

Rethinking Inventories *for* African-led Restitution

An Open Restitution Africa insight
for African decision-makers





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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KEY POINTS

- Inventories raise awareness but don't necessarily result in returned items
- Large-scale inventories are costly with limited returns. Focus on actions that lead to repair, not just data collection.
- Restitution should begin with community priorities. Locally driven, demands-based inventories are more ethical and effective.
- Public access must respect sacred knowledge and community rights. Transparency should empower, not expose.





INTRODUCTION

This report responds to an emerging challenge in the restitution landscape: African governments and decision-makers are increasingly considering comprehensive national inventory programs that attempt to catalogue all cultural objects originating from their countries and their current locations worldwide.

While inventory work serves important purposes, we argue that these large-scale cataloguing initiatives are resource-intensive and often unviable given the constraints African governments face. Instead, we advocate for a strategic reallocation of limited government resources toward supporting community-led restitution projects that are already active or seeking to begin—efforts that require immediate attention and are already achieving results despite operating in challenging circumstances.

Our recommendations target African decision-makers weighing resource allocation decisions, offering an alternative approach that prioritises urgent, grassroots restitution work over exhaustive national cataloguing projects.

Whether you're part of a national committee, working in a museum, or shaping policy, this Insight invites you to reflect on tools and choices that serve African realities, not foreign templates.

Grounded in evidence from ORA's comprehensive review of African-led heritage inventory initiatives, we distill key lessons from what has already been attempted. ORA's review focused on six major Africa-linked projects—most developed since 2017—whose scopes, goals, and intended audiences vary.¹ The review is further informed by restitution [case studies](#) and interviews with practitioners across the continent.²



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1. [Africa Accessioned](#) (2014–2017): Initiated by the University of Namibia's History Department with funding from ICOM t. Focused on ethnographic collections from Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe held in European museums.

2. [Edan](#): Tracked Ghanaian belongings in collections across Europe and the USA.

WHY INVENTORIES MATTER & WHERE THEY FALL SHORT

Since the 2017 Savoy-Sarr [report](#), and high-profile returns like the Benin Bronzes, inventories have become a go-to starting point for actors seeking restitution. International bodies like UNESCO, the OECD, and the EU are also encouraging greater transparency from holding institutions. Regional and continental bodies such as [ECOWAS](#) and the African Union are developing restitution policy strategies. Several **African governments are exploring the development of national inventories** of heritage held abroad as an entry point to future restitution processes.

Several African-led or African-linked initiatives centred around inventorying emerged in response. Perhaps the best known, [Digital Benin](#) documented Benin Bronzes across institutions globally. Others include; the [Edan Project](#) which focused on developing a Ghana-centric digital inventory of looted heritage and the [Atlas of Absence](#) which mapped Cameroonian belongings in German museums.

While ambitious and generative, some of the challenges faced by these projects also reveal the **uneven access to museum data**, and the **complex technical, ethical, and financial demands** of inventory-making. They underscore the importance of African ownership, the need to **prioritise resources strategically**, and the value of deep reflection before action.

WHAT INVENTORIES CAN—AND CAN'T—DO

Inventories are often seen as a starting point for restitution, but their **value and limits** must be clear—especially for African decision-makers working with limited resources.

Inventories can expose the scale of loss, raise awareness, and increase pressure on holding institutions to share information and return items. They can also support **education and research**, though the benefits often remain concentrated in the Global North, in most cases, and the projects discussed here reflect this. Inventories serve as a first initial step, but further qualitative research, knowledge development, major international cooperation, oral histories and other processes are required to bring value to inventory processes.

Inventories are not neutral or comprehensive tools. They **cannot capture the full scope** of what was taken, nor do they replace the need for **clear policy, political will, or long-term investment** in restitution processes. They rarely convey the **cultural or spiritual significance** of belongings or restore their **living connection** to communities. Without community involvement, they risk **reproducing the disconnection** they aim to address.

FOUR LESSONS

The evidence from recent projects across Africa points to **four main challenges**. These issues are not simply technical; they raise strategic questions about **where African governments should focus limited resources** and how to ensure that restitution efforts are meaningful, community-driven, and historically just.



1. High Costs, Modest Impact

Creating comprehensive inventories of African heritage abroad is **extremely resource-intensive**. For example, the Digital Benin project cost an estimated **€3.9 million** to document, build knowledge and make accessible **around 5246 items** from a **single kingdom**.¹

The scale of the challenge is even starker when you consider that Atlas of Absence identified over **40,000 Cameroonian items** in German museums alone, while Kenya's Invisible Inventories Programme logged **32,000 belongings** from only **a portion of institutions** across Europe and North America.

For most African countries, attempting large-scale inventories across all collections is not only **financially unrealistic**, but also **strategically debatable**—especially given that restitution is a long-term process that requires investment in additional aspects such as repair, community engagement, and institutional readiness.

