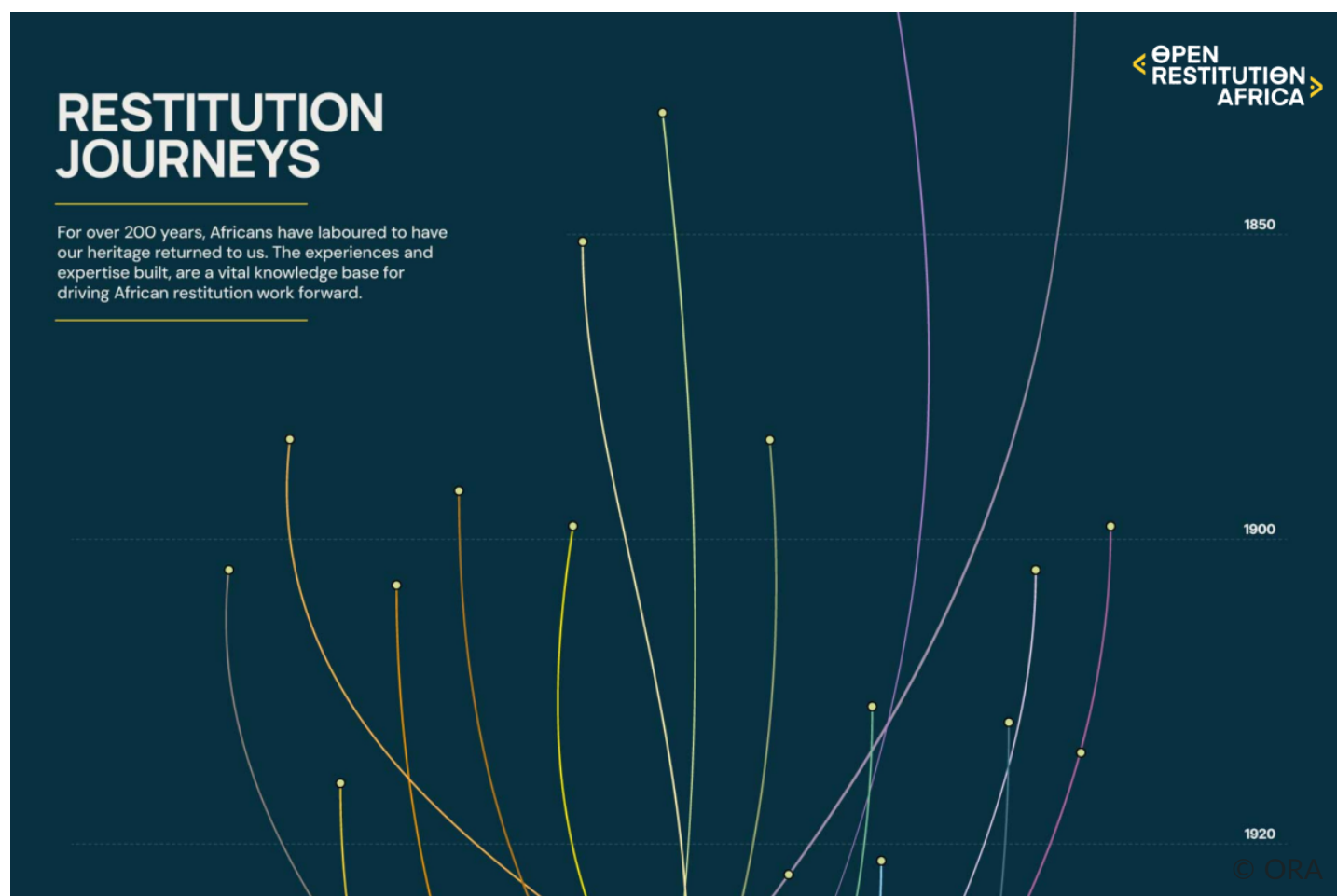




Colonial contexts

We call it “journeys”

Open Restitution Africa (ORA) describes restitution as a pan-African process of remembrance, research, and the digital sharing of knowledge – an interview.

