

Using AI to reclaim Africa's stolen history and heritage

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Looted artefacts returned by British and American museums go on public display for the first time at Manhyia Palace in Kumasi, Ghana, on May 1, 2024.

Reuters



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For over 100 years, the Nandi people of Kenya searched for the remains of Koitalel arap Samoei. Today, historians like Chao Tayiana Maina argue that the greatest barrier to bringing his skull home isn't just the thousands of miles between Nairobi and London, but the way history itself is coded.

The tragedy began in 1905. Koitalel, the orkoiyot (supreme leader) of the Nandi, agreed to meet British army colonel Richard Meinertzhagen to negotiate a ceasefire. Instead of a handshake, Koitalel was met with a bullet. In the ensuing chaos, his head was severed and taken to Britain as a grisly trophy of empire. This decapitation was a calculated move to break a nation's spirit.

Today, the search for Koitalel's skull has become a symbol of a much larger struggle: The restitution of African heritage. Chao, co-founder of Open Restitution Africa (ORA), believes the path home is currently blocked by colonial characterisations of African objects and artefacts.

In Western databases, a sacred Nandi shield or a Mijikenda Vigango statue is often stripped of its spiritual context and filed under clinical, colonial labels.

The seeds for ORA were sown in 2019, when Chao and co-founder Molemo Moiloa met at a conference in Namibia. They realised that while many Africans were fighting for restitution, their efforts were invisible to the world.

“What was interesting about this conference is that there were several African professionals from museum academics who were presenting on restitution work that they were undertaking. But if you check online, you could hardly find any evidence, any documentation on the work that was being done. And so, when you have a situation in which the media is dominated from a Western perspective, it also makes the efforts of Africans look invisible. It also plays into centuries of racist notions that Africans don't know how to take care of their things — we don't have the right museums. And so we were asking ourselves, ‘What is the voice of Africans in restitution? Where can you go to find that?’ That is the project we created,” Chao recalls.

ORA is a database of people and processes.

"It is a project about processes, about people, and about the labour and efforts of Africans in reclaiming their heritage. So we are more interested in the history of people demanding, people fighting, people advocating for the return of their objects. We look at the impact of the object being taken to the community, how are people finding the impact and how are people navigating it. That's what the database essentially intends to reveal."

For African, the search for these belongings is fraught with difficulty. Chao identifies two primary hurdles. The first is the sheer difficulty of locating what was taken.

"We don't know what's out there, and for many communities, even identifying the property itself — and where it is located — remains a major hurdle. Sometimes it happens by chance, in which maybe a Kenyan studying abroad stumbles upon the object and it turns out someone in Kenya is looking for it."

The second is the personal toll on the researchers.

"Many of the people doing this work are doing it out of their own initiative. And so you find that Africans are occupying multiple roles. Or someone is a researcher, they're doing advocacy, at the same time trying to liaise with the ministry or the state... Individuals are spread thin, and are occupying many roles, of course, this leads to burnout."

For Chao, restitution is more than moving an item from a box in London to a box in Nairobi. It is about restoring a spiritual intercession that was severed decades ago. She points to the Vigango (wooden funeral statues) of the Mijikenda people, stolen in the 1980s.

"For a lot of communities, these objects are central to spirituality and knowledge. The Mijikenda believe that the Vigango are the intercessors between the spiritual world and human beings. One of the impacts of them being taken is that people believe this has caused significant damage in terms of misfortune. The significance and the impact of this loss is tied to a lot of other things: economic activities, cultural protection. The reality is that Westerners have not held on to these objects out of the goodness of their hearts. They have made significant economic gains from having them. They have attracted tourists who come to see this material."

Read: Macron promises conditional return of African artefacts

To bridge the gap between inaccessible archives and community action, ORA has integrated an AI interactive query tool. Rather than comb through hundreds of pages of policy, the tool allows one to ask specific questions like, "How do I begin a restitution process for an object in a European museum?"

The AI synthesises ORA's verified database, including African Union working papers and case studies, to provide a step-by-step strategy. This shifts the focus from Western ownership to African agency. ORA documents 25 cases across 12 countries.

Chao emphasises that governments must prioritise the "ancestors" over the "calabashes."

"We still don't know where the head of Koitalel Arap Samoei is. That's a big debate. So instead of the government, for example, focusing on every Kenyan calabash that is outside, that not a single community is actively asking for, and I don't mean this in a derogatory sense, when there's a human ancestor that people are saying, 'We don't know where he is.'"

Ultimately, this work is about more than just possessing objects; it is a process of national healing.

"Restitution is a process of healing and it is a process of repair. It is not just about an item coming back and being stored in another box. We have to have some very serious conversations about education, how we teach the youth about the lost culture, how we restore knowledge, how we dignify even ancestors that were taken. And so, I think that's the big change. When you switch from a Western lens, which is about possession and ownership, and you move to an African lens that is about repair, about dignity, about healing and about reintegration."

For the African Union, the return of stolen heritage is not just a legal matter, it is a fundamental act of social justice. It is intended to heal deep historical wounds.



The repatriation of a significant collection of Karamojong cultural artefacts from Kenya back to their community.

Pool

The Common African Position (CAP) on the restitution of heritage resources highlights that, as the vast majority of these items were plundered during historically dehumanising situations, often involving military expeditions and loss of life, their return to Africa is a matter of profound honour and dignity.

Furthermore, the AU acknowledges that while these resources remain in foreign hands, they are frequently misinterpreted, misrepresented, mistreated or misused due to a systemic lack of proper cultural context and information.

In order to address this issue and provide a fitting home for these artefacts, the African Union is currently developing the Great Museum of Africa (GMA) in Algeria. Serving as a continental hub and a flagship project of the AU Agenda 2063, the GMA is designed to be a state-of-the-art space for preserving, promoting and showcasing the continent's returned treasures.