

## COMMUNITY MUSEUMS AS HOLDING CENTRES FOR RETURNED NIGERIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

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**Abstract.** Looting and trafficking of cultural heritage in the areas known today as Nigeria started during the exploration and expansion of British territories in Africa. Missionaries, military officers, traders and anthropologists were notorious for their involvement in the illegal expropriation of artefacts. After the independence, looting of Nigeria's cultural heritage continued in museums, palaces, shrines and other sacred places. However, in recent years, several people and institutions have campaigned for the return of artefacts to their original owners. Consequently, there was a return of two ancient Benin bronze artefacts; a cockerel (Okukor) and UhunwunElao (Oba head) by the Jesuit College of Cambridge University and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. This however, sparked a row as to who should take custody of the artefacts between Edo State Government and the Benin Royal Palace. This paper suggests that the Benin Royal Palace and other royal houses in Nigeria are custodians of the peoples' culture and should keep the artefacts and others that may be returned in future in a community museum. This study was carried out through documentary research approach. Relevant information was sourced in reports, books, monographs, newspapers, magazines, academic theses and internet sources, in order to have a comprehensive review of the previous reports on stolen and returned artefacts.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural heritage was defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1972 to include artefacts, monuments, a collection of buildings, sites, and museums with diverse values, such as symbolic, historical, artistic, and aesthetic value as well as ethnological or anthropological, social, and scientific significance. Klesmith, (2014) emphasized that ownership of cultural heritage resides with the entire society while an individual may be the custodian of a peoples' cultural heritage. In this paper, cultural heritage and artefacts will be used interchangeably to mean the same thing because the subject of discourse in this paper is the return of artefacts to Nigeria by foreign institutions and governments.

The return of two ancient Benin bronze artefacts – *Okukor* (a cockerel) and *Uhunwun Elao* (Oba head) by the Jesuit College of Cambridge University in 2019 and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland in 2021 sparked a row over who should take custody of the artefacts between the Edo State Government, and the Benin Royal Palace headed by His Royal Majesty, Omo NOba NEdo UKU Akpolokpolo, Oba Ewuare II, Ogidigan. To this end, the state government unveiled phase one of the Edo Museum of West African Arts (EMOWAA) in Benin city which is designed to house returned objects and support the preservation of West African heritage (Aliu 2022 and Nwakunor 2021). However, the Benin Royal Palace insists that the artefacts are the cultural heritage of the Benin people which belong to the Oba of Benin Kingdom who is the custodian of Benin culture. Therefore, Benin Royal Museum was proposed to house the artefacts and others that may be returned in future (Aliu 2022 and Nwakunor 2021). The question therefore is who should take custody of the returned artefacts between the two parties knowing full well that the Edo Museum of West African Arts (EMOWAA) is structured like a conventional Nigerian museum while the Benin Royal Museum is a community museum. This question is premised on the fact that structurally, a conventional Nigerian museum disconnects itself from the local people because it is modeled after the European style which is exotic and elitist in nature (Andah 1990).

According to Okpoko (2006), Nigeria's earliest museums existed before Arab and European explorers arrived. During that time, kings' and leaders' temples, shrines, and palaces maintained items of ritual, religious, and political importance. However, with the advent of early colonialists in Nigeria, Esie (1945) and Jos (1952) museums were established. Thus, making present museums in Nigeria creations of colonialism. The museum collections from that era were valuable and interesting merely because they allowed European colonizers not Africans to learn about the fantastical and exotic facets of what were then referred to as natives' ways and practices (Andah 1990). Consequently, there was a disconnection between the people and these museums. The elitist nature of the museums in Nigeria even after independence also continued to widen as they still retain some features of colonial vestiges especially in the exhibition of objects, where aesthetic is projected more than functional and ritual purposes (Abadom 1998 and Afigbo 1985). This is unlike

the community museum where objects are displayed in a functional manner because they serve traditional purposes.

Community museum, therefore, offers the opportunity for communities in Nigeria to tell their cultural history because it allows them to be involved as owners and participants in its management. To this end, Camarena and Morales (2016) submitted that community museums are initiatives that respond to the local needs and demands which are created and directed by a community organization through active involvement of the local population. Similarly,

Batt (2021); Nocca (2017); Camarena and Morales (2016) and Aremu (2001) opined that community museums have the propensity to reconnect the people with their lost heritage, enable skill acquisition and tourism development. Similarly, Trevino (2015), argues that community museum plays a vital role in the conservation of indigenous identities, not as a civilization of the past, but as a living culture that is being shaped daily. This paper therefore is an attempt to answer the question raised earlier about the appropriate place to keep the artefacts between Edo Museum of West African Arts (EMOWAA) and the Benin Royal Museum and by extrapolation between conventional and community museums.

