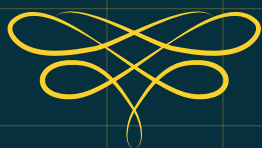




Fieldwork Guide for Restitution Practitioners in Africa

A COMMUNITY-CENTRED
APPROACH



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Introduction

This guide provides a structured framework for restitution practitioners to navigate the complex process of fieldwork in relation to returning cultural heritage and human ancestral remains. While not exhaustive, this guide addresses key challenges that restitution practitioners face while conducting research. It aims to address the following:

1. Create a guide that will act as a toolkit for researchers conducting field research in Africa.
2. Provide a framework for conducting restitution-related fieldwork using case study experiences from across Africa.
3. Offer practical tools for researchers, policymakers and communities to align research practices with integrity, transparency and accountability, grounded in African communities' experiences.

The guide aims to address the absence of ethical fieldwork protocols in restitution research, which has inadequately addressed communal ownership, colonial legacies and sensitive political terrain. Using common African approaches to deal with issues through consultative methods—which is well articulated in the Chi Chewa proverb, 'Kuyenda awiri si mantha. Ndi nzeru' ('Seeking company on a journey is not a sign of fear. It is a sign of wisdom')—this guide synthesises diverse fieldwork experiences from multiple regions into standardised and culturally responsive methodologies. Grounded in African-centered perspectives and community-driven engagement, this multi-vocal resource aims to equip practitioners with knowledge on how to navigate the complex process of restitution, ensuring affected communities remain central authors rather than marginalised stakeholders.

Contributors & Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the contributors, reviewers and communities/ communities of practice whose experiences informed this guide:

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- **Dr heeten bhagat (Zimbabwe/South Africa)** Creative and cultural practitioner, speculative thinker and independent scholar.
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- **Assoc Prof Martin Donleack (Cameroon)** Historian, Bamendou community scholar, activist and lecturer at University of Yaoundé I.
- **Mohamad W. Fareed (Egypt)** Digital humanist, architect and PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide.
- **Peter Jegede (Nigeria)** Curator, geoarchaeologist and PhD student at Federal University Of Agriculture, Abeokuta.
- **Dr David Maina (Kenya)** Social archaeologist, researcher and PhD candidate at Kenyatta University.
- **Elisha Rukundo (Rwanda)** Creative social entrepreneur and founder of Digital Heritage Preservationists Platform.
- **Lineo Segoete (Lesotho)** Artistic research practitioner, cultural producer and co-founder of Art First Consultancy.
- **Katrine Vigne (Namibia/Denmark)** Heritage management, independent scholar and researcher.
- **Syokau Mutonga (Kenya)** Contemporary archaeologist, operations and research associate at Open Restitution Africa.

Special Acknowledgements

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Phumzile Nombuso Twala is a cultural and creative industries researcher, writer and public engagement curator based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is a research associate at Open Restitution Africa (ORA), engaging the intersectionality of cultural heritage, research methodology and technology. Representing the ORA team, she has led the co-development of this guide. Her contributions span ORA's research and capacity-building goals, including: co-developing the methodological frameworks through which African restitution processes are documented and analysed; conducting case study research on the Repatriation of Sara Baartman; data input on the ORA data platform; and workshop facilitation.

She holds a BCom in Industrial and Organisational Psychology (Unisa) and two Honours degrees from Wits University, in Media Studies and Journalism and History of Art. She was named on the Wits Humanities 2021 Dean's List and received the Standard Bank Group Foundation of African Art Postgraduate Prize (2021) for Outstanding Achievement in Postgraduate African Art Studies.

Open Restitution Africa

Open Restitution Africa is an Africa-led project founded by Chao Tayiana Maina (Kenya) and Molemo Moilola (South Africa) that seeks to open access to information on the restitution of African material culture and human ancestors. The project gathers data on current restitution processes across the African continent; serves as a portal for case studies and best practice examples; and encourages data-informed, in-depth debate on the complexities, responsibilities and ethical imperatives of restitution.

Founded on three main pillars—transparency, access and centralisation—ORA develops an open data platform to enable data-driven approaches to restitution, particularly for African stakeholders. With support from the Mellon Foundation, ORA has funded researchers through micro grants to collect data about individual restitution efforts and compile case studies that reframe narratives around return, restitution and repatriation. This women-founded, continent-based initiative works to centre African voices in restitution discourse.