12. May 2026

Andreas Bohne

Open Restitution Africa (ORA) [↗] is a pan-African, women-led organisation dedicated to collecting and disseminating information about processes related to the return of African cultural property and human remains. ORA uses a variety of methodological tools such as webinars, videos and podcasts, and presents exemplary case studies on restitution in cooperation with African scholars. ORA's diverse documentation is to be supplemented by an 'open data platform' [↗], which has been launched in April 2026.

Andreas Bohne (German Lost Art Foundation) spoke with Chao Tayiana Maina and Karen Ijumba about the new platform, its background and objectives. Chao Tayiana Maina is a Kenyan historian and digital heritage specialist with expertise at the intersection of memory, digital humanities and public education. She is a co-founder of Open Restitution Africa. Karen Ijumba is a Senior Researcher at Open Restitution Africa and works at the intersection of research, culture, creativity and digital knowledge management.

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Your “open data platform” has been launched on the 31st of March 2026. Can you tell us more about its structure, purpose and use? And who is your offering aimed at?

Chao Tayiana Maina (CTM): Our “open data platform” is essentially a centralized open access space about restitution processes, or rather, what we call “journeys”. From our perspective this is a very important distinction because oftentimes people assume that the project is about inventories or provenance. But what we really wanted to surface is what are the strategies? What are the efforts that Africans are putting into restitution? And how do we turn those strategies, efforts and knowledge into insights that people can use. Oftentimes when we think about restitution: we think of the taking and the removal of objects and belongings and their return. But if you ask people, what they think happens in between there’s less clarity and much less information about what restitution process involve. That is the core focus of our database. It is not a database about objects per se but about people and processes.

The platform contains four main components: The first one are case studies, detailed stories of individual restitution processes, the chronology, journeys. The second one is what we’re calling a “restitution journeys visualization”. This offers an overview of 25 restitution case studies This visualization is very important because one of the things that we wanted to surface with our data was, how can we read across restitution journeys. For example, to what extent events in Tanzania are happening alongside a case in Kenya or Cameroon. This tool visualises precisely such parallels. The third tool is a data visualisation dashboard. It contains numerous graphics and draws on findings from several case studies. It provides contextual information: What are Africans actually calling for in terms of restitution? Who is involved? How does this relate to the wider context? How long did it take? And finally, the fourth tool is an AI-powered tool. It is a closed corpus or small language model. We have trained it exclusively using our own data. So, it is not just case study data, but also information from our webinars, podcasts, interviews and reports.

Karen Ijumba (KI): They're the same case studies. But we've extended the information and added further filtering tags. So, when we first shared the case studies, our main focus was on telling the story of each case, so that people could familiarize themselves. Now someone can come to the platform and say: 'I'm specifically looking for a case study from Cameroon, Kenya or Namibia' or 'I'm looking for one relating to "embodiments", "belongings" or human ancestors.' You can also filter by the strategies people have used. Did they use collaboration? Was it a government-led case study? And through this filtering, you can identify a specific case study that perhaps appeals to you most. Within the case studies themselves, we have then incorporated information on the frameworks that guided specific processes, as well as further discussion of the challenges and breakthroughs. Previously, it was essentially a chronological account, but now the content delves deeper into the nuances and complexities.

We are an institution that operates its own databases and makes the results of its research publicly available. The biggest challenge for us was to make research visible as a process that is never complete and consists of many different perspectives and pieces of information. How did you solve this? How do you plan to stay up to date in the future?

CTM: This platform marks the sunseting of our project. We are looking at it as giving the tools to the community. And so, to your question about how will this be updated in future, we are hoping that people use this as data as a foundation for their own restitution processes and questions. To your question about how to visualize multiplicity of processes and narratives, we make it very clear that the research and the case studies are very specific to a researcher's journey, the information they had at that time, the context in which they are working, the location where they are. We also have an explicit statement that encourages people to see and view other sources. We also make clear the methodology of the researcher and how they approached their particular case study. I think it's more about how to indicate that restitution is constantly changing and experienced differently by different people.

