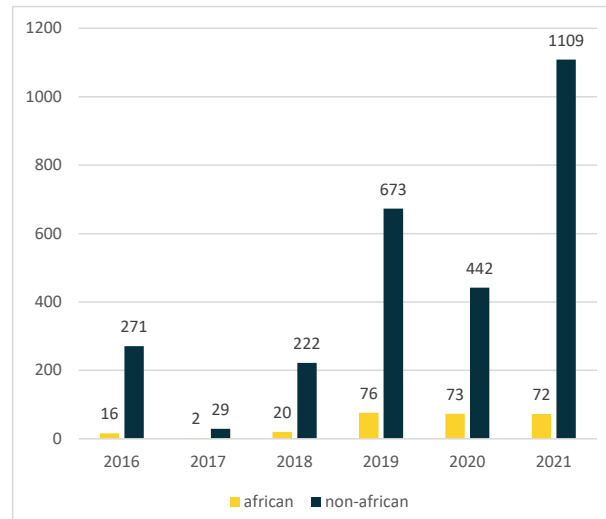


Figure 13: Difference in Google search mentions of African and non-African author and thinkers (Egyptian artefacts), 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

While we observe a marked growth in the presence of Africans in discussion on the Benin Bronzes between 2020 and 2021 (from 59 individuals to 163) (see *Figure 12*), this seems less significant when compared to non-African representation in the same years (197 to 1299). Furthermore, in discussion of Egyptian artefacts (see *Figure 13*),

the number of mentions of African authors remained stagnant, while the number of non-African authors climbed. When comparing the numbers of Africans in academic production versus those in public discussion, the numbers do not increase significantly – especially the case of the Tendaguru data set, in which the academic number is zero.

“While we observe marked growth in the presence of Africans in discussions on restitution, this is less of an achievement when compared to non-African representation in the same period”

4.3. WHO IS BEING LISTENED TO?

While we are able to get a broad overview of general representation numbers in the discussion on African heritage restitution, it is only when we begin looking more closely at the most prominent voices that emerge that we begin to understand more deeply the nature of the discussion, which shifts substantially across different cases.

Within the Egyptian popular narrative, we see that Hawass himself holds the most prominent place in the discussion, as a longstanding government official and skilled public wielder of the public interest machine⁴² (see *Figure 14*). This is perhaps the most interesting example of control of the narrative by the African country to successfully ensure hypervisibility of restitution and the return of thousands of objects over the past years⁴³.

In 2006, John Henry Merryman edited a collection of essays on a few high-profile cases from around the world, entitled “Imperialism, art and restitution”⁴⁴, including two opposing essays in favour of and against the return of the Nefertiti bust to its land of origin. Borchardt, the archaeologist who “discovered” the bust, is the third most referenced individual, while Macron, the French president, comes up constantly across the data, with reference to the “Discours de Ouagadougou”.

After Hawass, the next African on the list is former Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, often referenced due to the coinciding of his fall under the Arab Spring and the looting of the Egyptian Museum. The political instability and fear of theft or destruction of precious heritage is often discussed as a cautionary warning against restitution, certainly illustrated in this case. It is interesting that the Merryman and Mubarak references occur prior to our research date range but are still relevant within public discussion.

The next African referenced, Kwame Opoku, is a former official of the United Nations who now writes mostly for his own interests, and who has published over 150 articles since 2008, on the online news site, Modern Ghana⁴⁵. His articles put forward a broad argument for the many facets of restitution, which is why his name emerges in relation to restitution of Egyptian artefacts and the Benin Bronzes.

The only other African on this list is Nora Al-Badri, the artist whose controversial release of a 3D scan of Nefertiti we have previously discussed