ORA Team:

- **Chao Tayiana Maina** (Co-Founder)
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Section 1

Pre-fieldwork preparation & contextual analysis

“Do research before doing research. People give up their time to attend to your research, so be prepared.”

– Katrine Vigne



Preparation before undertaking field research

Any fieldwork undertaking needs preparation. This helps the researcher to put in place a clear roadmap for the work ahead. This helps both the respondent and the researcher to have a clear picture of the research objectives and to manage their time efficiently. The following should be taken into account as part of pre-fieldwork preparedness:

- **Preparations to engage with communities**

Take time to understand the community's history, dominant cultural traits, values and interests. This will help you understand and appreciate the context from which you will be operating. "Every space is political. Take time to understand the space you are going to," observes a researcher who has done fieldwork in the southern part of Africa. She notes that even seemingly peaceful communities can have undertones of upheaval that may not be so obvious to a stranger. When she was undertaking her fieldwork, there was a succession dispute for the position of Chief of the community, and the community was divided. At first, she thought it had nothing to do with her or her research work. However, she realised that interviewing some people that belonged to one group and not the other was interpreted as her siding with the group. This created animosity against her and her work from the group that felt ignored. "I soon learnt that knowing the political context of the area of research matters," she advises.

- **Set clear goals**

Have a very clear purpose of what you are looking for, set your goals accordingly and assess how they align or do not align with the community's interest. This will set the tone of your work. If you are clear on your purpose, it is easy to find help, reduce delays and avoid time wastage.

- **Identify your target group**

This will help you know what resources you will need well in advance, such as the need for interpreters, how to reach them and when they can be accessed.

- **Identify key stakeholders**

These are people who represent or speak on behalf of the group, like local leaders, elders, institutional heads or grassroots organisers. They will help you access your targets as well as give you guidance and protection.

Ready to start the engagement

“Make an appointment, just showing up is disrespectful.” - Anonymous

Once you are in the community, position yourself with intent in order to maximise smooth exchange, purpose and time. The following should prepare you:

- **Make an appointment with the people you intend to visit before you start your work so that they can be ready for you**

According to a researcher that has undertaken field research work in southern Africa, this is not only to make people ready for you, but it is also a sign of respect.

- **Prepare to listen**

Approach conversations with humility, an open mind and a readiness to learn and adapt. Part of this is self-introduction before proceeding with your work. “Your research is not your identity. It is important to give context of who you are and your intentions. That is the beginning of transparency,” one researcher notes. In southern African tradition, self-introduction of a visitor is a very important welcoming ritual; if not observed, the visitor is not well-received. In Northern Malawi and Eastern Zambia, it is known as ‘Malonje’, an exchange of greetings between the guest and the host in which the guest explains who they are (if they are not known by the host), where they are from and the purpose of their trip. The host responds by giving details about the state of the family in terms of health, family economy and what they are engaged in.

- **Develop a communication plan**

Choose the right language format and channels of communication to ensure respect, clarity and accessibility are promoted and maintained.

- **Language format:**

Choosing the right language format is important, considering that Africa is a continent of many languages. If the researcher is not proficient in the community’s language, it is advisable to use an interpreter. However, it is important to appreciate that one language can have several dialects. Therefore, be very particular on the interpreters’ language proficiency in the particular dialect involved. An innocent linguistic mistake can cause considerable damage.

- **Respect and accessibility:**

Fostering a respectful and accessible research environment involves inviting collaboration without pressure or expectation. If there are signs of doubt, when engaging with people, accept their position, but let them know that the door is open in case they change their mind. A good example is Peter Jegede’s experience when conducting field research on the Ife cultural objects of Nigeria (see case 4 later in this guide). He faced resistance, as key

stakeholders did not trust his intentions. Peter respected their opinion and went ahead to do his work only with those that accepted to work with him. But he did not completely close the doors on the key people, remaining open in his work and informing them of the progress. This made them see his intentions clearly and eventually they trusted him enough to accept his invitation for an interview.

- **Be ready for challenges**

Anticipate challenges like resistance, inaccessibility, language barriers, misunderstandings, lack of trust or interest. Preparation helps you identify potential solutions in advance and reduce surprises.