## **2. Research method**

The study was carried out through documentary research approach. This method involves the use of reports on journals, books, monographs, newspapers, magazines, doctoral dissertations, and internet sources. The essence of using this approach is to review some reports of expropriated cultural properties, requests for their return and the actual return. The study used descriptive analysis which focuses on organizing and presenting data to gain knowledge of the discourse.

## **3. Background**

Over 5000 artefacts of Nigerian origin, which were looted before, during and after colonization of the country are currently housed in individual homes and institutions of foreign countries. A classic example is the British army raid and theft of Benin artifacts in 1897 while invading the kingdom as well as stealing some from the Tiv and Ife communities (Chiama et al. 2014, Layiwola 2010). Looting and trafficking of cultural properties continued after the independence of Nigeria at various locations such as in shrines, sacred groves, palaces and museums. At the inception of Nigeria's independence, there was no formal government institution in charge of the protection of cultural properties because the objects were still in the custody of various kingdoms, communities, and individuals (Okpoko 2006). Hence, to address this challenge, in July, 1943, the Nigerian Department of Antiquities was established and charged with the responsibility to establish museums across the country, and safeguard cultural properties within and outside the confines of the museums. Thus, museums were established at Esie Kwara State in 1945, Jos in Plateau State in 1952

and subsequently, in other locations around the country. In spite of this, looting and trafficking of artefacts still continued though at a lower scale. However, campaigns and protests from local and international institutions for the return of Nigerian artefacts culminated in the return of some artefacts. Also, Nigeria signed several bilateral agreements with some countries on the return of her artefacts. Hence, the return of Nigerian artefacts will continue to cause friction between State governments and traditional authorities if a workable framework is not put in place.

#### **4. The nature of Nigeria's stolen cultural heritage**

Stolen artefacts, items obtained via illegal trade, and those historically claimed by colonizing or other dominant forces are the three categories of cultural heritage that are grouped as objects for repatriation (Geopfert 1995). The era of documented looting and trafficking of cultural artefacts in Nigeria spans the 17th and 18th centuries. The initial set of issues for cultural legacy preservation were brought about by the exposure of European traders, missionaries, explorers, anthropologists, and colonial officers to Africa's cultural history (Folorunso 2021). Many Christian missionaries encouraged the locals to give up objects of worship that they referred to as graven images, idols, fetishes, or wicked items in order to convert them. They were regarded as mere pieces of wood and therefore of no spiritual or aesthetic value. Some of these artefacts were physically destroyed either through burning in public or by being broken into pieces (Folorunso 2021, and Oloidi 1988). Centers where cultural properties of cultural, spiritual and political significance are housed are not spared by some religious extremists. They loot artefacts, shrines, grooves, altars and other sacred places in the guise of spiritual cleansing.

Resistance to the actions of the British government and military officials deployed to Africa to establish the colonial authority provided an excuse for invading, destroying, and pillaging African communities (Folorunso 2021). Examples of documented cultural heritage expropriation include the British army's infamous Benin Punitive Expedition in February 1897, during which artwork was taken from palaces and the homes of Benin chiefs. Several priceless cultural artefacts, including the renowned Queen Idia Mask, (FESTAC HEAD), which serves as the emblem of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, were lost as a result of this attack (Layiwola 2010). Some of the artefacts that were taken from Benin were later sold at auction in Europe and are now housed in both European and American museums. Leo Frobenius, a German anthropologist, traveled to Ife, the spiritual city of the Yoruba, between 1910 and 1912. During this time, he stole 5,670 cultural artefacts, including the Olukun Head of Ife, and replaced them with fakes. According to Chiama et al. (2014) and Eyo (1974), it would be more accurate to characterize Frobenius's actions in Ife as colonial enterprise-related treasure seeking than archaeological investigation. Additionally, between 1929 and 1950, the British colonial authority illegally seized a significant number of sacred Tiv items and exported them abroad under the guise of upholding law and order (Chiama et al. 2014).