Our research found **no direct link** between publishing inventories and the actual return of heritage items. Inventories may prompt discussion or highlight gaps for further research, but they do not, in themselves, trigger returns.

2. Colonial Misrepresentations Persist

Most existing museum **records were created during colonial rule** and reflect extractive classifications, racist ideologies, and arbitrary documentation practices, which include:

- Vague, outdated, or incorrect labels attached to belongings: Terms like “fetish” or “amulet” were often used to label items that Western curators could not—or would not—understand.
- Incomplete or misleading documentation: Many records omit origin stories, cultural uses, or even the names of communities, making it difficult to reconnect items with their rightful histories.
- Technical incompatibility: Researchers compiling inventories like Atlas of Absence and Digital Benin found that colonial records lacked the consistency and standardisation needed to build new, coherent African-led databases.

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Colonial looting erased languages and memory, making even well-documented items hard to interpret without community insight. Without deep reinterpretation, community participation, and critical analysis, inventories **risk reproducing colonial errors** in digital form.

3. Restricted Access to Collections

Access to data is one of the biggest obstacles in inventory-making. Despite public commitments to transparency, most Western museums still tightly control their records.

- The **Atlas of Absence** team was only able to access approximately **1% of Germany's 70 major public museums and over 7,000 private collections**.
- The **International Inventories Programme** contacted 100 museums across Europe and North America; 40 responded, and 30 shared their databases. From the 32,000 Kenyan belongings documented, only 7,000 were made publicly available - approximately 22% of the total documented.
- Only a few European institutions—such as the Netherlands' **Colonial Collections Data Hub**—are taking steps toward open access.

As a result, inventory researchers often **negotiate case-by-case**, waiting on email responses or permissions just to see records. This makes inventory work **slow, labour-intensive**, and highly dependent on the goodwill of foreign institutions.

4. A Mismatch of Priorities

Inventories often **reflect the research priorities**, understandings and the disciplines which dominate the institutions that fund or host them —rather than the concerns of communities, nor the imperative of spiritual repair at the centre of much restitution work.

Many inventory initiatives are **designed for European academic or curatorial use**, rather than being co-created with affected communities. The **Atlas of Absence**, hosted in Germany and built on German-language records, had some limited engagement with Cameroonian scholars, activists and traditional authorities, but as with most similar projects, remains resourced and institutionally driven from the European context.

For African governments, priorities should be focused on ensuring community-centred fair and just return first, rather than replicating a familiar colonial logic—where African heritage is once again studied, classified, and digitised from afar, often without regard for **local significance, spiritual meaning**, or community-defined value.

ALTERNATIVES AND POSSIBILITIES

Despite the emphasis on inventories, most **sustained restitution efforts have been driven by communities of origin**, not by databases. In many cases, such as that of the Tangué, sacred to the Bele-Bele Kingdom of the Douala communities in Cameroon **diaspora members have come across their community's belongings by chance** in Western museums. Similarly, the **campaign to return the [Ngonso statue](#)** to the Nso community in Cameroon was not sparked by a digital inventory. It grew from the commitment of **grassroots activists and diaspora members working to restore spiritual ties and mobilise public support**.

Meaningful restitution is often sparked by human connection rather than catalogues—by communities recognising, reclaiming, and fighting for what is theirs. In practice, many successful restitution efforts begin not with inventories, but with individuals or groups who already know what was taken and where it ended up.



What does this tell us?

1. Whatever type of information storage and management system is chosen should **support existing mobilisations**.
2. Resources should be directed to connect the dots between grassroots efforts, state actors, and diaspora mobilisations, while **diplomatic channels** also play a vital role in establishing and maintaining contact points.
3. In some situations, inventories that are **demands-based**, community-driven and modest in scale can **deliver more impact** than large, general datasets which cast the net wide.

WHAT COULD A DEMANDS-BASED INVENTORY LOOK LIKE?

A demands-based inventory starts with **communities identifying what they have lost**. It shifts the focus from institution-led documentation to community-led identification and demand—enabling rightful owners to articulate demands in their own terms.

Such a system must reflect African realities:

- **Cultural and Spiritual Protocols:** Some belongings carry taboos or sacred status. A responsible system must allow communities to set access rules—who can see what, under what conditions, and for how long—without freezing traditions as static.
- **Uneven Digital Access:** Many communities lack reliable internet, devices, or training. Any platform must be mobile-accessible, low-bandwidth friendly, and supported by offline outreach.
- **Sustainability and Accessibility:** In resource-constrained settings, inventory systems should be low-cost, easy to maintain, and grounded in local practices. Hybrid models—combining digital tools with paper records or community registries—may be more effective than fully online platforms.
- **People at the Core:** Beyond funding and infrastructure, demands-based systems rely on people. Museum professionals, cultural workers, artists, and academics play a vital role in connecting belongings to communities. Their skills, networks, and local knowledge help ensure systems are both practical and sustainable.