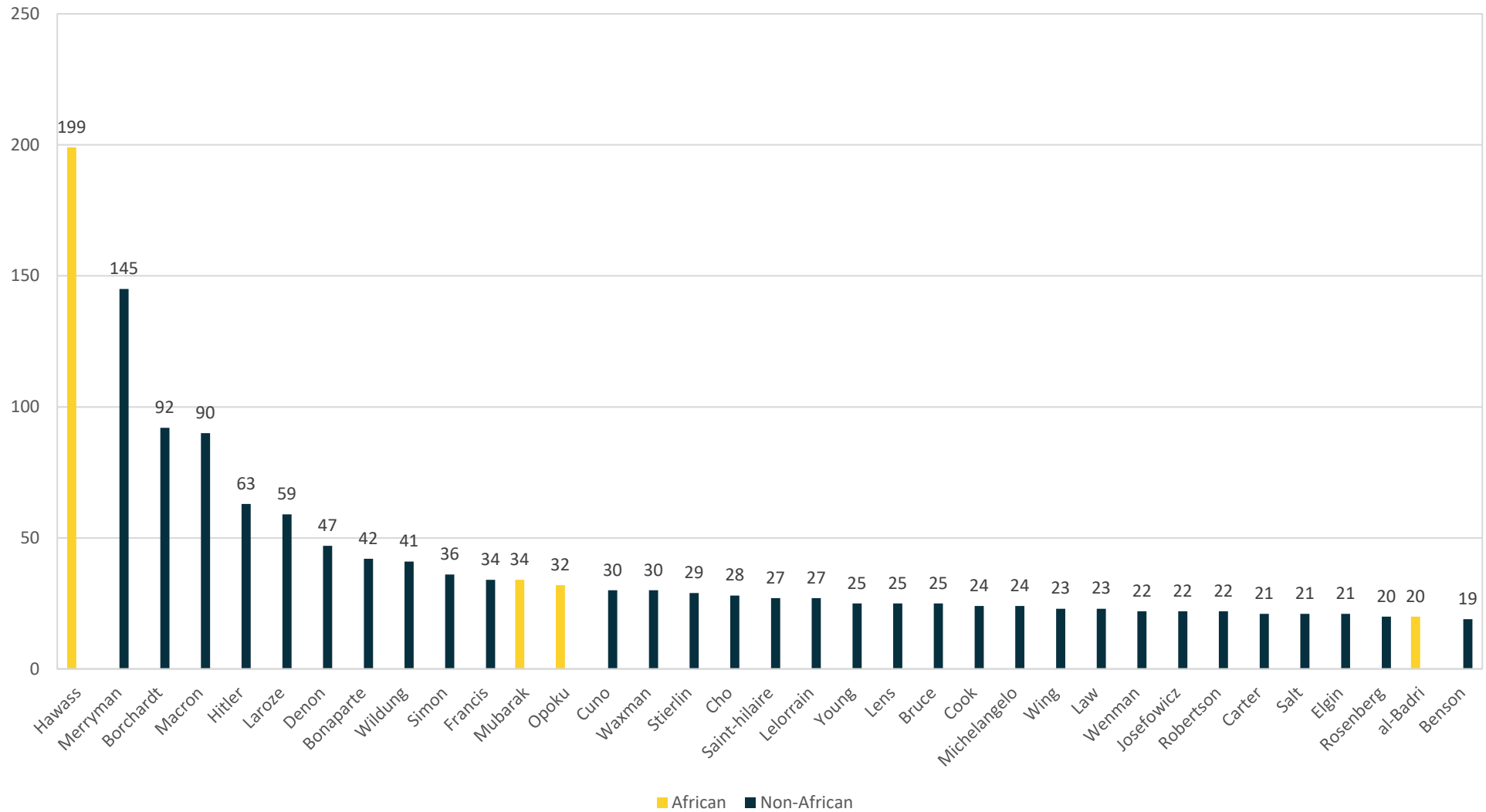


Figure 14: Number of African and non-African individuals named identified via Google Search on the topic of restitution and at least one of the Egyptian artefacts, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

Within the Benin Bronzes case, Opoku is the leading African author in public discussion on the topic, ranking third overall (see *Figure 15*). After him, the most referenced African is Ghanaian David Adjaye, the globally celebrated architect presupposed to lead the development of the new museum in Benin City, but otherwise unrelated to restitution concerns. It is important to note that Oba Ovonramwen, former king of Benin, who was overthrown during the punitive expedition, is number 32 on the list.

The first reference of Professor Dan Hicks is an interesting one. As the author of *The Brutish Museums*⁴⁶ in 2020, Hicks has emerged as a prominent voice advocating for the return of the Bronzes. While the launch of his book in 2020 does potentially skew the data in his favour as some articles and posts would likely be replaced with other books and/or reports launched in this period, Hicks' distinct visibility towers over that of any other African on this list. This is mirrored on Twitter, in which Hicks stands as by far the most influential voice on the subject, in spite of a relatively low number of followers (32 000 as at June 2021).

On the plot graph (*Figure 16*), the higher up and the larger the size of the bubble, the more substantial the level of engagement and conversation held on Twitter. This indicates influence in the nature of the discussion, as opposed to only visibility, which would be indicated by a large follower base. Clearly, Hicks occupies a highly influential position, despite having authored only one book on the subject.

The phenomenon of Hicks' popularity is particularly interesting, when we consider the long history of academic writing and nature of expertise on the subject. When we explore how individuals become well-known and popular within the sphere of knowledge production at an academic level, it becomes necessary to look beyond the 2016–2021 period, as authors are cited (referenced in other authors' work) over time.