Similar to this, the accidental discovery of a figurine in a tin mine in 1928 in the village of Nok near Jos sparked attention worldwide in the hunt for cultural treasures in the area. Under the pretense of conducting mineral exploration, illegal solid mineral miners conceal their activities and engage in inappropriate excavation and artefact trafficking. Along with this, a group of European art merchants hired young Nigerian youths in 1993 to help them illegally unearth roughly 3,000 terracotta artifacts from the Nok valley. These items were subsequently transported illegally, via Cotonou, Lome, and the Niger Republic, to art markets in Europe and America (Chiama et al. 2014, Sowole 2012, and Akinade 1999).

Meanwhile, museums have also been victimized by this ridiculous cultural heritage theft. By nature, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria regulate museums which are store houses of cultural heritage. Clearly, sculptures constitute the bulk of Nigeria's resources in antiquities and as movable items; artifact(s) could easily disappear from Nigeria in diplomatic bags (Egunjobi 1998). Some examples would be mentioned here, the stealing of a couple of Igbo Ukwu objects from Lagos Museum, which later re-surfaced on display in the British Museum; the mysterious disappearance of the replica of the renowned roped pot from Anambra States Museum in Igbo Ukwu; the loss of a brass headless mounted warrior; a brass cock; Obodo bell from Benin National Museum and a number of antiquities stolen from the Jos Museum in January, 1987 (Adiba 2011, Aduge-Ani 2007, and Ekechukwu 1990).

The majority of these objects are made from stone, ivory, glass, terracotta, metal, textiles, papers, bones and wood. Artefacts of Nigerian origin are highly sought and of high demand owing to a number of reasons; Egunjobi (1998) posits that Nigeria's sculpture in wood lasts much longer than those from other parts of Africa, and that bronze, terracotta, and stone objects produced in Nigeria are impervious to the heat, and humidity that so readily destroys many other examples of African art. All these artefacts are said to be economically enriching to the countries that looted or bought them a benefit that the originating country(ies) do not enjoy (Dzidzienyo and Nkumbaan 2020).

## **5. Demand for return of cultural heritage**

The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO have made several recommendations and declarations at its conventions to prevent the damage, theft and export of cultural heritage. However, the 1995 Unidroit agreement, which primarily addressed stolen and unlawfully exported artefacts, provided a procedure for the repatriation of objects to the real owners in cases of stolen goods or otherwise, to the state of export (Klemsith 2014). Countries that wanted their cultural heritage returned looked into three platforms before the Unidroit Convention was adopted. The UNESCO international committee, bilateral agreements, and foreign court proceedings are some of these venues (Folarin 2000). As good as the Unidroit convention was, it has no retroactive effect on objects stolen prior to the convention.

Therefore, some countries have taken advantage of this loophole by refusing to sign and domesticate the convention (Folarin 2000). Another obstacle against the return of stolen artefacts to the original owners is cultural internationalism. This concept states that cultural heritage belongs to all mankind because each group of persons makes cultural contributions to the culture of the world (Goepfert 1995). Cultural internationalists argue that repatriation of artefacts does not matter rather the ability to preserve and make it accessible to the world.

The demand for the return of illegally held artefacts in foreign countries and institutions is not limited to Nigeria as other developing countries have at one time or the other demanded the return of their cultural properties. At a time, the Ugandan authority requested the Oxford University, England to return an eight-legged seat looted from the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom during the colonial era. The seat is believed to be among the several artefacts looted by the British colonial authority (Novak 2022). On another occasion, Zimbabwe requested that Britain should return about 3000 artefacts including human skulls that were cut off and shipped away as war booty (Novak 2022). In 1976, Belgium returned over one hundred art works to the Democratic Republic of Congo former Zaire. Rwanda also signed an agreement with its colonial masters Belgium for the sharing of digital copies of about 4000 songs and other recordings housed at the Royal Museum for Central Africa near Brussels (Lucas 2022 and Novak 2022). The looted Egyptian Sarcophagus which had been on display at the Houston Museum of National Science was returned to Cairo on 2 December 2023 (Okafor 2023). Similarly, Netherland returned artefacts it expropriated from Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand to Papua New Guinea just as France had repatriated scores of artefacts to Senegal, Madagascar and the Republic of Benin (Folarin 2000 and Lucas 2022). Negotiations for the return of the Makonde Mask to Tanzania took twenty years, and those for the return of the stolen Vigango Memorials to Kenya from the United States of America took twenty-two years. The Lion of Judah monument was returned to Rome after thirty years, whereas the Obelisk of Aksum took seventy years to reach Ethiopia (Dandaura et al. 2014).

