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Are Museums Safe Spaces or Prisons for African Ritual Sculpture?

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ABSTRACT

The perception of museums as iconic spaces for preservation and display of art works, present a significant problem for thorough apprehension of many African arts in museum collection. While new museology advocates for the impute of culture-bearers in the display, labelling and interpretation of cultural objects in museum spaces, that intervention solves only half the problem. To understand the perspective of this paper, it is important to consider the correlation between African arts and ritual practice. The ritual actions associated with many African sculptures, and their function as objects of meditation, faith and communication is obliterated within museum spaces. The paper argues that African ritual sculptures in museums are institutionally confined, as these are not objects for aesthetic consumption, nor do they belong to *straight jacket acrylic boxes* in the museum space. Because context is lost, the understanding and appreciation of many African arts in museums are colored by valuation instruments alien to the original culture that produced them. In conclusion, the paper opines that although outright removal of African ritual sculptures from museum spaces may not be possible in many instances, culture-based interpretation of objects, and multi-media approaches to the presentation and representation of African ritual sculptures should become institutional requirements for museums, as an important step towards creating authentic cultural contexts essential to the apprehension and appreciation of African ritual sculptures in western museums.

Keywords: African Arts, Museum Practice, Ritual, Repatriation, Culture

INTRODUCTION

The traditional roles of museums over the ages have been that of preserving cultural and historical heritage. These include works of art and artefacts that give insight into the traditions, culture, history and ways of life of the societies that produced them. As custodians of these important material and non-material cultures, museums have the burden of interpretation in ways that represent a genuine and authentic narrative of the culture, history, identity and context of their collections. While museums have generally excelled in the physical preservation of cultural artefacts, safeguarding and preventing deterioration, the lack of context in its displays continue to pose challenges (MacDonald, 2015, p. 38), as many traditional museums foster narratives, which may be far removed from the community of objects origin (Emifoniye, 2022a, p. 670). These sculptures which hold profound socio-cultural, historical and spiritual relevance to the communities of origin (Chauvet, 2016, p. 45), become lost or misrepresented within museum spaces, and this is true for many African sculptures.

Blake (2016, p. 316) notes that the method of acquisition and display of African art raises ethical concerns. Sculptures that have been removed from Africa without proper consent, and their appearance in western museums question their cultural safety and integrity (Gikandi, 2019, p. 73). Miller (2020, p. 57) and Blake (2016) believe that ethical considerations are essential to the authentication of African arts. The notion of traditional and institution-based museums as presently practiced is froth with issues which museum bodies and culture enthusiasts seek to address with the ongoing discourse of museum practice

(Emifoniye, 2022a, 672). The growing movement in the repatriation of many artefacts in foreign museums is the offshoot of this deficiency. Beyond this factor, many African sculptures are living arts, serving their communities in ways that a mere labelling in museums or reference to their function does not suffice for an understanding of their sociocultural significance and context.

This article explores this dimension of thought, while examining the ways African sculptures have been obtained, perceived, interpreted and displayed in many western museums. The author is of the opinion that the absence of proper provenance and the time gap after their acquisition poses a variety of problems. Not all African ritual sculptures may be successfully repatriated to their cultures of origin since several can be traced to multiple culture areas or communities which may present the problem of original ownership. There may also be community leaders that are unwilling to receive their antiquities because of the burden of maintenance or the labelling to which such sculptures may have been appropriated by colonial infrastructures. In some instances, the communities may simply have evolved due to westernization or other factors, making their relevance within contemporary context inconsequential.

AFRICAN ARTS IN CONTEXT

African arts are multifaceted, with a variety of roles which serve the sociocultural, religious and sometimes the political needs of the various communities they represent. The diversity of the continent's traditions and heritage create multiple variations to roles and interpretations of her artistic traditions, which make an understanding and interpretation of some of the art forms difficult and complex for non-African societies to comprehend. Many African arts have religious connotations or serve purposes linked to spiritual and ritual actions. Artworks such as masks and statuettes are perceived essentially as ritual objects created as symbolic representations of clan heroes, ancestors, deities and benevolent spirits through which venerations and atonements are offered. These feature prominently in ceremonies and rituals where they function as mediums for invoking spiritual presence and for communication with the divine (Carey, 2025, p. 28). This role may extend to include serving as icons of political power, authority and the conferment of leadership status on persons identified with the art objects within the community (Adams, 1989, p. 55).

