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WHAT IS RESTITUTION?
SOME CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

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What Is Restitution? Some Conceptual Considerations

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Abstract

This paper is the outcome of joint reflections by the two authors, based on their diverse experiences of museum work in Europe and in Africa. This work was made possible thanks to a MIASA fellowship at the University of Ghana. The paper offers a conceptual approach to restitution as a phenomenon that has gained much public attention in recent years. Since the diverse practices of restitution have attracted more attention than certain concepts related to it, this paper addresses this imbalance by focusing on conceptual issues. Restitution is described as the process of renegotiating and mobilising cultural heritage. Simultaneously, it contributes to overcoming the injustices of the colonial era. Restitution is understood as the remobilisation of material items, accompanied by the identification of new embeddings. It fundamentally implies an appreciation of the collections concerned. The first chapter explains the epistemic positioning of the authors and the paper, as well as the framework, such as the relationship between restitution and coloniality, and the diversity of practices labelled by the term 'restitution'. The second chapter characterises the actors involved and explains the importance of cultural heritage institutions for successful and sustainable restitution. Furthermore, some of the conditions for the remobilisation and, consequently, the revaluation of these collections are explained. The third chapter focuses on the collections and explains their transformation as a result of the long duration of storage and the changes in meaning through time and space. Restitution is described as the career of objects. This applies to the repositioning of the objects to their new embeddings and functions, and to the increased public attention they receive. As the final chapter emphasises, restitution starts long before the actual moment of return. Negotiations form part of this, as do considerations regarding the whereabouts of the objects. Restitution produces new meanings for cultural artefacts and should therefore be understood as an open-ended process.

Keywords: restitution, cultural artefacts, museum, valuation of material things

Résumé

Cet article résulte d'une réflexion de deux auteurs, fondée sur leurs expériences diverses dans le domaine muséal en Europe et en Afrique. Les auteurs ont bénéficié d'une bourse du MIASA à l'Université du Ghana. Ils développent une approche conceptuelle de la restitution, un phénomène qui a suscité un grand intérêt ces dernières années. Les pratiques diverses de la restitution ayant attiré davantage l'attention que le débat conceptuel, cet article se concentre sur ce dernier. La restitution est décrite comme le processus de renégociation et de mobilisation du patrimoine culturel. Elle contribue à surmonter les injustices de l'époque coloniale. La restitution est comprise comme la remobilisation d'objets matériels, accompagnée de l'identification de nouveaux ancrages. Elle implique fondamentalement une appréciation des collections concernées. Le premier chapitre explique le positionnement épistémique des auteurs et de l'article, ainsi que le cadre qui retient la relation entre restitution et colonialité, ainsi que la diversité des pratiques appelées 'restitution'. Le deuxième chapitre caractérise les acteurs impliqués et explique l'importance des institutions du patrimoine culturel pour une restitution réussie et durable. En outre, certaines des conditions nécessaires à la remobilisation et, par conséquent, à la revalorisation de ces collections sont expliquées. Le troisième chapitre se concentre sur les collections et explique leur transformation qui résulte de la durée du stockage



et des changements de signification a dans le temps et l'espace. La restitution fait partie de la carrière des objets. Cela vaut pour le repositionnement des objets dans leurs nouveaux contextes pour leurs nouvelles fonctions, ainsi que pour l'attention accrue du public. Comme le souligne le dernier chapitre, la restitution commence bien avant le moment retour proprement dit. Les négociations en font partie, tout comme les réflexions sur la localisation des objets. La restitution confère un nouveau sens aux objets culturels et doit donc être comprise comme un processus ouvert.

Mots-clés: restitution, objets culturels, musée, valorisation des biens matériels



The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better. [...] These men and women who have been deprived of their cultural heritage therefore ask for the return of at least the art treasures which best represent their culture, which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish. This is a legitimate claim. (Amadou Mahtar M'Bow 1978: 4)

1. Introduction

This paper does not aim to offer a manual on the way restitution should proceed. We are convinced that – at least for the moment – this would not be possible.¹ It may not yet be time to write such a guideline because the various restitution processes undertaken in recent years, or currently underway, are too multifaceted and context-dependent to support a one-size-fits all approach. While it is important to reconsider how restitution has been and is currently processed, it seems unlikely that a guide could provide a definitive solution. In the 21st century, restitution is long overdue, because cultural artefacts from Africa and the Global South have been kept in Western museums for far too long, often without legitimacy and lacking a publicly acknowledged purpose for their retention. Yet, despite this urgency, it is not possible to address this matter quickly. This paper further explains why we argue in favour of restitution, while also emphasising that this as a delicate and slow process.

1.1 Purpose and Context of this Paper

This essay identifies two important positions: First, we view restitution as a process rather than merely an act (such as a 'delivery'). Second, the diversity of processes involved in the restitution framework is essential to understanding this undertaking. Restitution cannot occur without taking into account the multiple contexts that encompass time, space and the diverse actors involved. These contexts vary in each case and for each cultural artefact. Consequently, the goals of restitution processes are always distinct from each other, resulting in a wide range of modalities and understandings. To navigate this diversity in a meaningful way, the participation of all parties and negotiations at each step of the process must serve as the basis for every

¹ While initial attempts have been made to systematize and categorize the repatriation of human remains (cf. Fforde, Keeler and McKeown 2020), the authors are not aware of any comparable work focusing on the restitution of cultural artefacts. The work by Cressida Fforde, Honour Keeler and Timothy McKeown (2020) is interesting for two reasons: (1) it systematically seeks to give voice to authors from diverse cultural backgrounds; and (2) by compiling a vast number of case studies, it constantly contextualises empirical settings. Therefore, this 'companion' serves more as a kaleidoscope of different experiences rather than a prescriptive guideline.



restitution effort. Instead of providing instructions, this collaboratively developed text is embedded within an environment where numerous restitution processes have already been initiated, with several having reached an advanced stage. Observing these processes and engaging with people who have been involved in these returns forms the background of this text.