The actual demand by Nigerian authorities for the return of its artefacts dates back to the 1950s. At the time when museums were established across Nigeria, the Department of Antiquities bought several plaques of Nigerian origin from the British Museum who had prior obtained them as part of loot form the 1897 inversion of Benin Kingdom (Marshall 2021). In the early 1970s, Nigerian authority requested the British Museum to return the famous *Idia* mask, for use as the face of the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC' 77). Among other things, the demand failed because the British Museum insisted that the object was too fragile to travel having spent a long time in their custody (Marshall 2021 and Uzuegbu 2015). Much effort and many meetings have been held across African and European cities about the need to return stolen objects et al. to the original owners. The British Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM UK), the German Goethe Institute in sub-Saharan Africa and the Humboldt Forum in Berlin between 2018–2020 organized meetings on the appropriateness of repatriation of African artifacts (Laely 2020). Equally, Campbell, (2018) remarked that the report of the committee set up by President

Emmanuel Macron of France in 2017 on the returning of African cultural heritage stored in French museums recommends that France should return to Africa art and artefacts held in French cultural institutions (p. 1) The recommendation opened more avenues for further negotiations on repatriation of stolen objects et al. to Africa. Backed by the NCMM Decree No. 77 of 1979, Nigerian authorities have continued to interface with relevant national and international bodies to demand the return of illegally exported cultural heritage from Nigeria. Particularly, National Commission for Museums and Monuments NCMM has signed bilateral agreements with relevant foreign countries like Germany, Scotland, the Netherlands and Canada for the return of artefacts of Nigerian origin. Individuals and sub-national governments in Nigeria have made similar quests for the return of her cultural heritage. They include the Benin Royal Palace, Oba of Ile-Ife, Benin Dialogue Group, Edo State Government, Osun State Government, renowned Nigerian novelists and poets Niyi Osundare, Mrs. Chimamada Adichie, Professor Wole Soyinka and Mr. Ekpo Eyo, a former Director of Antiquities. In response to the clarion calls for the return of illicit cultural properties, the Jesuit College, University of Cambridge and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland organized a campaign which resulted in the return of a Benin Bronze Cockerel *Okukor* et al. and a bronze depicting the head of an Oba of Benin in 2019 and 2021 respectively (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). They became the first European institution to return Benin artefacts. In the same way, the Metropolitan



Figure1. Benin bronze cockerel *Okukor*. Source: Bakare (2019).



Figure 2. Bronze head of an Oba of Benin. *Source:* Aliyu (2022).

Museum of Art New York returned three Nigerian objects believed to be part of the 1897 loot. These are two 16th century brass plaques and one 14th century brass head (Nwakunor 2021). Also three artefacts were returned to Nigeria from Germany in March 24th 2022. The objects are the plaque of a 16th century Warrior Chief, a junior court official with a sword, and a 14th century zinc brass head of Ife (Ebeshi 2022). Five ancient terracotta sculptures smuggled out of the country in 2010 were returned by France (BBC 29th Jan. 2013). Eleven Nok terracotta stolen from Nigerian museums were returned by the Homeland Investigation Office, Manhattan in 2012 (Wynne 2012); two objects (a small bird that used to be on top of a staff and a bell) were returned to the Oba of Benin in June 2014 as a result of effort by Mr. Steve Dunstone and Timothy Awoyemi (Marshall 2021); a 600 year Ife Terracotta returned by Netherlands in October 2020; the return in April 2021 of a bronze piece from Mexico; the return of two Benin Bronzes and Ife Bronze head in November 2021 by the Metropolitan Museum, New York; twenty two Benin bronze objects from German Government in 2022.

## 6. Discussion

The custody of the returned Nigerian artefacts forms the issue of discourse in this paper. This arose because of the conflict of interest between the Edo State Government and the Benin Royal Palace over who should take custody of the recently returned Benin artefacts. Against this backdrop, both parties proposed to establish a museum to house the objects. Therefore, the question is who should take custody of the artefacts and by extension similar ones to be returned in future to Nigeria. In this case, both archaeological and historical facts support that the cultural properties