African Art functions as an information conduit, serving as a means for storing transgenerational information, traditions and culture. Many ceremonies are centers and opportunities for recounting, safeguarding and affirming the folk culture, history and oral traditions which constitute the mythscape of the community. During such ceremonies, visual metaphors and symbolic representation helps society to educate and enlighten themselves continually (Abiodun, 1987, p. 252). African art reflects the social structure, values and beliefs that help communities foster a sense of unity and kinship. Artistic expressions facilitate and invigorate communities' celebration of their heritage, helping to maintain their cultural identity and affinity (Carey, 2025, p. 28).

Aesthetics in African ritual sculptures is invariably linked to its functionality, that is, to the degree to which it serves its community or the level of benefits that community members can appropriate from its presence. Although the function of African sculptures is significant, traditional African artists take pride in their works of art. Their ability to create objects within cultural norms to the approval of society is an important factor that determines the satisfaction derived and the overall visual appeal which enhances its significance and value within the cultural space (Carey, 2025). This point is useful in understanding why the valuation of African ritual sculptures using western aesthetic instruments is a misnomer to traditional African aesthetics in both interpretation and context. While many western arts serve for decoration and aesthetic appreciation, African art *lives* in the community, connects

the community with the unseen world of deities, ancestors and spirit entities that are seen as embodiments of power and control, continuity and the preservation of community values and legacies.

COLONIALISM AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

The impact of colonialism in Africa is complex and quite troubling especially with issues of acquisition and the perception of African art. Africa was a target of colonialism in the late 19th century until the mid-20th century. The colonialists such as France, Britain, Portugal and Belgium seized and exploited the resources of extensive areas of Africa and enforced western cultural and political systems on the local communities. This era brought about the disruption of established political systems, traditional practices and the infusion of western ideologies (Ajwang, 2022, p. 6). The era also signaled an unparalleled acquisition of African arts, which colonizers saw as primitive and exotic, collecting out of curiosities than for their true cultural values. European museums often displayed African works of art without proper context or understanding of their importance (Wengraf, 2023, p. 5). Sarr (2018, p. 62) writes that African art was often misrepresented, dismissed, or commodified, and the repercussions of this historical legacy continue to shape the understanding and appreciation of African art today.

The realization that many pieces of art from Africa were acquired through theft, coercion, unfair trade and other means recently ignited concerns about rightful ownership and the call for repatriation of those artworks to their rightful communities in Africa (Princeton University Art Museum, 2025, p. 28). The National Museum of African Art (2025, p. 15), also acknowledged that due to concerns for the ethical issues and improper provenance associated with many acquisitions, efforts are being made by museums and collectors to return improperly acquired works and to collaborate with African institutions to ensure the preservation and respect of their cultural heritage.

INTERPRETING AFRICAN ARTS

The interpretation of African arts in many museum spaces is colored by the complex history of colonialism and postcolonialism. Beurden (2018, p. 45) discussing the cultural politics of museums and heritage, notes that African arts were collected by European powers, often disregarding their cultural significance while exhibiting them in museums as exotic curiosities, thus stripping it of original context and meaning. This remains the major challenge in the interpretation of African arts in western museums. Many western museums were founded or empowered from colonial infrastructure creating European perspectives that have significantly shaped the perception, categorization and interpretation of African arts. This often leads to the "othering" of African cultures, where African art is depicted as primitive or exotic rather than as sophisticated and integral to the cultural fabric of African societies (Dixon, 2016, p. 102).

The role of museums is crucial to the preservation, display and interpretation of the vast heritage of African arts in its collections. Emifoniye (2022b, p. 387), believes that central to the preservation of African heritages is the engagement of communities in a dynamic process. Accomplishing this is by no means easy, however, a rethinking and decolonization of the systems of display and cultural interpretation is a good place to start. Contemporary ethnographic museums are increasingly adopting holistic approaches to their exhibitions, aiming to collect, show, and interpret the history, art, and culture of African communities (Polyzogopoulou, 2023, p. 67). Many museums are now engaged in provenance research of their African arts collections, aiming to move beyond the stereotypes of colonial perceptions to which African arts has been confined. The National Museum of African Art (2025) also

notes that by collaborating with African institutions and communities, museums can ensure that the cultural heritage is preserved and respected.