About the authors' involvement in the restitution and museum debate

The context in which this paper was written has both practical and conceptual origins. One of the authors, archaeologist Kodzo Gavua from the University of Ghana, is responsible for coordinating several ongoing Ghanaian restitution processes for cultural artefacts stored in various European museums, where they have been classified as 'anthropological objects'. He is also chair of the Ghana Focal Team on Restitution and Repatriation (referred to as the 'Focal Team'), which was established in April 2022.²

For the other author, anthropologist Hans Peter Hahn from Goethe University Frankfurt, material cultures and the history of anthropological museums are among his main research interests. He has been involved in long-term museum activities related to the National Museum of Togo in Lomé since the 1990s. Currently, he serves on several advisory boards for heritage projects and museums in Germany, focusing on research related to collections and heritage.

Both authors have explored the topic of restitution in their university teaching and publications prior to conducting together research as part of a six-month MIASA tandem fellowship in 2022/23. This document is the result of this joint research, also drawing on practical experience with museums in Germany and Ghana. The joint research primarily examined how restitution is conceptualised and the expectations of professional actors and people engaged in restitution claims in West Africa. It focused on the underlying conceptual implications of how restitution has been experienced in certain countries in the subregion and its significance for shaping the concept of restitution. Based on these practical experiences, this paper aims to share observations on this previously vague and at times controversial concept while presenting various positions.

Structure of the text

This working paper is divided into three chapters of roughly equal importance and ends with a conclusion. The chapters progress from more general to more specific considerations. The first chapter serves as an introduction, exploring whether restitution can be considered a distinct concept and examining the external conditions that have led to its recent prominence in public

² For additional information on the creation of this Focal Team see <https://www.motac.gov.gh/return-stolen-cultural-artefacts/>.



debates within society and politics. This chapter will also address our understanding of the diversity of restitution processes, situate them within a decolonising effort and discuss their practical dimensions in regard to aims and expectations.

The second chapter covers key conceptual terms, starting with the actors involved and a critical examination of their possible scope of action. Our main focus here is the heterogeneity of these actors, which includes 'communities', activists, government representatives, museums, institutions and others. The chapter then moves on to the central question of changes in the objects themselves through the process of restitution, particularly regarding how material items are mobilised during their journeys and simultaneously revaluated. In a subsequent subchapter, we introduce our concept of multiple forms of evaluating material culture, especially cultural artefacts. The nexus between valuation and restitution lies at the heart of the conceptual framework of this paper.

The third chapter traces some of the most important changes to the cultural artefacts during the restitution process. Naturally, the first dimension of change relates to their movement through space and time, as well as the issue of old and new ownership. In addition, questions of identification and contextual redefinitions are relevant as aspects of change, both concerning the artefacts themselves and the changes in society they trigger.

The working paper concludes by summarising the findings and pleading for the respectful treatment of one another and of cultural artefacts, while urging caution regarding expectations of ongoing recontextualisations.

Note on terminology

The wide range of practices and perspectives is reflected in a confusing heterogeneity of terms. What constitutes or could constitute the subject of restitution is often referred to differently in different contexts and by different institutions. As a rule, these are material entities, yet their context and embeddedness remain as controversial as their exact valuation. For example, there has been much talk recently of 'sensitive objects'. Some authors use this term to express the idea that these objects require special consideration, while in the insurance industry it refers simply to the insurance of items deemed particularly valuable.

Another term that is used to indicate the special status of objects is 'objects of belonging'. This is intended to make clear that there are processes of belonging and identification that have often been neglected during the long history of those objects. However, the term also allows space for the possibility of multiple belongings, especially in cases where the exact place of origin cannot be definitively determined.



In this paper, the term ‘cultural artefact’ will be used preferentially, though not exclusively. This choice is based on the idea that these objects were produced by people as part of their cultural expression, and have always been understood to be part of a particular culture. While this is by no means an exhaustive description of their most important characteristics, it represents the least that can be said about the objects, the dignity and respect they deserve.

There is also a comparable range of terms when it comes to the people involved in negotiations regarding restitution. In fact, we assume that the simplest and most fundamental term is that of ‘interest groups’. These are simply people who form a group sharing special interests based on cultural affiliation or a logical connection to the context in which the object was produced. However, it also makes sense to speak of ‘stakeholders’, as specific, historically and culturally grounded ‘stakes’ play a role, rather than just any interest. The term ‘stake’ conveys a stronger sense of investment than ‘interest’, although the two terms are not always clearly distinguished from each other.

A third term dispenses entirely with the idea of self-articulation by the group or individual, and instead merely refers to the historical fact that a particular individual, group or community has been affected by cultural theft. The weakest term is ‘affected persons’ or ‘affected community’, but it may be justified in terms of a purely historical view of events.

1.2 Diversity of Restitution Processes

This paper primarily draws attention to the diverse meanings of restitution processes, the different perspectives and positions of those participating in such processes, and the range of procedures involved in restitution. Its focus is on the return of cultural artefacts that were expropriated in Africa and other countries outside Europe a long time ago under illegal or illegitimate circumstances. These objects were removed and brought to Europe and other regions, and now – often after more than a hundred years – are gradually beginning to be returned and arrive back in their countries of origin. Throughout most of this text, we focus on cultural artefacts transported between Africa and Europe. Although this concerns the majority of objects, we should keep in mind that Africa was not the only continent from which such things were taken, and that the itineraries of many items have been shown to be more complex than simply moving between two places.

Considering both the past and present, the long distances that these objects, mostly cultural artefacts, have covered makes it plausible to consider them ‘highly mobile objects’. At first glance, it may appear to be counterintuitive to label such cultural artefacts, which have often been stored and immobile in museum collections for long periods, as ‘highly mobile’. However, we emphasise this attribute in order to develop a perspective that is as holistic as possible. Material objects do not originate as ‘museum objects’, but have a history that pre-



dates their inclusion in a museum collection. These objects were once (often forcefully and with violence) ‘mobilised’ on their way to Europe and are now potentially ‘remobilised’ when being returned to an African country and reintegrated into their original cultural context.

