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This African-Led Research Organization Aims to Change the Conversation Around Restitution

BY **TAYLOR MICHAEL**

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Molemo Moilola and Chao Tayiana Maina, founders of Open Restitution Africa.
PHOTO MEKBIB TADESSE

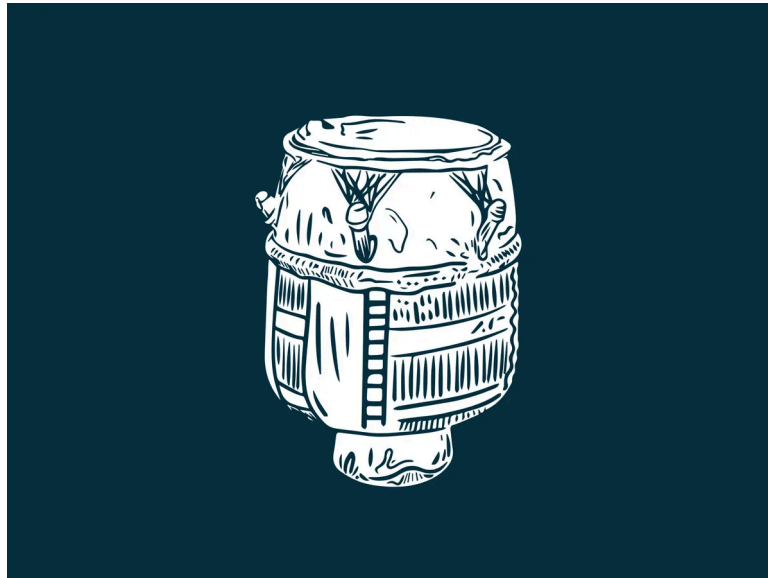
Since British colonial officers confiscated the Ngadji drum in 1902, the Pokomo people in southeastern Kenya have witnessed a significant percentage of their community convert to Christianity or Islam. They can no longer perform certain traditional ceremonies. Prior to British colonial rule in Kenya, beginning in 1895, Pokomo artists crafted these wooden drum for calls to worship or to celebrate the start of a king's reign. More than a century later, this group is still fighting to restore their community from this violent past by retrieving their sacred instrument from the British Museum in London.

This story is one of many that **Open Restitution Africa** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/open-restitution-africa/>), an African-led research organization based on the continent, compiled with scholars to help reframe narratives around the repatriation of important cultural objects from museums and private collections. William Mutta Tsaka, a researcher at the National Museums of Kenya, wrote the **Ngadji case study** (<https://openrestitution.africa/case-study/the-return-of-ngadji-a-sacred-drum-stolen-from-the-pokomo-people/>) in November 2023 with a \$1,650

microgrant from ORA. With a three-year, \$600,000 grant from **Mellon Foundation** (<https://www.mellon.org/grant-details/open-restitution-africa-20453071>), the project has allowed ORA to support scholars for four months and collect data about around 16 individual **restitution** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/restitution/>) efforts.

ORA initially planned for the grant program to cover the costs of collating and reporting the research. However, not long into the project, founders Chao Maina and Molemo Moiloa realized the needs were greater than expected, as most repatriation grants resourced provenance research for professionals working with Western museums. But most independent researchers had to rely on community fundraising or personal funders before ORA's microgrants. ORA's microgrants are likely the first to fund independent scholars or community activists on the continent.

"We found that people were using this tiny bit of additional resources to get on a bus and go into a village and do additional interviews," Moiloa told *ARTnews*. Tsaka's grant, like many researchers', covered the equipment, travel, and other fieldwork costs.



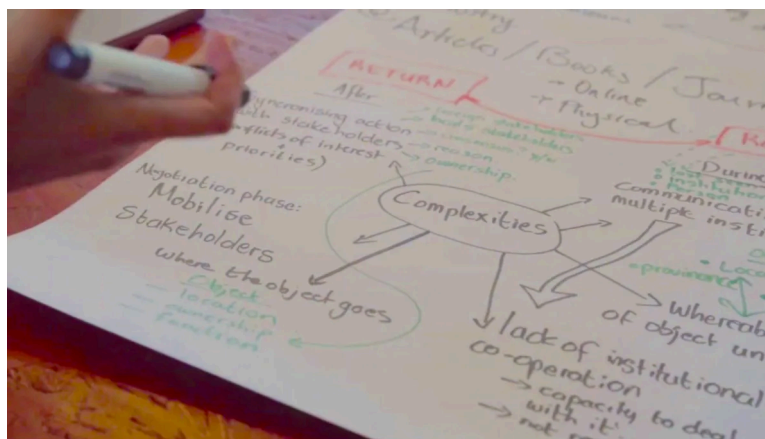
An illustration of the Ngadji, a sacred drum stolen from the Pokomo people that is currently held by the British Museum.