Community engagement & contextual understanding

“I do not think that as a researcher I can do a good job without going into the community.” – Dr Martin Donleack

- **Community engagement**

For any meaningful research into restitution to take place, it is important to consult the affected community and involve them throughout the whole process. “It’s amazing what you learn when you visit people in their own contexts and let them speak to you on their terms and tell you about their practices and their customs. I think that is valuable, and all good research celebrates and recognises the point of view of the people we are learning about and wanting to collect data from,” reflects ORA researcher Syokau Mutonga.

Research among the Giriama community in Kilifi County, Kenya, illustrated this vividly, revealing the vast gap between how sacred belongings such as vigango are written about academically and how communities speak about them. Practical field research experiences of language barriers, gendered cultural protocols, and expressions of feelings of exploitation by previous researchers all underscored a fundamental principle: the most valuable insights emerge when researchers engage people on their own terms, in their own contexts.

- **Community motivation**

Before venturing into research on restitution, it is important to understand the community’s motivation for discussing and/or undertaking these efforts. This is because restitution is not just an act of returning cultural belongings, but could be motivated by various reasons such as a restoration of identity, healing of historical wounds, a reclaiming of dignity, a restoration of lost memory and cultural continuity or regaining of control over a cultural narrative. Understanding what is motivating the community to seek restitution can help direct the research and restitution process according to the community’s wishes.

At the end of her case study in Lesotho, that is challenging the official narrative on the gifting of King Moshoeshoe I's belongings that are in the British Museum, Lineo Segoete noted that "I have learnt that I needed to ask more questions beyond the material object which is always the focus of all the attention". There is a need to look beyond the belongings being returned.

Appreciating the historical context

"We need to take care of sensitive histories." – Elisha Rukondo

Restitution often has deep historical implications that the researcher may not be aware of or know how deep-rooted they may be. The historical contexts that led to the removal of cultural heritage vary from colonialism, looting, unequal power relations, purchase under coercion or removal without consent. Such events could have left profound and lasting effects on affected communities such as cultural disconnection and loss, cultural amnesia, cultural mourning, displacement, identity erosion, colonial domination and knowledge gaps.

Historical context is vital; mishandling it can reopen wounds, causing resentment that undermines the process of research and restitution.

When conducting research on the return of Rwanda's Colonial Era Audio Archives collection, Elisha Rukondo realised that the difficult history of Rwanda could hamper the process of research if not handled with sensitivity and navigated with precaution. "I realised that social class is a sensitive issue and not easy to express; when you mention it, people go away from you," he noted. Engaging with the community in a way that does not inflame tensions can be crucial in such cases.

Respecting cultural protocols

Before you venture into research activities in a particular community, there is a need to familiarise oneself with local customs, languages and social norms. Even a small gesture of cultural awareness can build trust and acceptance. This can be done through the following gestures:

- Say something in the local language, especially greetings. It is not how well you speak, but it is your effort that will be appreciated.
- Address people according to how they are locally addressed; this will be seen as a gesture of respect.
- Try to dress according to the customs even though it may be uncomfortable. This will make the community accept you as one of them.
- Try the food that you can manage, even in small amounts; this will make the community understand you when you turn down the food that you cannot

take.

- Participate in family/communal activities such as public performances, even by merely being part of the audience and not an active participant. This will show on your part a responsibility and attachment to the community/family.
- Take time to study the cultures of the particular community in which you are operating. Africa is a continent of many cultures. Nigeria alone has over 250 languages, Zambia 73, and South Africa 11 official. Yet, within these groups, distinct sub-cultures exist. Have an awareness of these variations to avoid violations of local customs.

Critical takeaways

Thorough preparation is foundational. Understand the community's history, identify stakeholders, set clear goals and plan communication sensitively. Respect begins before you arrive: make appointments, learn to appreciate modes of communication and approach every engagement with humility.

Section 2

Data collection methods, tools and ethical protocols

Different methods and tools are used in fieldwork research. However, it is always important to observe ethical protocols that prioritise trust, transparency, partnership and collaboration.



Stakeholder identification

The first step in restitution research is to identify stakeholders. Stakeholders can include government officials, the general public, affected communities, holding institutions, international organisations and civil society. Recognising the most relevant stakeholders for your research is crucial, as they play distinct roles. Understanding each stakeholder's role can help define the approach and scope of the research.