This perspective stands in stark contrast to the dominant view of material items in museum storage, which are often considered to be immobile, static and materially unchanged. Tension between the presumed ‘inertia’ as a principle of museum objects (Mairesse 2011) and the notion that these material objects are highly mobile is evident. Questions arise such as: To what extent does the mobile history of these cultural artefacts imply their future mobility? Or, more precisely, does a holistic view of the past mobilities imply future mobility in the form of restitution? How will the valuation of these artefacts be affected by remobilising them?³ And how is their value conceived? As the gap between ‘objects in inertia’ and ‘highly mobile objects’ shows, restitution is a highly contested field where differing positions and perspectives converge. Often, conflicts surrounding possible restitution are related to different designations of the cultural artefacts in question by various stakeholders and to their specific features.

Over the last few years, public attention to the topic of restitution has increased rapidly, making it a closely followed and much discussed issue in the public sphere across different parts of the world. However, it is still little known that restitution is a practice with a history spanning more than a hundred years, at least as far as Africa is concerned. As Lars Müller (2021: 12) states in an overview article, this history includes a first restitution made to Liberia in 1923.⁴ Paying attention to this long history of restitution is important, as it helps those responsible for future restitutions to understand that, from a broader historical perspective, the concept has been associated with very different ideas and practices, encompassing a wide range of different meanings. Nevertheless, this early and unique story of restitution to West Africa should not obscure the fact that demands for restitution, which have been made repeatedly over fifty years, have been unconvincingly rejected by politicians and museum professionals in Europe (Savoy 2021).

The wide range of practices and meanings covered by the term ‘restitution’ is fundamental to understanding the phenomenon itself. While its historical dimension has contributed to harm and frustration, factors that must be considered as an important layer in restitution processes, diverging contemporary perspectives and objectives should not be perceived as a flaw or weakness in the concept. Instead, the different forms, modalities and aims should be seen as an indicator of the vitality and truthfulness of restitution claims. There is no single,

³ Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss (2013) discuss different form of mobilizations and their consequences for the objects’ cultural appreciation in more detail.

⁴ Larissa Förster (2025: 9) rightfully highlights the fact that some individual cases of restitution are “much older than a century”. Especially from New Zealand and Ethiopia there have been claims for the return of objects that played an important role within local political systems. In the case of Ethiopia, this resulted in a return in 1872.



definitive future for these remobilised cultural artefacts; however, there is the expectation that mobilisation will change and revalue the items and give them new meanings and embeddings.

Diversity in meanings and practices is not solely a challenge for scholars of history, ethnology or sociology. It also has legal dimensions and is linked to museological and political interests, as well as the perspectives of those directly affected: various regions of the African continent, the African Diaspora, and local communities with diverse languages, geographical backgrounds and historical contexts. These interests intersect with questions of cultural policy in African countries, as well as possible international collaborations across the continent, both of which are significant.

1.3 Restitution and Coloniality

Restitution is just a small aspect within a broader context; that is, the persisting coloniality of international relations (Quijano 2000, Kaltmeier and Rufer 2016). Restitution must be seen within the context of a larger and still ongoing debate on colonial entanglements in Europe that has been intensifying for several decades. As a result of this debate, many museums in Europe acknowledge having been beneficiaries of, or even active participants in, colonial systems of injustice. Today, coloniality is visible in the structural aspects of companies, schools, public research institutions and museums, as well as in the names of streets and squares across Europe and beyond.

It is noteworthy that the current dynamic of increasing awareness is primarily a local and regional phenomenon, rather than a national policy. In fact, regional governments and municipalities in Europe have been more active in this area than national governments. An outstanding example of this is the city of Hamburg, where the municipality and the city's museums have been particularly engaged in raising public awareness, especially by critically re-examining its economy (Zimmerer and Bechhaus-Gerst 2013; Zimmerer and Todzi 2021; Zimmerer, Todzi and Odenwald 2025). Similarly, Berlin has also a very active scene making public colonial remnants in the urban landscape (Heyden and Zeller 2002, Ehrhardt 2022).

Alongside political movements in Europe, civil society actors and local communities in Africa, Asia, Australia and beyond are increasingly articulating themselves as descendants of those who suffered the loss of cultural materials under colonial circumstances.⁵ With good reason, Fazil Moradi (2022) calls the cultural artefacts mobilised during colonial dominance 'catastrophic art'. According to him, the material items taken in colonial contexts bear witness to the catastrophic violence involved in their acquisition and transfer from one continent to

⁵ A good example of this is the artistic re-enactment of loss and repatriation in the theatre piece written by Keith Vries and staged by the *Nama Theatre Group*, entitled "Coming Home Dead", which deals with the ongoing consequences of the Herero Genocide in Namibia 1904–1905. Cf. <https://www.we.com.na/art-and-entertainment-we/coming-home-dead-back-on-stage2024-05-15>.



another.⁶ We consider the fact that their fate has gradually received more awareness and the claims for bringing them back are now heard internationally as part of the restitution process. Restitution has the potential to draw attention to the voices of the formerly colonised and to articulate their particular and specific needs. The remobilisation of cultural artefacts may be one such need, along with others that may be articulated simultaneously or subsequently.

Sensitising the general public in European and African countries to the continuing presence of colonial structures and ways of thinking in the 21st century is the most important reason why museums in Europe today feel called upon or even pushed to disclose their entanglements stemming from the colonial era. Today, many demand that museums identify objects with histories linked to colonialism and, if this is requested, return them as soon as possible. This widespread public concern relating to problematic provenance is exemplified in this quote by Anna Catalani:

Non-Western collections, in the West, are part of a difficult past; generally speaking, they are the result of Western colonisation, in non-Western countries. Such objects have been brought to the West, to Europe, as trophies or looted items and have become symbols of religious missions. (Catalani 2010: 24)

Today, museums acknowledge their colonial past and seek to become 'decolonised', although the processes leading to this status are not always clear (Brulon Soares 2020; Hicks 2020; Michels 2022). Because the wider public is generally unaware of the colonial implications of many collections, a critical restudy of the contexts of acquisition, exhibition and other museological practices forms part of the decolonisation effort (Procter 2020; von Oswald 2022). Widespread awareness of the wrongs of the past can contribute to enabling institutions to implement new practices. Restitution is probably the most important of these, but collaboration and critical reflection on the institutions' histories are also important.