KI: We present research that is qualitative and highly perspective-driven, and context is also key. Perspectives are at the heart of our knowledge production. This is reflected in our approach to research, which draws on case study, oral history and grounded theory methodology. Furthermore, our data platform makes all sources used by specific researchers visible, and we are very transparent.

I would like to give you two case studies from Nigeria as examples, both of which deal with the Benin Bronzes. One focused on the two royal stools ↗, concentrating heavily on the journey from the perspective of the Royal Palace of the Oba of Benin. The other focused more on the national strategy to repatriate ↗ many of the pieces scattered across various institutions. And the way in which these two tell this story is already very different. The people they interviewed were similar, but the sources they used and the trajectories they

mapped differed. So I think there is always an understanding within our data that there is power and knowledge, but also perspective and knowledge. That is why we constantly encourage people to form their own. We think that is a better way to approach this research, rather than saying: 'This is the definitive fact.'



CTM: However, the platform isn't our only output. We've conducted numerous conversations and interviews with African restitution practitioners, artists and museum staff. We've produced a podcast and a series of webinars. We've created explanatory videos for the general public. And for us, it really was a very special experience. All you can do is sow the various seeds of knowledge and hope they then grow. And I think that's where the complexity really became apparent.

The debate surrounding "repatriation" and "restitution" is often driven by communities and descendants of those affected by colonialism and the looting of goods. At the same time, however, many of them find it difficult to access digital services, either due to a lack of technical infrastructure or a lack of knowledge. For you, on the other hand, it is very important to take into account the interests of descendants and so-called communities of origin when managing the data. How do you ensure access and inclusion?

KI: I think the first thing is the platform itself, there's been a lot of work done to make sure that the platform is accessible via mobile devices, So, I think that's been a key intervention - low bandwidth and accessible. But I think one of the key things we've seen, particularly with the Community of Practice, is that a lot of people are wearing different hats. So where somebody might be a museum curator, they might also be from or work in community and academic contexts. Then physically moving and sharing between these fields and spheres circulates the knowledge as well.

CTM: What was very important to us at the outset was to find out exactly who this platform is intended for. This stems from the idea that when you try to appeal to everyone, you end up appealing to no one. So we went through a user mapping process to find out who we were developing this tool for. Firstly we realised that Africans often occupy multiple roles because restitutions work is not institutionalised – so people are active in a range of activities. Secondly, we asked ourselves how this could influence the design of this platform to appeal to individuals who can then activate various information channels across different networks. Our primary target groups were therefore community activists – people who act as intermediaries and representatives primarily working directly with or within communities. Other secondary target groups included museum professionals, government workers, policy makers and academic researchers. So, as you can see, we are not saying that the academic community is not our main target group, but we prioritise providing these tools for people actively involved in restitution on the ground.

The wording often makes all the difference: you use the word 'restitution' instead of "repatriation"? How do you intend to go beyond the database in terms of how you present the transfer of ownership that lies behind the term 'repatriation'?



CTM: I would say that we make the complexity of restitution visible primarily through the tools we have developed. So you can see that our platform is not a single tool that works in just one way. We've gone through a discovery process to understand how we can make this data usable. How do you turn knowledge into a tool? How do we put research and information into practice? This whole knowledge base – what do you do when someone says: 'I have a restitution process in my community? I've found an object from my community in a German museum. Where do I start? And so we've structured the tools to focus on actively thinking about restitution and taking one's own capabilities and needs into account, rather than passively consuming information.