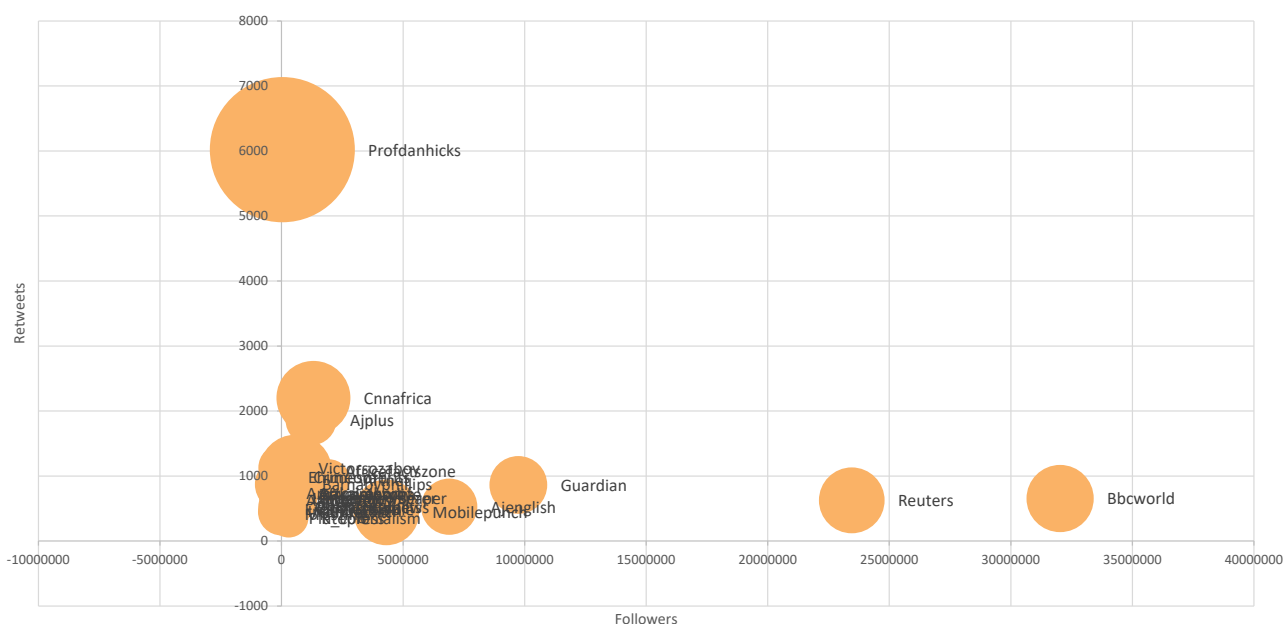


Figure 16: Twitter influencers with Hicks at top left on subjects of Egyptian artefacts and restitution, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

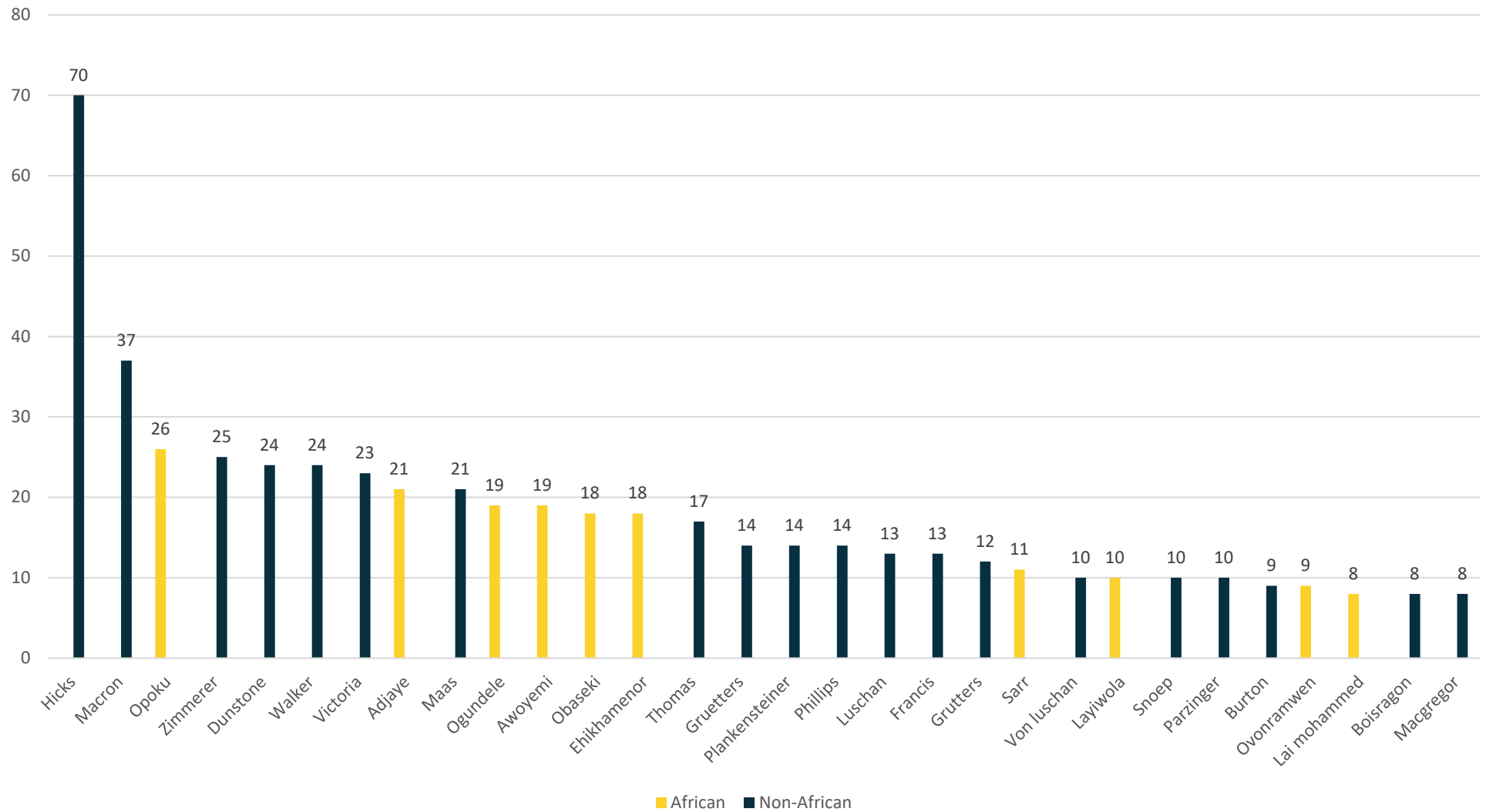


Figure 15: Number of African and non-African individuals named identified via Google Search on the topic of restitution and Benin Bronzes, 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2021