Currently, there is widespread acknowledgment among museums and academics in different professional fields that colonial implications have been suppressed, neglected or insufficiently worked through (Apoth and Mehler 2020; Zuschlag 2022; Nehmachena 2023). Therefore, it can be argued that critically re-examining institutions' pasts and encouraging reflection on the political implications of colonial times are important elements of 'de-colonising'

⁶ Interestingly, Moradi's important article emphasises one aspect of the history of objects – the intensity of violence experienced – while ignoring another important aspect: their connection to the precolonial culture of their place of origin.



the museum. One popular but controversial approach in this context pertains to 'unlearning the museum' (Azoulay 2019; Landkammer 2018). The basic idea is to reject conventional perceptions of museums, systematically questioning their agency, objectives, audiences and the status of their collections.

There is no doubt that the dominance of colonial acquisition contexts has been obscured and marginalised by museums over the past hundred years. As recent publications highlight, violence is an inherent part of the history of institutions like museums which house collections that include items from colonial contexts (Blatt 2023). However, it should be kept in mind that many cultural artefacts were also acquired outside the contexts mentioned by Catalani, as quoted above. In colonial settings, some people sold sought-after cultural artefacts to Europeans, thus pursuing their own economic goals as market participants, while others were involved in illicit trafficking of cultural artefacts, which sometimes continued after independence.⁷ Undoubtedly, such artefacts, taken out of their countries through trafficking, also form a legitimate part of restitution claims (Gavua and Kuntaa 2022: 188).

In a recent publication, Beninese scholar and expert in cultural history, Emery Patrick Effiboley (2020), proposes a list of categories of looted or stolen artefacts, with the intention of distinguishing among the various colonial contexts in which the appropriation of cultural artefacts took place. One category consists of objects designated 'spoils of war', obtained during so-called 'punitive expeditions', which must be returned in any case. In addition, Effiboley describes a second group of objects whose religious or ritual significance was disregarded or ignored during colonial appropriation: these cultural artefacts must also be returned without exception. Eyifa-Dzidzienyo and Nkumbaan (2020) support this view in the Ghanaian case. Effiboley's third category includes all those objects for which no specific context of acquisition exists; in his opinion, the return of these objects is not a priority. A similar list of acquisition categories has been published by Benjamin Ouedraogo (2023). Both Effiboley's and Ouedraogo's classifications are informative and can help raise awareness of the substantial differences in how these artefacts were transported from Africa to Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the assignment of a category to any individual transaction is not sufficient to fully understand the impact of colonial power and the asymmetries of agency between the owner and those who acquired these cultural artefacts.

⁷ Guyer (1993) addresses the strategies of market trade. She shows that even in the colonial context, artisanal products were produced and sold as commodities. The economic strategies of African entrepreneurs were also successful in the colonial context. At the same time, it is not always easy to distinguish between legitimate market strategies and illicit trafficking of cultural artefacts on the basis of documents about historical transactions.



Coloniality is an overarching condition that has, in one way or another, affected all museum acquisitions of non-European collections assembled during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was a dominant ideology during that period, and to some extent it still persists today (Mignolo 2011). In recognising the wrongs of the past, restitution should be seen as a means to foster a stronger future for cultures and societies. An important aspect to highlight is that the theft of cultural artefacts and human remains is not only a violent and illegal act of the past but also continues to contribute to the humiliation of the local populations today. Jonatan Kurzwelly (2023) emphasises that properly and thoughtfully executed restitution can help to replace this perception of humiliation with a spirit of cooperation. Zimbabwean museologist Rudo Sithole underscored this point in her concluding remarks at a MuseumsLab conference:

This is a watershed moment for the museums and the Heritage sector to interrogate together [...] our colonial legacies and usher in a new era of north south reconciliation and collaboration [...]. It's time to stop discussing the why of restitution and to cross over to the how of restitution for I am convinced that where there is a will there is a way. (Sithole 2024)

1.4 Practices, Aims and Expectations

The perspective of the authors of this text is less focused on the long history of the cultural artefacts and the detailed reconstruction of colonial acquisition contexts, which is the subject of provenance research. Provenance research seeks to reveal the extent and modalities of injustice associated with acquisitions in colonial contexts, although documentation is often scarce, fragmented and biased. Ambiguities surrounding acquisition are frequently not only due to a lack of attention but also result from colonial practices of covering up colonial violence (Fuhrmeister and Hopp 2019). Instead of focusing on these issues, this paper focuses mainly on the current practices, aims and consequences of restitution for the present and future of societies in the countries of origin, with a particular focus on culture.

This paper prioritises the meanings and implications of the activities that form part of the process of restitution on a more general level. One obvious priority concerns the question of the future development of cultural self-images in various African countries.⁸ After all, it is not always clear whether and in what way the return of cultural artefacts after often well over a hundred years of absence from Africa will change the current image of culture and identity on the continent (Bell, Christen and Turin 2013). Nevertheless, many people actively involved in

⁸ The connection between restitution efforts and national cultural policies in West Africa remains a considerably under-researched field. While ministries of culture feel responsible for encouraging restitution and are ready to support it, there is not, to the authors' knowledge, any cultural policy addressing this issue. Effiboley (2022) controversially assumes that, in Benin, there has been no cultural policy since independence.



restitution initiatives firmly believe that the presence of these historical artefacts will shape the development of their societies' images of themselves and their histories. Fiona Batt (2021) argues that only after a 'steady stream' of such restitutions will the imperialist narrative be replaced by a true African Renaissance.

Many people are convinced that old material objects, despite being neglected for many years, will soon gain new appreciation and value. Expectations are particularly high as it is anticipated that these cultural artefacts have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the future of the young nations of the Global South (Van Beurden 2017). In fact, these objects may help to gain a new understanding of those nations' past and present. In addition, restitution is deemed by many of the activists and professionals involved as offering opportunities for reconceptualising and presenting alternative narratives about the world and transcontinental connections (Azamede and Mehler 2023). At this point, it is uncertain whether it is the debate itself that will lead to a re-evaluation of the cultural artefacts, or whether close observation, careful research and thorough examination of the objects' histories and features will do so. The uncertainty regarding their potential future contextualisation and embeddings is not a reason to question the appreciation of their potential. Rather, it underlines how important it is to carefully consider the different voices involved in restitution processes.