ILLUSTRATION: CHAO TAYIANA MAINA/COURTESY OPEN RESTITUTION AFRICA

The project aims to disrupt the media and scholarship landscape ORA's founders had identified in **a 2022 report** (<https://openrestitution.africa/resources/reports/reclaiming-restitution/>), titled *Reclaiming Restitution: Centering and Contextualizing the African Narrative*. In it, Maina and Moiloa argue that even though discussions about African restitution increased after 2017, African voices and the needs of Africans have been largely absent from these conversations. Among their findings was that Africans authored at most 4 percent of all academic publishing on restitution between 2016 and 2021. When those voices were present, the focus had been on Africans arguing for the right to own their material culture instead of providing an understanding of the impact an object's loss had on its community. The report also emphasizes that restitution cases extend beyond the **Benin Bronzes** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/benin-bronzes/>), which have been given an outsize significance in the media.

Along with case studies, ORA has created an open data platform, unveiled at the end of the year, to contain researchers' documents, interview transcripts, and other materials with other recorded events. They hope to show that restitution is more than "putting something in a box and sending it on a plane," Moiloa said. "The really complex work of repair and restoration is actually the work of Africans."

This community-centered approach to restitution research also highlights the immense challenges faced when tracking, locating, or retrieving seized artifacts. In ORA webinars and conferences, researchers have shared stories about removing arsenic, a preservative that conservationists treated artifacts with until relatively recently; settling customs disputes with different jurisdictions; or determining who has the right to advocate on behalf of a community for an object's return.



Open Restitution Africa team members mapping missing processes in current restitution data, 2022.

PHOTO AMIT RAMRAKHA/COURTESY OPEN RESTITUTION AFRICA

To write his case study, Tsaka traveled to Tana River County, a coastal province in Kenya where the Pokomo people live, and interviewed community members and representatives from Recovery of the Ngadji, a nonprofit initiative, who had sought the object's return from the British Museum between 2019 and 2023. Through his research, Tsaka learned that Ngadji's case is likely stalled still because of intracommunity discord. Even though Pokomo elders granted the initiative's founders, Makorani Mungase and Baiba Mjidho, permission to visit the Ngadji in the British Museum's archive, these elders argue that the pair started the initiative without community consent. In 2020, Pokomo elders sent a letter to the British Museum asking the museum to pause all negotiations with the initiative because of this.

"It's important that negotiations involve the local community," Tsaka told *ARTnews*. "It's not a good idea to form an NGO to negotiate with [Western] institutions; the item belongs to the community."

The British Museum and the Recovery of the Ngadji initiative did not respond a request for comment from *ARTnews* about the negotiation process.



Focus group discussion with Isanzu elders, Mkalama District, Tanzania, 2023.