Some museums have recently been actively involved in the reinterpretation of African arts. The British Museum, Tate, and the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac have initiatives for decolonizing their collections and exhibitions, incorporating diverse perspectives and narratives (Dixon, 2016, p. 110). The efforts include returning stolen artifacts, integrating African voices into curatorial practices, and developing exhibitions that highlight the cultural and historical significance of African art. The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren near Brussels is a museum and research center on Africa, which critically analyzes the representation of Central African objects in its exhibitions. The museum's efforts to balance tradition with decolonization reflect a broader movement towards more inclusive and respectful interpretations of African art (Casalini, 2021, p. 34).

REPATRIATION EFFORTS

While the conversations on decolonization of the museum spaces are on, there are examples of actual repatriated African sculptures, which underscore the joint efforts of museums, governments, and international organizations to rectify historical wrongs and safeguard cultural heritage of Africa. The number of repatriated objects so far is probably just a fraction compared to the volume of artefacts illegally obtained during the colonial era that are currently sitting in western museums. The very few objects repatriated by western museums underscores the premise of this article and why deliberate internal intervention within museums could make significant impact.

Various countries have different frameworks regulating ownership and repatriation of cultural artifacts. However, museums have a moral obligation to facilitate the return of illegally obtained artefacts when requested by the source community. The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, provide guidelines for the protection and return of cultural property. The implementation, however, depends on the political will of museums and government to act in good faith (UNESCO, 2025, pp. 1-2). Some of the arts and cultural objects returned to the source communities so far include:

- Ancient Benin Bronzes returned to Benin city, Nigeria by the Smithsonian, the Horniman Museum in London, and the University of Aberdeen among others.
- Five Nok Terracotta Sculptures returned in 2013, by the French government to Nigeria.
- Ethiopian Manuscripts and Artifacts, including a lock of hair belonging to Emperor Tewodros II returned in 2019 to Ethiopia by the National Army Museum, United Kingdom.
- A Makonde Mask, returned by the Ethnological Museum of Berlin returned in 2018 to Tanzania.
- Several Egyptian cultural Artifacts, returned from Western museums.

CONCLUSION

One of the ideals of contemporary museum practice is the recognition of the social and moral obligations of museums to liaise with source communities for the improvement of the interpretation and display of cultural artefacts in their possession. Museums should avoid presenting African arts as mere decorative objects and instead highlight their cultural relevance and significance (Smithsonian Institution, 2019, p. 12). A comprehensive background information which includes the influences of culture, history, and societal norms that shaped the creation and meaning of the art should form part of the African cultural objects in museum collection (Ibid). Also, collaborations between museums and African communities should prioritize cultural ownership and authenticity, ensuring that the

presentation of African arts is both respectful and informative (Arts Council of the African Studies Association, 2024, p. 51). Some work has been done by ethnographic museums to this effect; however, many African sculptures especially ritual objects remain improperly presented in western museums. Museums have the moral responsibility of continuous research to provide more culturally responsive ways to present their African collections and by recreating environments that enhance original context, function and meaning. Recreating the environment would provide visitors with some level of cultural experience relevant both to the interpretation and the contexts of the artworks on display.

The appreciation of African ritual sculptures goes beyond its physical attributes, although physical attributes may enhance the overall aesthetic experience, it is a configuration of many things. The participation of the community in the ritual dance where such sculptures feature, the rhetorics and incantations that accompany the ritual performances, the exhilarating moments where chants erupt into ecstatic applause or frenzy, the rhythmic movement of dancers wearing ritual objects, and the sense of place and identity are factors that *straight jacket* displays in acrylic boxes or direct video presentation cannot effectively articulate. Therefore, it is important that multimedia intervention in museums move past mere video presentations to environmental recreation and virtual reality rooms. Ritual sculptures in Africa do not function alone, they are part of a larger socio-religious construct, and virtual reality could be useful for providing the important experiential components for visitors in this regard. The research by ethnographic and other museums should include the further acquisition of related cultural objects like costumes, ornaments and accessories associated with major ritual sculptures and their ceremonies. Recreating the environment to show the interconnection between ritual objects in a community and how they unite to function within the cultural setting would be useful in providing proper interpretation and context for African ritual sculptures in western museum collections.

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