The above-mentioned expectations emerged again and again in the numerous conversations with the descendants of those from whom these cultural artefacts were expropriated, as well as with members of those groups whose histories include the painful experiences of colonial violence and theft. These discussions also involved scientists, museum professionals, activists and politicians in various West African countries within the context of the research on which this text is based. While these people do not specifically state exactly how the return of these cultural artefacts will be linked to the future of national and regional culture, there is an expectation that their return will, among other things, enable a strengthening of the further development of national identity and a reconnection to a past from which many citizens are disconnected. As Pauno Soirila (2022: 7) argues, it is a basic assumption that these cultural artefacts, at least metaphorically, have a 'home', and that their return to that place will enhance their value and meaning.⁹

Restitution can be seen as a process of 'setting in motion again' creating new contexts for old things, even if these contexts are yet to be specified. Cultural artefacts do not return to contexts that are the same as they were over a hundred years ago. Restitution is therefore an opportunity for revaluation, as will be explained in more detail in the course of this text. It is clear that the re-mobilisation of cultural artefacts – often after more than a hundred years –

⁹ Several contributions in the volume *Disputed Archival Heritage* edited by James Lowry are subsumed under the heading 'Home' (Lowry 2022: 231–330). 'Home' here is an uncontested notion that promises to rectify the wrongs of the past and to elevate the value of the items concerned.



does not primarily restore the old meanings but connects with new contexts. Both societies, the one that – after too long – finally accepts the return of those cultural artefacts and the receiving one, will have changed significantly during the period of absence.

It is obvious that the long periods objects spent in the archives of European museums have left lasting effects that cannot be erased. Although the temporality of material items is fundamentally different from that of human beings (Robb 2020: 127), there are always traces of time on the cultural artefacts themselves.¹⁰ This is true despite museum conservators' efforts to place the collections in 'inertia' and to 'preserve' individual objects from decay using all technically available means. The concept of a permanent museum collection, comprising a collection of materially unchanged objects, is not only at odds with early 20th-century practices of exchange (Hoffmann 2012) but also proves unattainable due to evolving standards of conservation. For example, methods commonly used to protect against insect infestation are now seen as problematic forms of poisoning the material items (Nason 2001). Ultimately, the effort to 'preserve' is nothing more than an attempt to maintain a delicate balance between materially conditioned, inherent material change and the conservation goals of maintaining a specific external form and surface of the object.

However, for the assessment of the long periods during which objects have been stored in museum archives, the contextual changes are even more significant. In European museums, cultural artefacts have become specimens categorised within collections, with the associated documentation focused on referring to similarities or differences with other comparable objects. Much of the relevant information has been lost during the transfer to the museum or over the lengthy residence period and cannot be recovered after the passage of time since arrival.¹¹ Consequently, knowledge about these objects has changed: obtaining information now relies on the available documentation, which, at best, is part of an associated database. The individual expertise and personal competence in handling such an artefact that was probably normal when these objects were embedded in a living context, no longer exists when they are part of a collection. In many cases, museum records are fragmentary or incomplete, leaving little information about the cultural artefacts. The extended time spent in the museum has thus led to a serious reduction in knowledge.

These changes are part of the process known as 'musealisation', which is unavoidable for most cultural artefacts that have existed for such long periods, regardless whether they are housed inside or outside a museum collection (Maranda 2009; Elliott 2019). In this logic of

¹⁰ The many years that elapsed between the initial movement from Africa to Europe and their re-mobilisation from European museums back to Africa have left material traces on most cultural artefacts. For example, many colours have faded, surfaces have become rough or opaque, and organic substances may have lost their elasticity. As a result, objects have become brittle and sensitive to damage in a material sense (Dudley 2012).

¹¹ Cf. Hahn (2015). Especially in the French museology there is a strong consciousness about the loss of information and ambivalent status of objects stored in museums (Clair 2007; Lenclud 2007).



musealisation, the process of identifying cultural artefacts has been subordinated to the way they have been reorganised in museums and storage facilities. Whether consulting a digital database or opening a drawer of index cards, without 'reference' to an exact location, state of preservation and associated 'category', the cultural artefact cannot be either located or identified. The archive itself imposes its own logic, and a collection item without associated documentation is no longer an identifiable part of the collection. The process of isolating objects in a collective, and the practice of selectively seeking out and providing information, constitute basic conditions of existence within the museum. This is especially true for those objects that have not been exhibited for a long time and lack updated information.

What does this mean for the status of a cultural artefact before restitution begins? First of all, this transformation – an epistemic paradigm shift – explains the often peculiar and fragmentary nature of the information available in museums regarding a material object. More importantly, this involves the recognition of a specific form of appreciation embedded in a collection. The homologous structures of knowledge applied to all objects in a collection make each of them comparable. However, it remains unclear whether this epistemic paradigm shift constitutes a genuine form of valuation.

In a metaphorical sense, Miriam Brusius and Kavita Singh (2018: 169ff) describe the possibilities of an artefact as part of a collection as 'changing fortune'. Brusius and Singh refer in particular to the question of whether these cultural artefacts are exhibited in the museum. Typically, collections of non-European artefacts are rarely exhibited. It should be noted that, particularly in museums with large collections in Europe such as the British Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly or the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the proportion of objects on display is comparatively low compared to the size of their collections. Due to lack of space, 99% of their collections has never been exhibited. This has led to a lack of clarity on the value of large numbers of cultural artefacts. Meanwhile, the broader public in Europe may have forgotten that hundreds of thousands of objects remain in storage; while others, especially restitution activists, have dedicated years to campaigns aimed at making these objects accessible or returning them to their places of origin.

Against the background of the musealisation process described above, the demands for restitution can be considered to be a renaissance for the cultural artefacts themselves. These demands link the cultural artefacts to the present and to forms of appreciation that are brought to the collection from outside the museum. No one can deny that the two different forms of appreciation – the logic of the collection including its systematic ordering of knowledge, albeit limited, on the one hand, and the activists' demands for restitution on the other – collide. In principle, this dual appreciation – limited but ordered knowledge within the museums and the



demands for restitution and claims for holistic approaches – is a good thing. This dual appreciation explains why demands for restitution today have the potential not only to remobilise the cultural artefacts but also to generate new value for them.