Some of the most important stakeholders in restitution research are holding institutions, such as the national archives that hold historical information. However, access to some national archives in Africa and Europe may be restricted. When conducting his field research in Egypt, Mohamad W. Fareed found out that the national archives could not be easily accessed. Dr Heeten Bhagat points out, "National archives in various countries have been declared security entities because of the information they hold. Therefore, access can be a challenge." Getting the necessary permission to access archives is essential. Research opening times and access requirements in advance, particularly where national archives are central to your work.

National governments of countries whose heritage was removed are also stakeholders. They can provide insight into the diplomatic framework within which the restitution/repatriation/return can take place. Nevertheless, government procedures and diplomatic stances can be challenging to restitution research work. In the Lesotho case study on King Moshoeshoe I's belongings, researcher Lineo Segoete realised that the government's stance on the matter was not clear. "It was confusing. On one hand, the government had made a demand for the return of the belongings, whilst on the other hand, the government was weary of a public campaign to expedite the processes," she lamented. Yet, this was not her main challenge. Government bureaucracy and politics can be frustrating, and she had to find a balanced way of coping with this: "My main challenges were government procedures and the 'respectability of politics', trying not to sound rude, but firm enough to drive the point home. Not being angry, yet demonstrating the frustration that comes with dealing with the bureaucracy of government procedures."

Consent

After identifying the stakeholders, you can prepare to engage them by first getting their consent. Obtaining consent before conducting research is critical to the whole process, as it forms the foundation of ethical practice, legitimacy and trust. Consent is essential, since restitution deals with sensitive histories of dispossession, force, dominance, extraction and exploitation. Consent ensures that the stakeholder understands the purposes, risks and benefits of participation in the research. Without consent, the research risks repeating colonial practices of exploitation and extraction, reopening colonial wounds, especially when dealing with affected communities.

It is important to establish what type of consent to use according to who and what you are engaging in your research. For example, individual consent may not be appropriate where cultural heritage belongs to the community. In instances like this, collective consent should also be obtained.

Consent forms are not always practical—particularly in rural communities where written literacy cannot be assumed. One researcher found herself reading consent forms aloud to participants, raising legitimate questions about whether this constitutes genuine informed consent. Oral and recorded consent should be considered viable alternatives.

The researcher also noted that the process of filling in forms and signing them can be associated with government programmes and government officials. During her research, the community involved did not trust the government and did not want to deal with government officials. Her guide, who was a local person, advised her not to use consent forms. “If you give them consent forms to sign, they will think you are from the government and they will not talk to you,” the guide advised her.

Building trust and ensuring transparency

Trust and transparency are essential when researching restitution. Deliberate strategies—including open communication, respect for cultural protocols and accountability—are necessary to ensure stakeholder confidence and guard against exploitative or extractive research practices.

In the case of Mohamad W. Fareed—whose case study was on the Rosetta Stone, an Egyptian belonging currently in the possession of the British Museum—he experienced difficulties getting information from government institutions that were not sure of the purpose of his research. “Getting a statement on restitution from public institutions was not easy. No institution wanted to talk to me because they felt it was political,” he explains. To ensure transparency, some officials agreed to participate only via written interview. This approach proved effective for Fareed, as it built trust and enhanced the integrity of the research process.

Addressing knowledge gaps

“Colonial archival documentation has many gaps, such that local people mentioned in the archives may not be traceable today.” – Elisha Rukundo

Knowledge gaps can hinder field research. To address them, researchers should first audit existing literature, identify contradictory evidence and consider the perspectives of marginalised and underrepresented groups, including what Dr heeten bhagat describes as “periphery contexts,” that is, contexts that are never the main focus.

After identifying the gaps, intervention measures to address them could

include combining methodological innovation and stakeholder interventions, collaborations, interdisciplinary approaches and the use of digital tools.

Elisha Rukundo found out that archival documents had many gaps that made his research work difficult. He also found out that “most written documents have been written from colonial perspectives, such that the community may have a different version of the same story.”

Dr bhagat also encourages researchers to consider digital tools such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) to address knowledge gaps: “The process of research now has to look beyond just history books.” However, he is quick to note that most of the available AI platforms do not yet have the depth of information required for Southern Africa. “There is much work still to be done to train newer AI platforms that can attend to the needs of in-depth research,” he points out. This observation could apply to the rest of Africa.

