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Rethinking Inventories *for* African-led Restitution

An Open Restitution Africa insight
for African decision-makers



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



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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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This insight is developed by **Jinty Jackson** and drawn from a study undertaken by **Open Restitution Africa** on behalf of the **South African Cultural Observatory** & the **National Department of Sport, Arts and Culture** in South Africa (2024).

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Open Restitution Africa would also like to thank the following individuals for their time and insight..

Luness Mpunwa (*National Art Gallery of Namibia*)

Samora Cloete (*>>Africa Accessioned<<*)

Sebastian Sprute (*Atlas of Absence*)

Digital Benin

Juma Ondeng (*Invisible Inventories Programme*)

Yann LeGall (*Restitution of Knowledge*)

Rebecca Thompson (*EDAN*)

Cindy Zalm and **Camiel de Kom** (*Colonial Collections Data Hub*)

Andrea Baresel-Brand and **Tessa Hamann** (*Lost Art Database*)





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 cataloging projects.

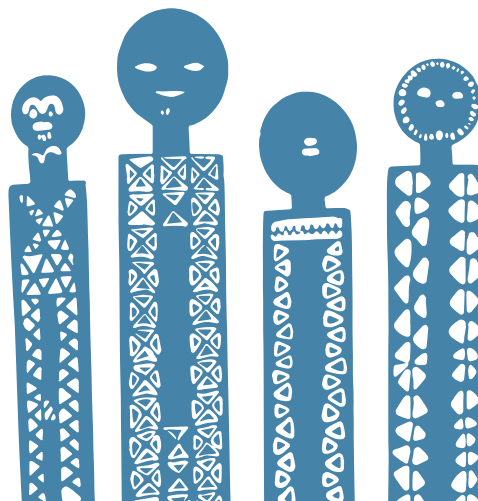
Whether you're part of a national committee, working in a museum, or shaping policy, this Insight, grounded in a comprehensive review of a dozen Africa-linked inventory projects, invites you to reflect on tools and choices that serve African realities, not foreign templates.



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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.



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 common starting point for restitution. Initiatives like the African Union, ECOWAS are supporting African states to identify and retrieve items. In Western contexts, inventories are often framed as tools of transparency, accountability and the good governance of heritage. Some **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 including [Digital Benin](#) which documented Benin Bronzes across institutions globally, 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 reveal uneven access to museum data and highlight the technical, ethical, and financial challenges of inventories, emphasising the need for strategic resource use and careful reflection.



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.

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.



1. High Costs, Modest Impact

Creating inventories of African heritage abroad is highly resource-intensive. The Digital Benin project cost €3.9 million to document, build knowledge and make accessible around 5246 items from a single kingdom. Atlas of Absence identified over 40,000 Cameroonian items in German museums, while Kenya's International Inventories Programme logged 32,000 belongings from only a portion of institutions across Europe and North America.

For most African countries, large-scale inventories are financially unrealistic and strategically questionable, given the long-term investment restitution demands in repair, community engagement, and institutional readiness.

Without clear outcomes, these efforts risk draining resources. Our research found no direct link between publishing inventories and the actual return of heritage items. They may prompt discussion or highlight research gaps—but they do not, in themselves, trigger returns.

2. Colonial Legacies Persist

Colonial-era museum records are often vague, inconsistent, and shaped by racist and extractive logics. Labels like “fetish” or “amulet” obscured meaning, while documentation frequently omitted origins, uses, or community names. Researchers behind projects like Atlas of Absence and Digital Benin found that these records lack the standardisation needed for coherent, African-led inventories. Even well-documented items remain difficult to interpret without community insight, risking the digital reproduction of colonial distortions.

3. Restricted Access to Collections

Access to collections remains a major barrier: the Atlas of Absence team reached only approximately 1% of Germany's public museums, while Kenya's International Inventories Programme saw just 30 out of 100 contacted museums share data—and only 22% of the documented items were made public. Few European institutions, like the Netherlands' Colonial Collections Data Hub, are moving toward open access.

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 are designed for European academic use, with limited local involvement. This risks repeating colonial patterns of studying and classifying African heritage from afar.

ALTERNATIVES AND POSSIBILITIES

Despite the focus on inventories, most sustained restitution efforts are driven by communities of origin. Diaspora members often encounter belongings by chance in Western museums, as in the case of the Tangué, sacred to the Bele-Bele Kingdom in Cameroon. The return campaign for the Ngonnso statue also began not with an inventory, but through the efforts of grassroots activists and diaspora members working to restore spiritual ties and build public support.

What does this tell us?

Information management systems should support ongoing mobilisations and connect grassroots, state, and diaspora efforts. In some cases, modest, community-driven inventories tied to specific demands are more effective than broad, general datasets.

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.

- **Cultural and Spiritual Protocols:** Some items are sacred or taboo. Communities must define access—who can see what, when, and how—without freezing traditions as static.
- **Uneven Digital Access:** Many communities lack stable internet or devices. Platforms must work on mobile, support low-bandwidth use, and be backed by offline outreach.
- **Sustainability and Accessibility:** In low-resource settings, systems should be low-cost, easy to maintain, and rooted in local practices. Hybrid models—mixing digital tools with paper or community records—may be more effective.
- **People at the Core:** These systems depend on people. Cultural workers, artists, and academics connect items to communities, making inventories relevant, usable, and lasting

Though no fully-fledged African-led demands system yet exists, useful models can be adapted. These include:

Germany's [Lost Art Database](#), funded by the federal government and run by the German Lost Art Foundation, helps victims of Nazi looting reclaim art and belongings. It acts as a matchmaker, linking known claims with known holdings, and is guided by the 1998 Washington Principles—non-binding guidelines adopted by 44 countries that promote transparency, access to provenance, and non-litigious restitution. Crucially, they place the burden on holding institutions to make records visible, rather than on victims to prove their loss alone.

The [Mukurtu CMS Project](#), developed with Indigenous communities in the U.S., is an **open-source digital platform** that lets communities manage cultural heritage on their own terms. It supports **custom access protocols**—allowing communities to decide who can see what, when, and how—ensuring respect for sacred knowledge and cultural sensitivities. Crucially, it is **designed to evolve** with community needs, rather than freezing traditions in fixed forms.

The examples in Box 1 offer key lessons:

- 1. Inventories don't need to be comprehensive**—they should support existing community efforts to reclaim specific, meaningful items..
- 2. Political will and ethical framing are essential.** Like the Washington Principles supported the Lost Art Database, African restitution needs clear commitments to transparency and responsibility from holding institutions.
- 3. Access must be on the terms of rightful owners.** Digital access, rights management, and resource limits raise complex questions—especially around sacred, taboo, or community-held knowledge.



CONCLUSION

Inventories are not a silver bullet. They are just one tool in a broader, resource-intensive restitution process that demands long-term investment, community engagement, and institutional readiness. For many African countries, large-scale inventories are **financially unrealistic** and **strategically questionable**. Inventories **should be pursued selectively**—anchored in national institutions, tied to public programming, and focused on reconnecting communities with their heritage. But visibility alone is not justice. Documentation without action risks deepening disconnection.

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**. The burden cannot fall solely on African states. **Western institutions must take responsibility:** publish and share records, demystify opaque archives, and support the repair of what was broken





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