The question often asked in current discussions with experts in West Africa, “Why are these cultural artefacts still kept in Europe today at all?”, urges a critical examination of earlier evaluations. Similar questions include: “What is the knowledge value of these things?” and “What is their ‘show value?’”¹² Providing answers from within the museum becomes increasingly difficult because little research has been conducted on these artefacts in recent decades. In addition, as already mentioned, only a small portion of the available collections has been publicly displayed in Europe, which is a strong indication of the low level of public recognition and appreciation there.

The low proportion of such collections exhibited in European museums is also relevant in another respect. The figures make it obvious that restitution will definitely not lead to an ‘emptying’ of European museums, which is one concern voiced by some experts. Even if, which is highly unlikely, a third or even half of the artefacts from non-European collections were to be returned, this would not represent a substantial reduction in the overall holdings. When measured against the total number of cultural artefacts stored in the collection rooms, the remaining collection would still exceed the number of cultural artefacts exhibited in practice.

Beyond concerns about numbers, which are in themselves problematic, the goal of restitution should be understood as a way of enriching the collections by creating new contexts and reconnecting them with multiple pasts and presents. Re-mobilisation opens up the possibility of making other perspectives explicit.

As has been shown, it is misleading to speak of the ‘destruction of museums’ or of ‘dismantling the collection’, as is the case, for example, in the essay by John Giblin, Imma Ramos and Nikki Grout (2019). Nevertheless, it is worth thinking about the consequences of restitution for the museums as civil society institutions. In the face of the restitution challenge, museums can no longer regard themselves merely as keepers or custodians of their collections. By exposing cultural artefacts to different and new contexts of valuation, they are tasked with better understanding the many roles and meanings these cultural artefacts hold.

Museums in Europe are therefore not threatened nor will they be destroyed. However, they are faced with the task of redefining their roles and gaining new skills, especially with regard to integrating diverse perspectives to assess their collections, and adopting a responsible and sustainable stance as civil society actors in the related debates. This aligns closely with the current redefinition of museums’ roles in society by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which emphasises the social role of museums (Thiemeyer 2020).

¹² For an overview of the different aspects of valuation, cf. footnote 22.



In our view, restitution will not lead to the emptying of European museums. This simply cannot be expected based on the current number of restitution claims. On the contrary, restitution can help to revitalise museums by initiating reflection on their positioning and associated functions. Calls for restitution originate in the connections certain groups have with specific cultural artefacts and their references to a violent past marked by misappropriation that remains un-sanctioned. Restitution is by no means intended to cause damage to either the returning or the receiving party, i.e. the museum or the society in which these cultural artefacts originated. Rather, restitution can support the further development of all the institutions and groups involved. Restitution contributes to a better future by reflecting on the past and strengthening or building new relationships by remobilising culturally relevant objects (Buschmann 2023: 6). As one of the authors aptly states:

If Europeans really believe in the independence of Africa there is no need to hold onto those objects as trophies. [...] Restitution is crucial to correct colonial narratives and stereotypes created by the West about Africa, and it is important to repair the damage to the mind caused by looting and illicit trafficking of such a wide range of objects from the African continent. (Gavua quoted in Sithole et al. 2022: 16 and 27)



If only more treasures could take a similar journey [back to Africa]. Because when they do, they are always greeted by grateful masses relieved at the opportunity to staunch an open wound. (Faloyin 2022: 256)

2. Conceptual Considerations

On a conceptual level, restitution can be considered to be a ‘travelling concept’.¹³ Restitution has been used repeatedly in different debates, different disciplines and different historical periods, taking on different meanings again and again (Greenfield 2007). While the multiplicity of its meanings leads to a certain vagueness, this multiplicity has also contributed substantially to its widespread application in the present. The broad conceptual development of the term is at the same time a challenge when it comes to agreeing on what exactly it means and how it is used as a tool for justifying certain demands.

The situation today is no longer as clear cut as it was at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was primarily a matter of undoing art theft, as shown by Lars Müller (2021). In the international discourse of the last fifty years, the term has experienced significant prominence, initially in the context of the restitution of cultural objects looted during the Nazi era (Fuhrmeister and Tauber 2023; Tompkins 2022). The concept of restitution was subsequently expanded and has taken on even more fundamental significance in a global context against the backdrop of increasing research into colonial injustice (Hicks et al. 2019). This more recent development, in contrast to earlier understandings, concerns a very different, much larger, spatial and political dimension, the facets of which need to be carefully considered.

Jeanette Greenfield (2007) is one of the most prolific authors on this concept with a focus on art history. She has accurately depicted the evolution of the concept from a largely legal term to a social task and an ethical obligation. According to her, museums as institutions are well advised to understand restitution as part of their agenda. Greenfield (2007: 437) emphasises that the capacity to deal with restitution appropriately indicates the integrity of the museum as an institution and as a civil society actor. According to Greenfield, cultural artefacts will always be translocated (or mobile) because, in principle, no material object has a fixed address. However, museums should be able to assign levels of appropriateness and legitimacy to the holding of particular material items.

¹³ Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (2012) effectively illustrate the added value of reframing particular concepts in the humanities through this metatheory. Travelling concepts, first introduced by Mieke Bal (2002), not only have variations in meaning across different places but also have the potential to connect different contexts without imposing a uniform meaning.



In recent international debates, a distinction is made between restitution, return, repatriation (Van Beurden and Conn 2019) and, last but not least, reparation.¹⁴ All these terms describe actions and political goals that are closely linked. It would therefore be illusory to distinguish one from the others, and it is also questionable to separate, for example, 'return' from 'restitution' or 'reparation'. What appears more relevant in the current debate is how these individual aspects are prioritised or not. What order should be observed among these topics? To what extent can restitution already include reparation? Such questions are of great importance in current debates on the concept of restitution.