KI: There's a distinction between repatriation and restitution. We have found that changing this terminology brings certain activities into focus. For example, many of our case studies involved speaking with other members of the community to raise awareness around the loss of a particular belonging, showing that discussions or negotiations often take place amongst Africans before making contact with an institution or person holding our belongings. All these processes are somewhat hidden when we speak only of repatriation.

We have also looked at negotiations, specifically in terms of how people talk to one another about these issues, attitudes and prejudices also come into play. And then there is another important category, which we have identified as 'African accountability'. This focuses on how Africans talk to other Africans about return. There are discussions and sometimes tensions around how, where, and for what purpose material heritage is being returned. The value of return could be cultural, spiritual, economic, intellectual or all of the above. So there are multiple levels to restitution and the associated reconciliation, restoration, reconnection, and repair that accompanies that process, which is not accounted for with mere physical return to States, as envisioned by repatriation.

Even if you said that your project is coming to an end, how will Open Restitution Africa be promoted in the future, and how will communities and individual actors learn about the "Open-Data-Platform's" existence? Is there a promotion strategy?

CTM: First, we're working on a strategy for sharing these tools with other African organizations. Ideally, we'll find an organization or group that can continue the entire project. But we're also considering sub-areas. Perhaps someone wants to publish the data long-term or host a copy. Perhaps someone wants to organize a hackathon. We call this "data activation". We're aiming to collaborate with technology partners and museums

across the continent. We also want to work with politically active people. That's why we're pursuing an approach we call "community exit." In this approach, we work with community groups and institutions and ask them how this data can be useful in order to activate it accordingly.



We also want to ensure that this data is available in as many places as possible. So, for example, how does it get into knowledge databases like Wikipedia? We've collected so much contextual data that some Wikipedia entries are sparse. So, how can we link local data and data science? Open Restitution Africa advertises itself with the label 'Woman founded' – why is that relevant? Is the female approach different from the male one? How is this evident or how did it manifest itself during the development phase?

CTM: I would say the first thing is that so much of the historic context of restitution has largely been male dominated, particularly from a point of view of people who have had the power of decision making, who have been predominantly European, predominantly male - academics, museum directors and so on. And one of our earliest research outputs was by my co-founder Molemo Moilola, who was looking at how often Africans are cited in press and research around African restitution. We found that the most quoted perspectives on African restitution were European authors even when African scholars had published more material over a longer period of time. And so for us, it's not just being women founded that matters. It's about being African women based on the continent that matters. And I think it's also important because when we think about the power dynamic, especially in projects that are related to museums and provenance, what we've seen is that a lot of the funding comes from Europe and while this funding is highly necessary and useful it often necessitates that projects are done in partnership between European institutions and African ones. There has been very little resourcing for Africans to talk to each other and learn from each other and this is the gap that our project seeks to bridge.

The global restitution debate is by no means new. The first demands were made a hundred years ago, and in the 1970s the issue shaped UNESCO policy. After that, things quietened down again – only to pick up speed again in the last decade. How do you assess the current processes, and can you identify any similarities or differences with previous waves? Do you believe that this time the political will is strong enough to anchor the issue permanently?

CTM: One thing our data clearly shows – and as you rightly pointed out – is that restitution activity increased significantly, particularly in the 2000s. The Sarr Savoy report on restitution among other political shifts in Europe are notable in the last few years. However, we also wanted to make it very clear that Africans have a long history of engaging with restitution. Even looking at the early 1900s, our data shows that – and we must

remember this is a small sample – two or three items were reclaimed immediately after being confiscated. I think the data shows an increase in activity in recent years, but it also shows that the processes surrounding these claims have been ongoing for much longer than the last 20 years.



I've asked myself whether the political will is sufficient to sustain this, and I don't believe this moment is driven by political will alone. I think the biggest shift is that restitution is much more a subject of public discourse. There's much stronger public support and accountability. For me, it's about building that. A critical awareness has developed in recent years. And I think that's an important point to consider regarding how digital platforms have changed. I think that in some cases, political will has followed a critical mass of awareness and pressure. Karen can certainly elaborate on the research findings in more detail, but I believe it's about much more – a movement, a collective pan-African movement and a shared understanding – than simply attributing it to political change.