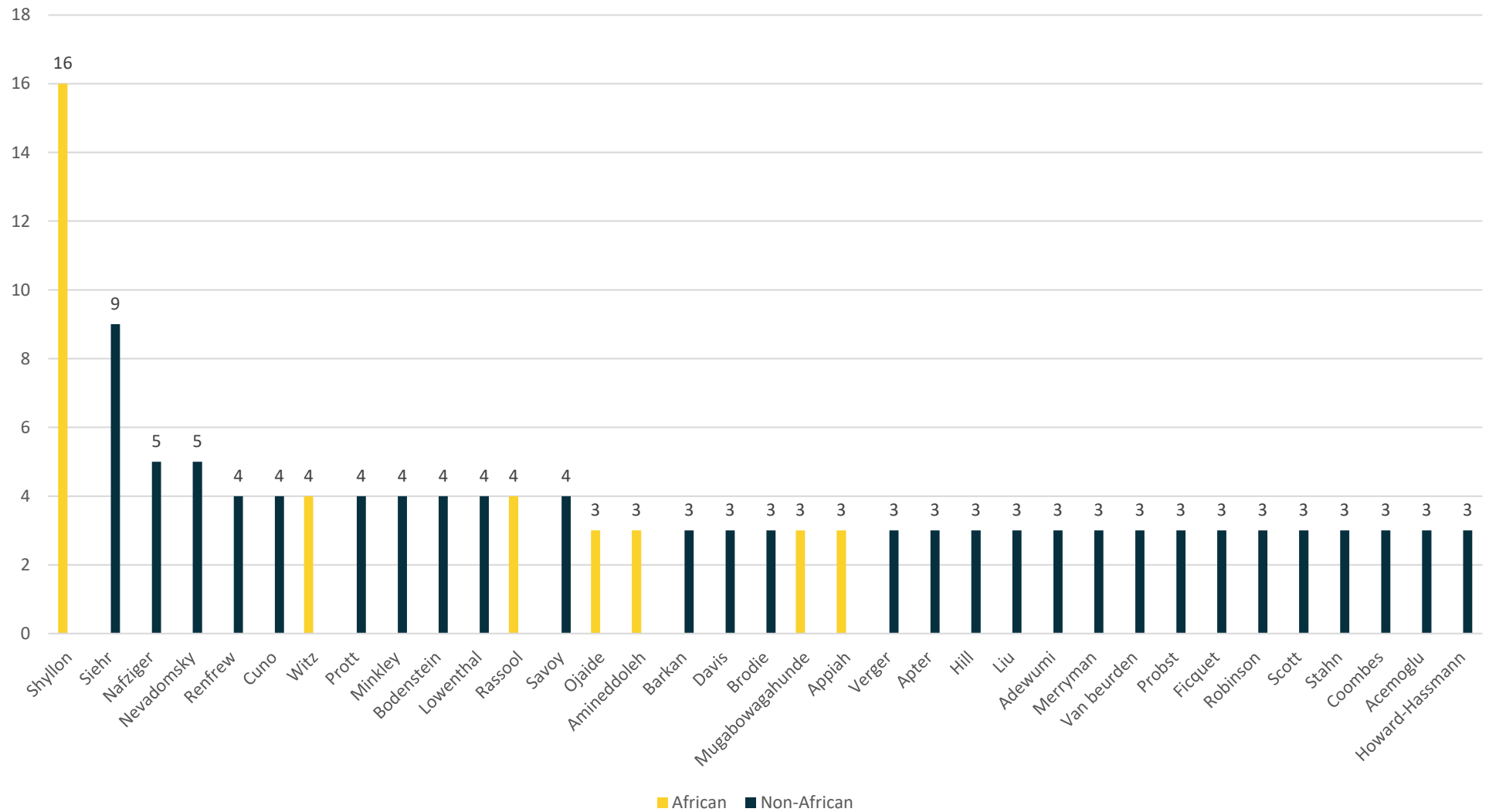


Figure 17: Publications per author, African and non-African, including discussion on Benin Bronzes and restitution