It is also useful to ask what kind of historical perspective should be adopted as the framework for acknowledging restitution. Today's increasing attention on material things from the past – particularly within the emerging field of material culture studies – should be seen in conjunction with the rejection of a modernist, progress-oriented view of history. The idea of history as linear progress does not align with the reflection on the conditions under which collections were assembled more than a hundred years ago. Instead, this reflection involves re-evaluating cultural artefacts collected at that time as evidence of historical contact and cross-cultural interaction, which will be explained in more detail in a subsequent section. Thus, it stands in opposition to linear models of history.

Contrary to linear historical models, restitution as a concept should be understood as an approach that regards the righting of past wrongs as a possibility for historically responsible action. Restitution is therefore based on looking back into the past and critically re-evaluating it. Restitution is furthermore built on the willingness to deal with past wrongs and to work towards alleviating grievances. This is, incidentally, the central argument of Thomas Sandkühler, Angelika Epple and Jürgen Zimmerer (2023) when they pose the question: "Can a 'historical culture' be generated through restitution?"

The idea that the present status of collections and museums is implicitly a result of past injustices, as had been explained in chapter 1, must be understood as a postmodern perspective on history in the sense of a Foucauldian analysis that re-evaluates discourses about prerogatives and inequality in the past. Obviously, the historical perspective here should be understood as the history of a past societal configuration imposing a responsibility on the present. Accepting the responsibility that comes from historical insight influences action today. It is also the duty of historians and museum professionals to demonstrate that restitution is not

¹⁴ Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo and her co-authors use these terms in the title of their MIASA working paper 2023(2). However, this paper does not provide much in the way of a definitional work. One valuable insight underlines that restitution without reparation may appear to be an incomplete activity (Eyifa-Dzidzienyo et al. 2023: 31). Rather, restitution may be considered to be a prelude to reparation. Ibou Diop (2023) is much more critical about the nexus between restitution and reparation.



merely a restriction or forced renunciation of something that was previously an unquestioned possession. Considering history and particularly the coloniality of museums can be seen as a way of opening up new avenues for societal engagement and responsibility.¹⁵

At the same time, it should be emphasised that restitution should neither be understood as an act of nostalgia nor as a means of returning to the social conditions of the precolonial era. The return of objects does not mean a return to the values and social order that existed before these cultural artefacts were stolen. Sophie Schönberger (2021) develops a critical perspective on the idea of restitution as what she calls 'reparative nostalgia': she argues that museums are not in a position to 'repair' the wrongs of the past. In principle, museums are institutions that redefine history. Therefore, restitution has the potential to be used by museums to present new interpretations of the past, but not necessarily to restore the value systems of the precolonial era.

Based on the discussion in the previous paragraphs, one can argue that restitution is nowadays conceived as one of the most important decolonial initiatives of the 21st century. It is perceived as contributing to a less unequal and less violent future for societies.

2.1 Heterogeneity of Actors: Communities and Institutions

The complexity of the concept of restitution and its associated practices of return, reparation and repatriation is compounded by the heterogeneity of the actors involved. In public debate, there is the widespread practice of referring to the recipients of restitution as so-called 'communities', although it is often unclear who exactly is meant. The sometimes vague terminology concerning the destination societies reflects the heterogeneity of understandings. Recognising who is involved and identifying potential stakeholders is part of the restitution process.

There are obviously good reasons for emphasising the role of state-organised and institutionally constituted bodies. Institutions are indispensable for ensuring a sustainable process of restitution. Two reasons can be given for this. First, institutions such as museums, cultural centres, regional administrative units and ministries are needed to conclude inter-governmental agreements. Although the extent to which countries have consistent cultural policies is questionable (cf. footnote 8), these institutions have effectively been established by their respective governments. It can therefore be assumed that such cultural institutions are the result of political will. Independently of this, it can be argued that each actor involved in restitution will articulate his or her intentions and values related to the ongoing return of cultural items.

¹⁵ The comprehensive anthology by Sandkühler et al. (2023) adopts this very understanding, advocating for a different understanding of what history means for contemporary actors. In the light of what they call a 'historical culture', restitution is an activity generated by the awareness of past wrongs. However, the contributions to this volume do not present a unified view of how this should be done.



It should be clear that any restitution constitutes a plurality of actors, and that negotiations about different interests and priorities should be regarded as normal for such initiatives.¹⁶ These intentions differ from one country to the next and, as a rule, those involved are well aware of such differences.¹⁷ It is important to recognise first of all that very different actors with different horizons of experience and different capacities for communication are involved in the field of restitution. This should not be seen as a problem; rather, this particular structural challenge makes it clear how much sensitivity and mediation are required in order to arrive at a uniform concept of restitution that is endorsed by all those involved.

The dialogue between the museums in Europe and those who consider themselves stakeholders from the formerly colonised countries has so far often taken the form of an asymmetrical exchange of arguments in public. For example, activists from Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Namibia have articulated their demands through public demonstrations as well as by means of newspaper articles, films and social media appearances. Guido Mingels (2022) and Hansjörg Dilger (2023) give detailed reports on how Sylvie Njobati managed to convince a museum in Berlin to repatriate the statue of a goddess taken by German officers in Cameroon during the German colonial occupation. Interestingly, the initial campaign was not accomplished through academic articles and studies, but rather via social media and the mobilisation of younger people in Germany who were moved by the emotional intensity of Njobati's statements.

The initiative attained its objective in June 2022 with a formal declaration by the director of the Ethnological Museum Berlin, Lars-Christian Koch, that his institution was ready to return the statue in question at any time this was requested by a Cameroonian institution. However, more than thirty months later, the statue has still not been restored owing to the lack of a receiving institution in Cameroon. Shuimo T. Dohyee (2025) gives a comprehensive overview on the outcome of this initiative, which was highly successful even though the Ngonso statue has not yet returned to Cameroon.

¹⁶ In several case studies and with a focus on various selected countries in Africa, the contributions in the thematic issue edited by Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry and Marian Nur-Goni (2021) examine historical objects as part of national cultural policy. They emphasise the openness of these objects to reinterpretation by different actors.

¹⁷ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) begin their report by asking a series of rhetorical questions about the intentions of the various actors. Presumably, the answer to these questions is not an 'either/or' but a 'both/and'. All the hypotheses put forward here are valid side by side: "So why then seek to retribute? Is it a question of attempting to alleviate the symbolically 'cumbersome' collections so as to sell off a heavy burden of a colonial past, and, along with it any attempt at rendering this past intelligible? To use the symbolic space as a tool of soft power aiming to 'revalorize' France's image to an African generation of youth that is less and less Francophile? To send a message to the African diasporas in France? Or is it to institute a new relational ethics between peoples by helping to give back to them an impeded or blocked memory?" (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 30f).