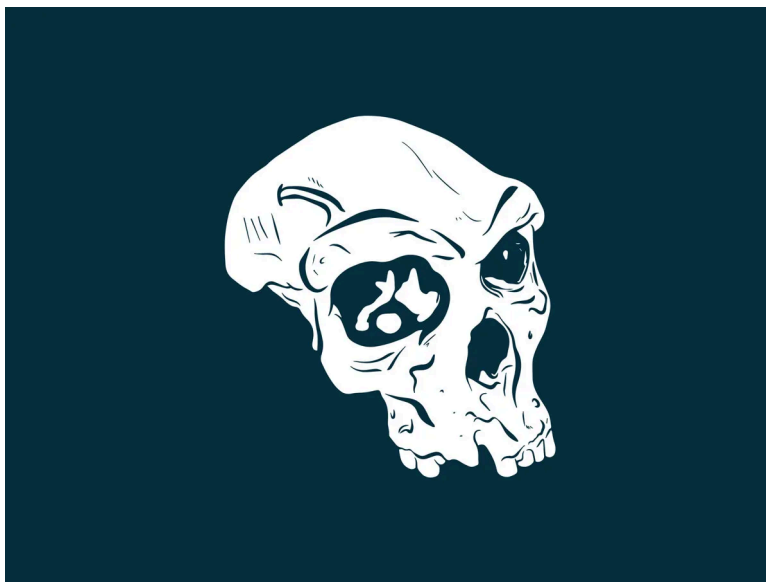
PHOTO MAXIMILIAN CHAMI/COURTESY OPEN RESTITUTION AFRICA

The Ngadji case study provides a picture of how ORA's research and data challenges the methods of contextualizing objects and their respective restitution claims accurately. One important point of distinction in this discussion is between material culture, such as the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, which have made international headlines, versus requests for human or prehistoric remains, which have been underreported in the media. This has led to a bias within the international media, according to ORA, with a 2022 report noting that this bias is "understandable," given that conversations and research about restitution recently became more popular.

By failing to research a wide variety of cases may also oversimplify restitution discussions and silence narratives that don't fit a specific mold. That's what ORA's model aims to change.

“Our researchers go into villages and museums to track the stories of cases about human ancestors, prehuman remains such as dinosaurs, [and] through to what is usually expected: material culture like Benin bronzes,” Moilola said.

Independent curator Phumzile Nombuso Twala, for example, used her microgrant to develop a **case study on Sara Baartman** (<https://openrestitution.africa/case-study/3609/>) as a way to humanize the Black woman who had been dehumanized by the human circuses she was exhibited in. Twala includes details about Baartman’s life before moving to Europe, the conditions she faced while in England and France, and the efforts the Griqua community made to reclaim her remains in the 1990s from France’s Musée de l’Homme. In her report, she emphasizes the roles artists, African media, and national government can play when supporting community-led efforts like these.



An illustration of Kabwe Man, also known as the “Broken Hill Skull.”

ILLUSTRATION: CHAO TAYIANA MAINA/COURTESY OPEN RESTITUTION AFRICA

Other ORA-funded case studies show how human remains are just another resource extracted from Africa, like in one by independent curator Mwape J. Mumbi, about the first human fossil found in Africa. Even though the **Kabwe Man** (<https://openrestitution.africa/case-study/kabwe-man/>)—named for the Zambian town it was unearthed in and also known as the “Broken Hill Skull”—helped paleontologists and archeologists better understand humankind’s evolution, the skull represents Zambia’s colonial, environmental, and cultural history. African laborers uncovered the skull while mining for lead and zinc in a town, more two hours north of the capital city Lusaka, that environmentalists now consider **one of the most polluted in the world** (<https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/03/30/g-s1-51935/toxic-mines-zambia-polluted-lead-poisoning#:~:text=This%20city%20of%20almost%20300%2C000,largest%20lead%20and%20zinc%20mines.>). (A **2015 scientific study** (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25303652/>) found that children who live in Kabwe have serious health risks from soil contamination.) Mumbi argues that Zambia could have benefited financially if the research funding—and later the tourism-related spending from its display—had stayed in Zambia rather than going to the United Kingdom and the Natural History Museum in London.

A UNESCO court ruled in 2024 that the UK must repatriate Zambia’s skull. But the negotiations for its return have also stalled, with UK researchers making the case to international courts that Zambia didn’t have the infrastructure necessary to preserve the skull for future research. Zambia’s government has provided evidence to the contrary.

In a statement to *ARTnews*, the United Kingdom Natural History Museum said that it “remains committed to continuing to work constructively with the UK government and the Zambian government on this matter.”



Artist Chansa Chishimba, seated next to his sculpture *Last Identity*, which reflects his critical interest in the Broken Hill Man Skull (Kabwe Man), at his home studio in Livingstone, Zambia.
PHOTO MWAPE MUUMBI

Mumbi said that negotiations might have actually stalled because of fears of what Zambians would do with their item once it was returned, as some Zambian communities believe the artifact doesn't belong in a museum for display and should instead be reburied in Kabwe. Mumbi believes that these discussions need to be left to Zambians to decide.

Now, nearing the end of its research and discovery period, ORA is ready to share data insights with Africans first and foremost. Collaborating with digital storytellers and AI software developers, they hope their data platform will provide restitution practitioners with the qualitative and quantitative resources needed to move various ongoing cases forward. Maina shared that Africans' century-long effort to retribute objects has often happened behind closed doors between museum and national leaders. With this data, they can identify patterns that help Africans receive their confiscated objects faster.

"This is the first data set of its kind, so we are looking to translate it into insights and specific tools that people can use within restitution" Maina said. "For example, you're more likely to succeed in a restitution process with multiple stakeholders as opposed to fewer ones."