Nevertheless, oral traditions are the most common format of keeping records in some traditional communities in Africa. Most records have been orally kept for centuries using songs, dances and stories passed down from one generation to the next. This often conflicts with the written format that is associated with the western style of keeping records. It is important to take note of oral traditions as vital sources of information. This is because they are most likely to retain deeper historical information about belonging, embodiment and human ancestry than written sources, which are a relatively new format of keeping records in traditional societies. Ignoring these forms of record-keeping means missing vital information that may not be contained in written records.

Most importantly, employing the local community’s methods of gathering information can be a natural way of conducting research. A good example is Lineo Segoete’s research method in her case study where she used the method of a town hall meeting, which is a traditional way of gathering information on public issues. In traditional Basotho society, important social issues are addressed through community consultative meetings called ‘Pitso’ in Sesotho, which are held in public spaces. Members of the community are called to a public hearing of the issue at hand and are asked to give their views. In this way, the information is disseminated to everyone publicly, and the community members are given an opportunity to participate in resolving the issue, thereby creating community ownership to both the problem and the solution: “I used the traditional town hall method for my case study as a way of reaching the people and in order to gain ‘license’ from the community to take the campaign to a higher level.” She also adopted a local slogan for the campaign for the return of King Moshoeshoe I’s cultural belongings to resonate with the community: ‘Khombo boela haeno o holile,’ translated as ‘Cow, it is time for you to return home, for you are now grown.’ In this slogan, the cow refers to the cultural belongings that have been gone for a long time; now the time is ripe for them to return home. The slogan shows the urgency of the matter: the cow has grown; there is no reason to continue keeping it away from home. And the time is now; there is no room for any delays.

In Elisha Rukundo’s case, he used dialogue to gather information from community members. In traditional Rwandese society, dialogue is encouraged as a way of establishing the truth. ‘Ukuri gushirira mu bigabiro’ is a Rwandese saying that Elisha translates literally as, ‘the truth is likely to be explicit during dialogue.’

All the same, dialogue may not cover all the gaps. Dr David Maina points out that, in Kenya, government officials may not say things explicitly because of fear of putting themselves in trouble. They would rather give clues that, as a researcher, you are expected to figure out. A researcher who is not familiar with this kind of communication may miss out on the information being provided. He says that this is illustrated in a Kikuyu proverb that says, 'Mundu mugi ndari miheere ya uhoro,' translated as 'A knowledgeable person does not need a lot of explanations. He understands very fast.' "You can always connect the dots," he explains.

Critical takeaways

Identify all stakeholders early, obtain appropriate consent and build trust through transparency. Address knowledge gaps creatively using oral traditions, AI tools and community-led methods. Ethical protocols are not optional; they underpin the integrity of restitution research.

Section 3

Reciprocity and benefit sharing

Reciprocity and benefit sharing ensures that the research process does not only benefit the researcher, but also the community. This can be done through a number of means such as knowledge sharing and creation, capacity building, honorariums and progressing restitution.



Honorariums

“Honorariums can be honourable or un-honourable, depending on the situation”
– Anonymous

During field research work, an honorarium can be given to the local people that help with the research work. Peter Jegede explains that it is only right to offer some form of honorarium because people leave their businesses or activities to attend to the research. However, the way in which the honorarium is given is what matters the most because it has the potential of taking away the integrity and dignity of both the giver and the receiver. It is important to understand the processes of showing appreciation in different communities of Africa.

The central question in most communities is not whether the honorarium is given or not. The question is how dignified it is, and this can be established in the way it is given. In most communities in Southern Africa, a modest ritual is observed in order to give dignity to the gift. Part of this observation includes not hurriedly handing over a gift, giving it in privacy or not displaying the gift for all to see, preferably giving it through someone else and not handing it over directly. These observations symbolise a token of appreciation and not a business transaction.

In some communities across Africa, some people may turn down the honorarium. Some would rather that the giver spends money over a shared activity such as buying drinks which they can enjoy together with the receiver. If it is a home, bringing scarce commodities that can be shared by the whole family may be preferred. In rural Zambia, a gift of soap, salt or maize meal for the family may be more appreciated. After the gifting, the giver should give time for the receiver to respond or offer their thanks after receiving the gift.