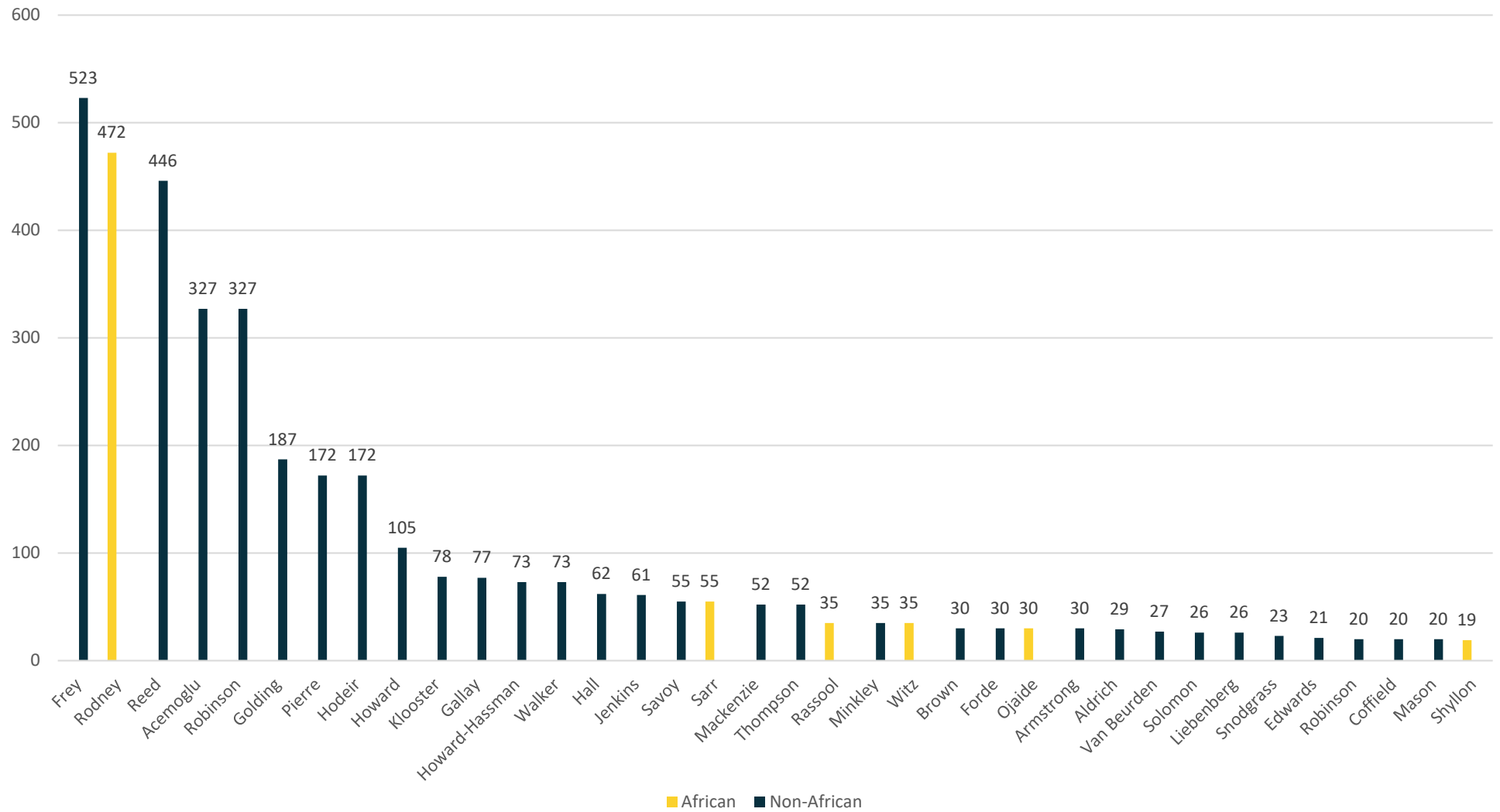


Figure 18: Citations per author, African and non-African, including discussion on Benin Bronzes and restitution

In the case of the Benin Bronzes, we see in *Figure 17* below that the late Professor Folarin Olawale Shyllon (1940–2021) was by far the most productive academic writer on this subject, having done substantial work for UNESCO and having played a substantial role in the shift of debates from the 1970s onwards. We see that the professor distinctly dominates, and that Hicks doesn't feature. However, citations are an indication that the author is taken seriously by other authors, and the professor emerges very far down this list, with non-African authors being far more widely referenced (see *Figure 18*); although Guyanese Walter Rodney, author of *How Europe under-developed Africa*⁴⁷ is from the African diaspora.

An interesting side note that emerged was the recurrence of the name “Mona Lisa” in data on Nefertiti, and “Michelangelo” in data on the Benin Bronzes. This is because writers often compare these artefacts, for example, by calling Nefertiti the “Mona Lisa of Africa”. We see here how African heritage is framed specifically in relation to Western notions of value, rather than on its own terms. In both cases, the names of these Western classics were cited more often any African name – author or otherwise. This is another indicator of the degree to which discussions on African heritage are framed through a Western lens.

“We see here how African heritage and knowledge generation is framed specifically in relation to Western notions of value, rather than on its own terms.”

In the diagram related to the Tendaguru dinosaurs (see *Figure 21*) we see that restitution terminology is more of a thread from other tangents. There are also far more words within the Tendaguru diagram, indicating that restitution is mentioned far less. Instead, we see a larger amount of scientific terminology.