in question belong to the Benin people of Nigeria (Layiwola 2010, Andah 1990). Therefore, the artefacts should be returned to them. We argue that the proposed Benin Royal Museums a community museum is ideal place to house the returned artefacts because it will afford the locals the opportunity to repossess and be reconnected to their lost heritage. This is in line with the thoughts expressed by Camarena and Morales (2016) as they posited that community museum allows local people to be involved in the planning and management of the museum unlike the conventional type which revolves around the interest of the owners with less input from the local communities. Okpoko (2006) had argued that African artefacts are traditionally used to perform specific function in the socio-cultural and political contexts which are lacking in the conventional museums. Also, Akinyi (2022) and Andah (1992) opined that in conventional museums artefacts are displayed in boxes and shelves as lifeless objects which are deprived of their true essence. It therefore reinforces the argument of housing returned artefacts in community museums, which are designed to replicate traditional settings that will allow the owners and managers to use them in their utilitarian sense. Nigerian communities like the Benin, Ife, Igbo-Ukwu, Tiv and Nok whose artefacts had been returned and others who are still waiting for theirs to be returned have the right to demand that they take custody of them for optimal utilization, unless they are not prepared.

Looting and carting away of artefacts from Benin, Nok, and Ife disrupted the cultural milieu that existed at those periods. It is therefore important to allow the various communities to take custody of their returned objects in order to heal the wound created by the losses. This position tallies with the thought expressed by Andah (1990) as he argued that the decolonization policy of African museums will help to rehabilitate the people, mentally and otherwise, through the material evidence of their civilizations and positively help recognize their identities. Decolonization policy of African museums encourages community participation in the management of the museums as it will create a suitable environment for the locals to have a sense of involvement in restating their cultural values through their artefacts.

Some African countries like Uganda, Kenyan, Tanzania, Egypt and Zimbabwe have made projections that if stolen artefacts are returned to the original owners, it will attract more visitors and increase revenue through tourism (Nocca 2017). Batt (2021) reports that Ghana generated about 1.8 billion US dollars in 2019 from Diaspora visitors who came to see the returned artefacts from Europe. Therefore, tourism in local communities will be improved when the returned artefacts are displayed in consonance with the people's traditions which will be provided by a community museum. Tourists who hitherto had visited foreign museums to see the artefacts will come to Nigeria for the same purpose; hence, there will be increase in revenue generation. Currently, some of the looted Nigerian artefacts serve as economic wealth for museums in the Western nations while the source nations suffer untold economic and non-economic losses (Akinyi 2022, Dzidzienyo and Nkumba 2020). It is therefore strategic for Nigerian communities whose artefacts are returned to establish community museums in line with their cultural idiosyncrasies to be able to attract visitors and tourists. As noted by Aremu (2001), the establishment of

museums in every Nigerian community will help the development of tourism in the country. Such local communities will fill the impact of tourism through increased revenue from sales of souvenirs, food, drinks, transportation and accommodation.

## 7. Conclusion

Looting and trafficking of cultural heritage in the areas known today as Nigeria started prior to her independence. Several places were invaded in the guise of mineral explorations, propagation of Christian religion, peacekeeping missions and the study of local craft of the people while looting of artefacts went on discreetly. Museums, palaces, shrines and other sacred places were not left out in the scourge of looting. In all, many Nigeria artefacts are currently housed in several foreign houses, museums and other institutions. In recent years, several people and institutions have campaigned for the return of the artefacts to the original owners. Nigeria, through National Commission for Museums and Monuments has consistently requested that her stolen artefacts be returned. The request has yielded little success. Nigeria has equally signed bilateral agreements with some foreign countries to return artefacts in their custody. The actual return of Nigerian artefacts in recent years is the return of Benin Bronze Cockerel *Okukor* et al. and a bronze depicting the head of an Oba of Benin by the Jesuit College, University of Cambridge and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Also an Ife Bronze head was returned in November 2019 by the Metropolitan Museum, New York and twenty-two Benin bronze artefacts returned by the German Government in 2021.

Particularly the return of the two Benin artefacts by the Jesuit College, University of Cambridge and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland caused a row between the Edo State Government and the Benin Royal Palace over who has the right to take custody of the artefacts. The state government proposed to build Edo Museum of West African Arts (EMOWAA) to house the artefacts while the Benin Royal Palace proposed to establish Benin Royal Museum which is a community museum for the same purpose. It is the opinion of this paper that since the artefacts have been historically and archaeologically traced to Benin Kingdom, therefore, it is necessary that the Beni people take its custody and display same and others that may be returned in future in a community museum which will give the locals opportunity to curate them. This applies to other communities whose artefacts maybe returned in the future.

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