Sharing knowledge and the creation of knowledge

Sharing knowledge and the creation of knowledge is another form of benefit sharing. Dr Maximilian Chami notes that knowledge sharing is becoming more and more important to communities who are pursuing restitution of their material heritage or human ancestors. This is because some communities, depending on how their heritage was removed, may have lost some of the knowledge associated with it. It is therefore crucial that, after conducting research and assembling different data obtained from different sources, the researcher should share the knowledge generated with the community as a way of benefit sharing.

The ultimate benefit sharing is when the research conducted leads to restoration, repair or return of material heritage or human ancestors to the community. Maximilian points out that this is the most elusive part to most communities. A lot of excuses and delays have made it impossible for most communities to realise their dream, and they feel cheated in the whole process of restitution research. He views provenance research connected to restitution cases with skepticism,

suggesting that holding institutions may use it selectively to address gaps in their own records. In some cases, the holding institutions are not showing any signs of giving up the cultural belongings in their possession. “They are using African experts to give them information in the guise of provenance research,” he says. Holding institutions in the diaspora are not reciprocating; they have continued to receive and not give out. This sentiment is echoed by Lineo Segoete who states that, “Restitution is broad and has many layers, such that concentrating on provenance research only is a delaying tactic.”

Critical takeaways

Research must benefit communities, not just researchers. Offer honorariums with dignity, share knowledge meaningfully and centre the community’s long-term interests. True reciprocity extends beyond research. It is realised through authentic repair: reparations, repatriation and meaningful return of heritage.

Section 4

Case Studies: Challenges, best practices & lessons learnt



Case 1: Understanding stakeholder perspectives

“Repatriation of human remains is a sensitive issue that only the affected community can fully appreciate.” – Dr. David Maina

Dr Maximilian Chami’s research examines stakeholder perspectives on the repatriation of ancestral human remains, conducted between 2022 and 2023 across three communities—the Isanzu, Rangi and Burunge—in central Tanzania. The research formed part of the University of Göttingen’s collaborative “Sensitive Provenances” project, which traced the origins and histories of 66 ancestral human remains from these Tanzanian communities held within the university’s collection.

Chami’s role was to identify the likely origins of the ancestral human remains held in this institution, engaging members of these specific communities to gather a broad range of views on their restitution. He first conducted a focus group discussion with the Rangi elders. The elders revealed no direct knowledge or oral history of human ancestors being taken from their community to Germany and maintained that none had been. They suggested that any skeletal remains held in Germany may have originated from other communities.

The Burunge elders echoed the Rangi’s position, firmly denying any knowledge of ancestral human remains being taken to Germany. They found the possibility deeply distressing and shocking. During an interview, one of the Burunge elders stated, “It is very confusing and surprising to hear there are human remains from our ethnic group in Germany. It is difficult to understand.”

These responses suggest that many Tanzanian communities lack information about their ancestral remains, largely because the circumstances of their acquisition were complex, leaving significant gaps and mismatched records that have been compounded by the passage of time. This complexity makes restitution deeply challenging. Dr Chami notes that members of both communities have ultimately rejected restitution of the remains: “They cannot perform burial rituals practiced in their community on skeletal remains that they do not recognise as their own.”

Case 2: Conducting research in areas with a history of conflict

Elisah Rukundo's case study examines audio archives, removed from Rwanda during and shortly after the colonial period, which have remained inaccessible to Rwandan communities. These archives hold significant potential for preserving traditional knowledge, supporting post-genocide healing and strengthening national identity—though conducting research within Rwanda's sensitive post-genocide context presents considerable challenges for researchers.

Rukundo found that certain terms—such as 'social class,' a root cause of the genocide—could inadvertently alienate participants. He remained consistently mindful of this throughout his research to maintain openness and receptivity amongst his respondents.

Similarly, Dr Martin Donleack, who has conducted extensive field research work in Cameroon, recounts how difficult it can be to conduct research in areas that have experienced war. People tend to be very suspicious, and they do not trust easily. Carrying letters of permission to carry out research or letters of introduction does not help to dispel these suspicions, and researchers risk being killed if they do not take enough precautions. The best way to handle the situation is to go to these areas accompanied by a person that is trusted in the area. "Letters of introduction are never enough," he advises.