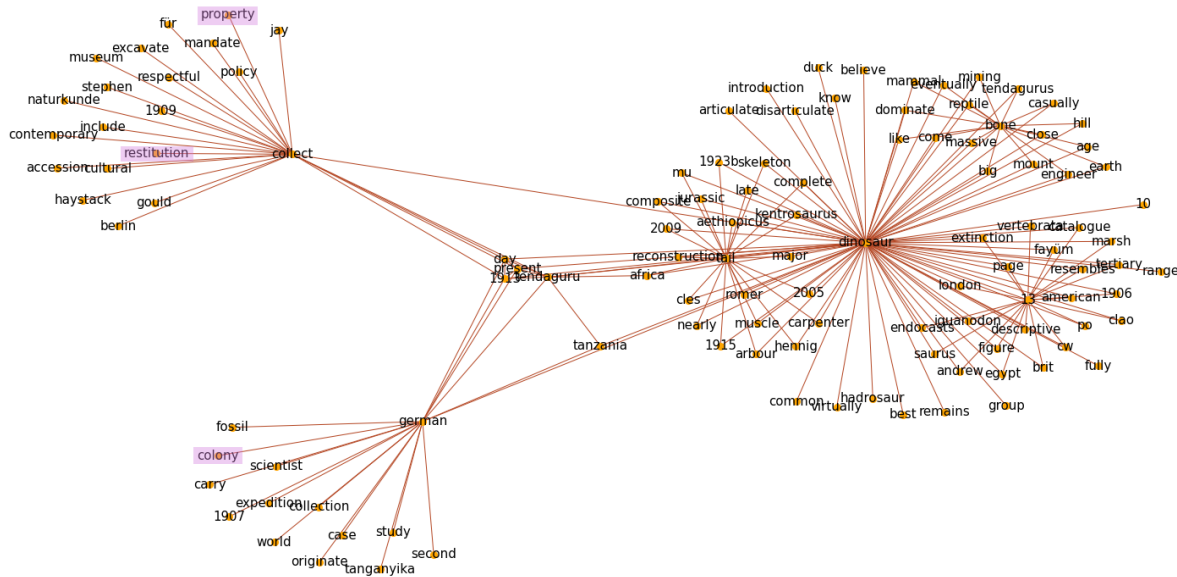


Figure 21: Network diagram of Google Scholar keywords related to Tendaguru dinosaurs

This trend is repeated within broader public discussion, with similar clustering of terminologies in the Benin Bronzes and Egyptian artefact cases, but with a lower concentration of restitution themes as central to the content (see *Figure 22*, *Figure 23* and *Figure 24*). In addition, we see a larger number of other terms, indicating a greater focus on other themes in the general discussion, rather than the academic one. Again, discussions related to the Tendaguru dinosaurs reveal a similar trend, but with a greater sense that restitution sits at the edge of public discussion interests in the dinosaurs, with less variation and complexity regarding these issues.