Though no fully-fledged **African-led demands system** yet exists, **useful models** can be adapted (*see Box 1*)

Germany's [Lost Art Database](#), run by the German Lost Art Foundation which is **entirely funded by the federal government**, was created to help victims of Nazi looting reclaim art and belongings. It functions as a matchmaker—connecting known claims with known holdings—and is underpinned by the 1998 **Washington Principles**. These principles, adopted by 44 countries, are non-binding guidelines that promote transparency, access to provenance information, and non-litigious paths to restitution. Crucially, they **place the burden on institutions** holding potentially looted belongings to make them visible and accessible, not on victims to prove the loss alone.

Meanwhile, the [Mukurtu CMS Project](#), developed with **Indigenous communities** in the **United States**, provides an open-source digital platform for managing cultural heritage on community terms. It allows communities to create custom access protocols—deciding who can see what and under which conditions—**ensuring that sacred knowledge, taboos, and cultural protocols are respected** even in digital spaces. Importantly, the system is not fixed; it is designed to evolve with community needs and understandings over time.

The examples in Box 1 offer key lessons:

- 1. A demands-based inventory doesn't need to be comprehensive.** It only needs to support what communities are already mobilising to reclaim—specific belongings with known value and meaning.
- 2. Such a system will only be effective if there is political will and ethical weight behind it.** Just as the Washington Principles gave weight to the Lost Art Database, African restitution efforts require a similar commitment to transparency and responsibility from the institutions that hold looted heritage.
- 3. Rightful owners, not holding institutions, must set terms of access and visibility of data.** In many African contexts, digital access, rights management, and resource constraints raise complex questions. Who can or should see certain belongings? How are sacred, taboo, or community-held knowledge handled responsibly?



CONCLUSION

Inventories are not a silver bullet. They are one tool in a much broader ecosystem of restitution which is **resource-intensive, time-consuming, and requiring long-term investment and cross-institutional cooperation**. This calls for a hard look at what inventories are really for. While they can raise visibility, the real work of identifying meaningful items and resourcing restitution efforts still rests with the communities and countries of origin.

When pursued, inventories are most effective when **anchored in national institutions**, tied to **public programming**, and used to reconnect communities with the **histories—and futures—of their stolen heritage**.

But **visibility alone is not justice**. Documentation without action risks reinforcing the very disconnect it seeks to repair. It is not the job of African states to track down every looted belonging. **The responsibility to make collections information accessible lies squarely with those who hold them**. European governments, museums, universities, and private collectors must take the lead in **publishing, sharing, and demystifying records**, many of which remain opaque to the very communities from whom these belongings were taken.

What African Governments Can Do

- **Create a national restitution database** to register claims and allow communities and international museums to interact around them.
- **Fund focused research and coordination efforts**—including a small team or unit to support claims and engage with institutions abroad.
- **Support community-led initiatives and national museums** that are already advancing restitution on the ground.

What Western Institutions Must Do

- Make full collections **data open and accessible**, with translations where needed.
- Actively respond to claims and share responsibility for repair, including **co-funding returns** and supporting African institutions.
- **Engage African diaspora communities** as essential partners in identification and advocacy.

Restitution is not only about return—it's about repair. African governments must choose where to invest for long-term cultural renewal and **social cohesion**. Western institutions must do more than open databases—they must **share the burden of restitution and help rebuild what was broken**.

SUPPORTING NOTES:

1. The six Africa-linked inventory projects included in ORA's review, along with ORA case studies and interviews with researchers and key actors involved in these projects:
 - [Africa Accessioned](#) (2014–2017): Initiated by the University of Namibia's History Department with funding from ICOM t. Focused on ethnographic collections from Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe held in European museums.
 - [Edan](#): Tracked Ghanaian belongings in collections across Europe and the USA.
 - [Colonial Collections Data Hub](#) (2022): Dutch-funded project mapping colonial-era belongings and ancestors from several African countries held in the Netherlands, aiming to increase visibility for source communities.
 - [Digital Benin](#) (established 2019, launched 2022): Developed from the Benin Dialogue Group, this project involved multiple institutions internationally to build a digital archive of belongings related to the Benin Kingdom (present day Nigeria).
 - [Atlas of Absence](#): Initiated following the Starr-Savoy report (2017), this project focused on Cameroonian heritage in German collections, led by researchers based in Berlin and Cameroon.
 - [International Inventories Programme](#) (2018–2022): A Kenyan-led project to identify Kenyan belongings in European museums and raise public awareness. Involved museums and collectives in Kenya and Germany.
2. Pursuant to producing this discussion document, a team of ORA and University of Western Cape researchers convened a workshop on inventories for restitution experts from sub-Saharan Africa in March 2025. The inputs of this multi-disciplinary reflection helped set priorities and needs of the audience.





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