Case 3: When identity is an issue

Mohamad W. Fareed carried out research on the [Rosetta Stone](#) that was extracted from Egypt during its colonisation and exchanged hands between two colonising powers, France and Britain, without the consent of the Egyptian people. Now held by the British Museum, the stone has provoked political discourse over its restitution. It has been associated with Egypt's historical sovereignty, national identity and civilisational continuity. For Egypt, the stone embodies the country's rightful claim to interpret and safeguard its own history.

Fareed's fieldwork brought him face to face with the complexities of national identity and ancient heritage in Egypt, a country whose geographical position at the intersection of Africa, Asia and the Middle East renders these questions particularly layered. This is besides the many religions of the area, including Islam and Christianity, among others. As such, certain parts of the population do not have a historical or religious connection to some cultural belongings, such as the Rosetta Stone. This scenario posed a danger of affecting the collection of information during Fareed's field research work. So, even if the Rosetta Stone is recognised as a national symbol of civilisation and continuity, appreciating the fluidity of identity at the local level informed him on how to select his sources of historical information without having to draw in people that did not feel connected to and had no information of the history of the Rosetta Stone.

Case 4: The insider that is rejected

Peter Jegede conducted field research work in relation to the Ife Terracotta Head, a sacred spiritual medium of the people of Ile-Ife. The [Ife Terracotta Head](#) also serves as an important cultural symbol of Ife identity and Yoruba civilisation. It was illegally removed from Nigeria and smuggled to Europe, where it was intercepted and returned to Nigeria under the custody of the Nigerian National Museum. Jegede's research recorded the repatriation of the Ife Head amidst a strong desire by the Ife community to have it returned to them, where its spiritual and cultural significance still remains vital. Jegede's fieldwork challenged the widely held assumption that insider researchers have an inherent advantage within their own communities. Despite being Yoruba and a member of the Ife community himself, he encountered significant resistance from key figures who questioned his intentions and credentials. Some people turned down his invitations for interviews, while others questioned his credibility. This was despite the fact that his guide into the inner circles of the community was not only his friend, but a member of the Royal family.

Unrelenting, he pursued his goals by going ahead to interview only those that were willing. He also participated in the ritual ceremonies at Ile-Ife in order to gather more information and meet more people. To demonstrate his integrity, he kept his door open to those that had rejected his invitation and informed them of his activities at every stage of his research work. By doing so, he eventually won their trust, and they invited him to interview them. This turnaround not only gave credit to his work, but also meant that he eventually had access to all the information needed to carry out the field research work on the Ife Head.

Critical takeaways

Restitution fieldwork is rarely straightforward. Researchers may need to navigate missing records, histories of conflict, contested identities and community resistance, even as insiders. Flexibility, cultural sensitivity and persistence are essential.

Conclusion

Using fieldwork experiences from researchers across the African continent, this guide has created a tool kit for researchers conducting restitution-related research in Africa. Although not all parts of the continent have been covered, the experiences drawn may still be generally applicable, while appreciating that some experiences can be very unique to specific places and acknowledging that no fieldwork can be the same. Nevertheless, this guide's emphasis is to ensure that affected communities remain central authors rather than marginalised stakeholders in research and restitution processes.

With case study examples from across Africa, the guide has also provided a framework for conducting restitution-related fieldwork that emphasises culturally responsive methodologies, addressing communal ownership, colonial legacies and sensitive political terrain. The framework provided may not be the ultimate answer to the different challenges that restitution practitioners may face while conducting fieldwork. Nevertheless, it offers a window through which the cultural diversity of Africa can be appreciated and respected while conducting it.

Ultimately, the guide offers practical tools not only for researchers, but also for policy makers and affected communities to align research practices with integrity, transparency and accountability. Grounded in African-centred perspectives and community-driven engagement, the tools are designed to help practitioners navigate the complex process of cultural heritage and human ancestor returns to Africa.