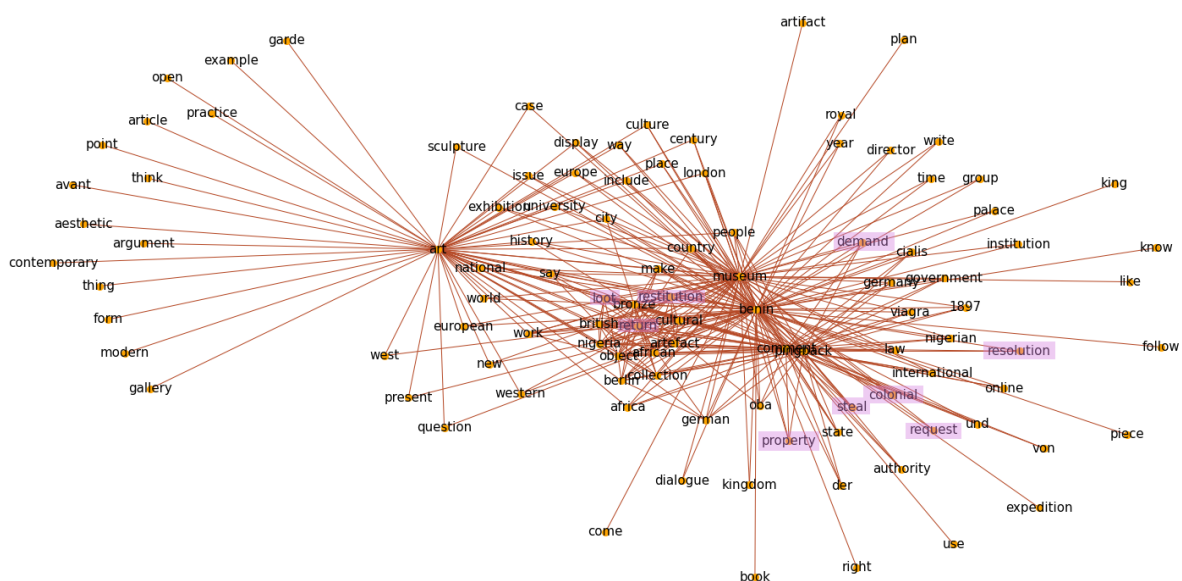


Figure 22: Network diagrams of Google Search in relation to Benin Bronzes

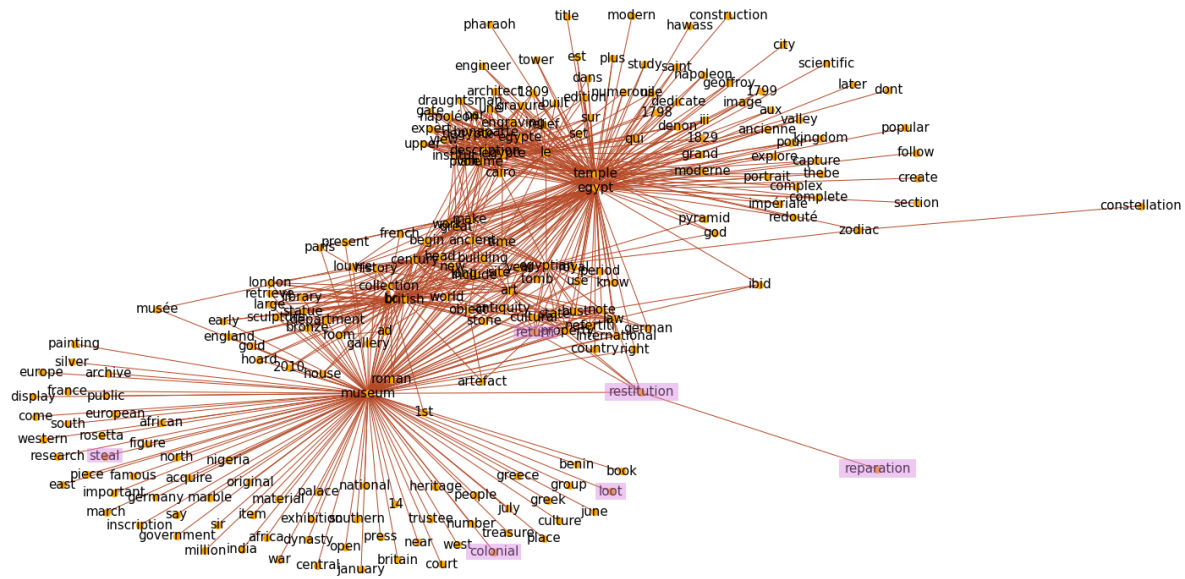


Figure 23: Network diagram of Google Search keywords in relation to Egyptian artefacts

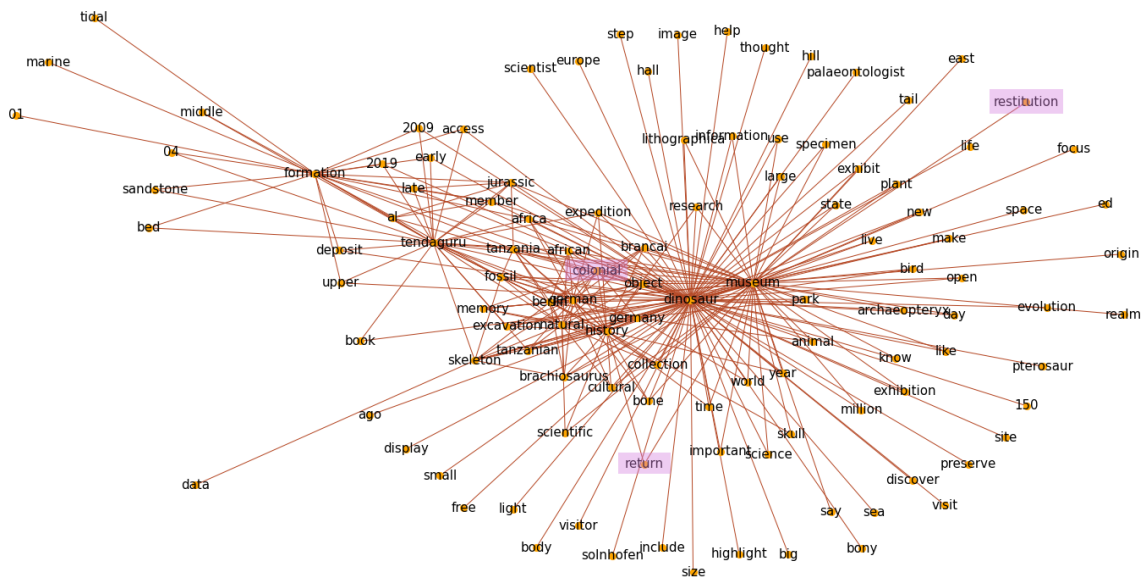


Figure 24: Network diagram of Google Search key words in relation to Tendaguru dinosaurs

Discussions on Twitter provide a fascinating picture of the primary areas of interest within the social media landscape, as well as how these interests shift and connect (see *Figure 25*, *Figure 26* and *Figure 27*). Within the circled areas we can identify key clusters of themes and content that indicate some differences between the academic and general media discussions. The Twitter engagements on the subject of the Benin Bronzes are far more extensive, with greater depth and range of engagements with restitution related terminology across the full spectrum of discussion. This probably represents the nature of the Bronzes in the restitution discussion but is also an indication that restitution and the Bronzes are now intrinsically linked, rather than being an element or singular cluster within a broader public discussion.