KI: Regarding civil society and the shift in awareness, this is, so to speak, the trigger for changes in public opinion, which alters people's perspectives in institutions. For example, our data shows that as African countries gained political independence in the 1960s / 1970s restitution efforts were increasingly driven by African State leaders. So the issue transforms from a concern of a royal family or community to a national one. Different perspectives shape the institutions and have an impact on the respective communities and civil society. I very much hope that this current pressure from affected communities and civil society is sufficient to bring about change. Our documentation ↗ of laws, policies, and frameworks have shown that, particularly in Europe, over the last two to five years, there has been an increase in measures that pay attention to restitution – an issue that cannot be ignored.

I think it will develop in waves, but I think it's definitely something that more people are interested in and engaged with. And perhaps we'll now see how different this discussion looks compared to ten years ago. But that's definitely the energy we're feeling now.

When I understand you correctly, then it's mainly pressure from the civil society. But you have some restitution committees on national level, so restitution processes are negotiated just on the state level and not with communities. How can these tensions between community demands and negotiations on state level be solved?

KI: I think there are almost two very different examples. Cameroon comes to mind, or more precisely, the Cameroonian government in Germany. They have stepped in at a certain level because they understand that the communities cannot, by way of German and International law, negotiate directly with German institutions or German federal states. They have collated existing community demands, like calls for the return of Ngonso

↗ and the Tangue ↗, and now serve as an intermediary between communities and German States. The assumption is that once the material heritage is repatriated, something else will continue, allowing for discussions about the long-term future, their restitution.



In the case of Nigeria, however, I think there is a very interesting ecosystem of practice. It involves state and federal institutions like the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, traditional authorities and intercontinental bodies like the Benin Dialogue Group. Each stakeholding institution or group is trying to understand its place in the restitution process. The community communicates with the state, and the state, in turn, communicates with the institutions that are supposed to invest. I know that in Nigeria, there is an agreement between the NCMM and the Royal Palace of the Oba of Benin that is valid for the next five years. This agreement regulates where certain belongings will be returned—whether they go to the palace, the Oba Ovonramwen storage facility in Benin, or one of the National museums for display and conservation, and so on.

Often, the situation is portrayed as a conflict between the community and the state. But it is becoming increasingly clear that everyone plays a role in this ecosystem of restitution governance. Understanding one's own contribution helps to make the connections more comprehensible, especially for the public.

CTM: In addition, our data clearly show that restitution take place and progress happens when people work together across lines of difference. There is a significant shift in the pace of restitution processes and in what can be considered success—depending on the success criteria of the respective community—when the stakeholders, i.e., the community and the government, collaborate. This demonstrates that the best practices emerge from these processes of debate and negotiation. We should also not assume that restitution should be a simple, clearly defined process. We are talking about a long period during which cultural heritage was lost. But even more than the expropriation of this heritage, the societies in which we live have been shaped and torn apart by colonial violence. The tensions, conflicts, and events in the restitution process reflect these historical legacies. The only way forward is through making these connections visible. As we have often emphasized—and the data bear this out—the bulk of the work in the restitution lies on the African side: the work of reintegration, the negotiation, and supporting people in dealing with the return of the artifacts. It is interesting to make these processes, tensions, and this work visible. But we are also committed to how we can use this data to facilitate and simplify restitution efforts for those involved. How can this data influence policy and funding? We have found that the most important resource in any restitution process is human resources. What skills do we need to utilize? I think the better way to think about this is not is that restitution is not about an either-or situation, but rather an 'and' situation - meaning that multiple actors, multiple strategies are used at the same time to make multiple things happen.

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For over 200 years, Africans have laboured to have our heritage returned to us. The experiences and expertise built, are a vital knowledge base for driving African restitution work forward.

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