Appendix:

Open Restitution Africa Lexicon

Word	Description	Political Implications
Belonging/s	Material and/or tangible representations of cultural heritage that has been held, or is being held, outside of the community of origin.	The term 'belonging' is in part a claim for a connection between 'human remains' restitution (largely accepted in the museum world) and 'object restitution' (still under 'debate'). By using the term belonging, the human and world that something belonged to is immediately inferred, the conceptual separation of humans and objects currently being weaponised is undermined, and the historical-holistic separation of Africans from their culture is forefronted. This vocabulary was recently adopted in Namibia, and is part of a collective shift away from the use of "artefact" and "heritage object".
Community	A group of people who share a common cultural heritage, ancestry, identity or geographic origin, and who hold a collective connection (spiritual, historical or social) to the belonging or human ancestor that is the subject of a restitution process.	The term recognises that communities, not just governments or institutions, are the rightful authors of restitution processes, centering their voices and lived experiences over official or colonial narratives.
Human Ancestors	The physical remnants of the people who were removed from their land of origin, and from whom present-day Africans descend.	Museum terminology refers to "human remains". Ancestors infers the idea of descendents but also of spiritual significance, in ways that "remains" is part of a history of dehumanisation.

Word	Description	Political Implications
Restitution	Restitution: To restore a belonging or human ancestor that was lost or stolen to the rightful owner or place, and to make good the injury or loss, and/or unjust enrichment that resulted from the theft or loss. Repatriation: The rightful owner (specifically a state and government) seeks the physical return of the belonging or human ancestor to the country of origin [father], where the state becomes the owner, and curator. Reparations: The community of origin, or rightful owner (country), seeks to retrieve the monetary representation of the value of the belonging or human ancestor, to compensate the affected community for the damage that was caused by the removal. The amount is determined by what it will cost to begin to restore / repair what was lost. Return: The rightful owner (individual, family, community, country) seeks the physical return of their belonging or human ancestor. In some cases this may be a part of something where the whole is not possible (eg. Lumumba's tooth) or a representation of something where the whole is entirely inaccessible (eg. soil of the expected burial site). Rematriation: The community of origin seeks to reestablish a broken / disrupted connection, and restore balance through engagement with their belonging or human ancestor. Their focus is on centering indigenous relationships to land, and the restitution pursued is comprehensive and unconditional. This terminology has largely been informed by North American traditional modes of restitution, and is not well established on the African continent.	A holistic understanding of restitution goes beyond return, and includes concepts and acts of repair, accountability, education, and healing. This means that restitution encompasses all these possibilities - each one articulating a different motivation and objective for restitution.

Word	Description	Political Implications
Restitution	Digital Restitution: The return of a copy/copies of a belonging or human ancestor, in digital format, to the community of origin. This may also include the transfer of ownership rights for the digital copy, and may be put forth as a step towards physical return, and the return of ownership rights.	A holistic understanding of restitution goes beyond return, and includes concepts and acts of repair, accountability, education, and healing. This means that restitution encompasses all these possibilities - each one articulating a different motivation and objective for restitution.
Restitution Processes	The various individual actions and/or activities that are undertaken to pursue the restitution of belongings and/or human ancestors.	We are exploring how restitution happens. What does restitution look and feel like, and who is implicated in making restitution happen on the continent? This shifts away from the dominant narrative, which looks at why restitution is necessary. This also decenters restitution as a singular event of return/handover, which is what current discourse presents it as.
Restitution Journey	The sum of findable activities that have led to the status of a restitution case to date.	Restitution is not a linear process; there is rarely a beginning, middle and end. The people involved, areas of activity, and objectives tend to shift as the barriers to an outcome reveal themselves over time. We use the term journey to encompass the dynamism of intention, and continuous learning and revision that occurs when one seeks to reconstitute their belongings or human ancestors.
Negotiations	An activity and/or action that occurs between the rightful owner country and current holder country to determine the terms and conditions of a restitution.	Negotiation is not simply about a result (return or other) but about “a new relational ethics” as introduced by Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy. In the negotiation, a new set of terms of rights, power and relationality is to be negotiated. This is the extended importance of Africanist human relation that goes beyond the western objectification of belongings. Negotiation inevitably also includes conflict, extensions of humanity, and unlearning to transcend to a new relational ethics.

Word	Description	Political Implications
Stakeholders	A stakeholder is an individual, group or organisation who has a vested interest in, or is impacted by the outcome of an activity or decision in a restitution journey.	
Case Studies / Cases	A detailed multi-source study of the activities that were undertaken during the restitution of a belonging or human ancestor to an African region, to achieve a particular outcome, in consideration of the context that motivated and/or had an impact on those activities.	

A stylized illustration of several hands stacked in a circle, rendered in a dark blue color with white line work for shading and detail. The hands are positioned in a way that suggests a group hug or a gesture of solidarity. The background is a dark blue grid pattern.

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