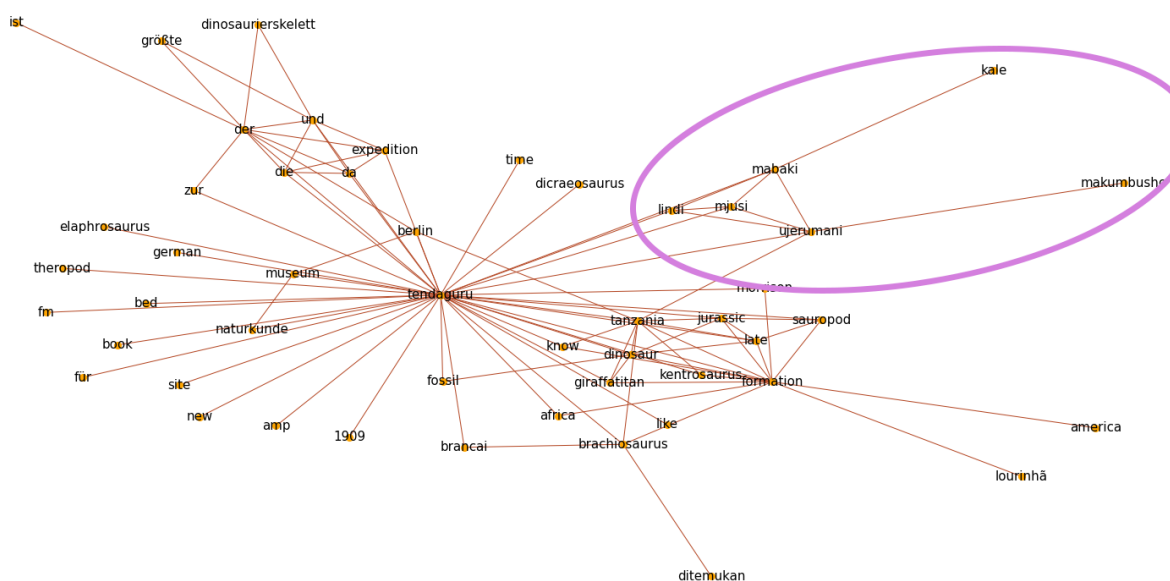


Figure 27: Network diagram of keywords from tweets on Twitter in relation to Tendaguru dinosaurs.

4.5. SILENCE, ABSENCE AND VIOLENCE

The absence of existing discourses in local languages on the issue of African Heritage restitution, or the limits of African representation due to lack of internet access, are just part of a larger problem of the absence of Africans within the broad sphere of knowledge production. While much of this absence could be explained by long-term historical inequalities of access and representation, we discover particularly in current discourse and regular citation by contemporary authors, that minimal effort is made to emphasise or even include the voices and positions of Africans, and the long battle Africans have undertaken for the restitution of their heritage. This amounts to a limited engagement with the subject that centres white European and American voices, positions and agendas as superior to the voices of those who are most affected by it. The greater presence of individuals such as Hicks and Macron than that of Oba Ovonramwen, who was dethroned and died in exile, with his ancestors' material memory scattered across the world, is perhaps a strong indication of the current nature of restitution discussions and of continued violence against African subjectivity – even at the same time as global attention to restitution of African heritage grows.

“The data is a strong indication of the current nature of restitution discussions and of continued violence against African subjectivity – even at the same time as global attention to restitution of African heritage grows.”

5. CONCLUSION



When we consider the extent of African people’s impacts on the restitution narrative – from early demands, to pressure on political and institutional matters, to later academic and popular writing, we expect to see the presence of Africans in the broader narratives that have emerged around restitution over the past years. And yet, the data points to serious inequities in who is listened to, when it comes to the subject of restitution. This inequity not only ignores the decades of work already done, but it also acts as an erasure a second time, in some senses mimicking the erasure that occurred when so much history was taken. But perhaps most importantly, when African voices are not taken seriously, it shifts the priorities of what we should be discussing.

When we consider some of the more contemporary approaches to issues of restitution by a younger generation of thinkers, we begin to see the changes in what restitution means for Africans – particularly in relation to the many decades of work that has come before them. As stated by Nana Oforiatta Ayim⁴⁸, “I have to be honest, I don’t expect very much of Western institutions anymore, you know. My focus and my energy are at home amongst us and what new narratives that we are coming up with; because I’ve lived there, I know what I’m dealing with, and it’s exhausting, to be really frank. It’s exhausting”.

Today, we see young Africans building on the arguments made in the 60s and 70s that sought to create Africa anew after independence. These narratives are focused on the African context, and what culture and heritage can do for Africans. These narratives are also focused on creating new, reconstituted museums⁴⁹, on developing new strategies for education, and on rethinking the place of history in everyday society. Ngumi⁵⁰ states “Who are the people the object left behind? And if the object is to return to a people that were bereft of it, who are the people that the object meets?”

“Who are the people the object left behind? And if the object is to return to a people that were bereft of it, who are the people that the object meets?”

- Njoki Ngumi

The data from this research can be read as an indictment of the ways in which knowledge circulates within the power frameworks of the west – even when it is about issues of concern to Africans. It can also be read as a rather negative reflection of the state of discussion on restitution today, despite the perceived improvements made over time. We see the lack on inclusion of African scholars and authors in publishing on restitution. We see that western voices are more often cited, and more often considered within the academic and media discussions on restitution. And therefore, we understand that western voices are taken more seriously than African ones. We see the impact this has on public engagement with the political concerns on these objects, as Emmanuel Macron, Michelangelo and Mona Lisa hold more presence in the discussion on restitution of African heritage than any named African individuals.

Still, we can take the data on heritage restitution from the past few years, discussed in this report, and compare it with the many decades of impact by Africans laying the groundwork, which was also discussed in this report. And when considering both, we can find a better way forward. By ensuring Africans are cited and published in academia and that they are referenced and interviewed in the media, and by enabling access to African positionalities and the long history of African narratives on restitution, with the greater body of knowledge that emerges, we are more likely to arrive at a more nuanced and varied approach to restitution. And perhaps most importantly, we begin to pay more attention to ensuring restitution plays the role it has always been intended to play – renewing connection, knowledge and selfhood through heritage and culture in Africa.

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