Meanwhile, Flaubert Djabateng (2025) explains what happened in more detail. Delegates from seven ministries in Cameroon have established a working group (Comité Interministériel sur les biens culturels Camerounais) that oversees the conditions for the return of cultural artefacts, ensuring that these are appropriate for keeping them secure. It can be assumed that activists, local societies, traditional rulers and the state all need to be recognised as stakeholders in this process. Expressing frustration about the slow process, Djabateng (2025) also notes that the government has publicly stated that it will not support any restitution without prior approval from the Comité Interministériel.

Undeniably, emotions play an important role in every restitution process, and the feeling of being ‘humiliated’ by limited access to things that are perceived to ‘belong’ to oneself or to one’s ancestors is highly relevant (Vergès 2016; 2019). Overall, emotions are systematically underrepresented, if not marginalised and denied, in the evaluation of heritage issues (Krmpotich and Somerville 2016). This holds true as much for museum exhibitions as it does for negotiations about restitution. Through the framework of museum politics and heritage negotiations, cultural artefacts may have become ‘emotionless’, which may be a problem for people from outside, who claim to have strong emotions with regard to those cultural artefacts. Emotional demands are legitimate as they can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the value of objects. However, while emotion can enhance and enrich the understanding of the multiple roles of cultural artefacts, emotional approaches can also obscure the complexity of the competing claims of heritage (Tolia-Kelly, Waterton and Watson 2016).

Museum officials, authorities and ministries in Europe have often responded to restitution requirements by referring to the lack of a ‘formal request’. In fact, the range of different stakeholders is sometimes an obstacle to a quick response and straightforward action. However, pursuing restitution as a sustainable objective means to accept the difficulty of identifying different stakeholders and understanding their sometimes highly divergent positions as part of the restitution itself.

The way in which the concept of ‘communities’ is frequently associated with active and committed individuals and local groups in Africa is worthy of closer reflection. This terminological practice, which can be observed predominantly in the European public sphere, implies an unspoken but highly problematic conceptual one-sidedness. Active groups in the countries of origin, labelled ‘communities’ and not ‘societies’, have no less organised social structures than European societies. The need to negotiate between different interest groups in individual countries in Africa and within the so-called ‘communities’ is no less complex and controversial than in any other society worldwide. Whether and to what extent one can rightly speak of



'communities' in this context should be examined in detail. However, to use 'communities' as a blanket term for societies of origin is an inadmissible simplification.¹⁸

The term 'communities' refers to a specific, historically developed concept (Levinson and Christensen 2003). This conceptualisation cannot be applied to the cases of interest here without being substantiated by specific characteristics. Is this a question of 'religious' communities or rather of 'ethnic' communities in the sense of a social group that shares belief in a common origin? At this point, it is probably always more accurate to speak of a 'community of restitution activists', i.e. an association of people who share an interest in the return of the objects.¹⁹

2.2 Activists and Institutions as Partners in Restitution

Every restitution implies the voices and objectives of activists and representatives of local cultures and societies as well as governmental institutions. This is true for the European countries with the big museums holding so many cultural artefacts from colonial contexts, as well as for the countries that are the destination of restitution. Therefore, contrary to the sometimes assumed 'communality' of the recipients of the return, it is more correct to emphasise the complexity of the societies in the receiving countries. As has been shown in the previous section with the example of the Ngonso statue, restitution is not just about the position and claims of one group, and is not limited to their specific interests. Even as members or representatives of such a group, activists are simultaneously citizens of a state, affiliated to administrative structures, professional associations and religions, among other things. All these aspects need to be considered within the context of restitution.

The return of cultural artefacts is not just about the interests of one of the above-mentioned groups; a multiplicity of representations, value orientations and priorities form part of each social, administrative and political unit. Only when all legitimately entitled and interested actors in a society are involved and given the opportunity to articulate their intentions and perspectives can the restitution of a cultural artefact be perceived by all sides as a credible process and, thus, receive social and political recognition.

¹⁸ Contrary to the criticism of Robin Boast (2011), who classifies the use of the term 'community' as a neocolonial practice, Laura Peers (2019) defends this term, which according to her was 'invented' by her in 2003. According to Peers, the term refers to the fundamentally different internal organisation of social groups in societies of origin. At the same time, she demands that representatives of these groups should be represented in decision-making bodies in museums.

¹⁹ Christine Kreamer (1992) rightfully points to the fact, that there are reciprocal effects between 'communities' and 'museums'. Museums and exhibitions may support the self-identification of communities and vice versa.



In light of the challenges posed by the complex involvement of various actors, those responsible at museums and universities in various West African countries see themselves merely as ‘enabling’ facilitators. As learnt in conversations in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, professionals such as museum experts, curators and university professors understand their task less as promoting their own interests, and more in fostering dialogue among different stakeholders. Their aim is to facilitate an understanding of the diverse positions with regard to specific cases of looted cultural artefacts and their restitution. In an interview in Abidjan, the director of the Musée des Civilizations, Fernand Gnoleba Tagro, explicitly argued for ‘museums as facilitators’ (personal communication in October 2022).

It is common practice for working groups to be formed in the individual countries to act as mediators in restitution issues. The medium-term goal must be for such working groups to accumulate experiential knowledge and thus be in a position to describe the possibilities and limits of certain ideas regarding restitution.²⁰ More important than a speedy implementation of restitution is the concern for a holistic understanding of the process. Even before the cultural artefacts leave Europe, the various stages, the length of stay and the readiness to receive them in certain, very often intermediate, places should be clarified. The advance planning of such a process also includes the appointment of accountable people who will take responsibility for the safekeeping of the cultural artefacts at the place of return and who will also ensure the safety of the objects themselves (Tchana 2023).

Incidentally, the need to establish such advisory bodies also applies to museums in Europe willing to retribute ethnographic objects from contexts of violent appropriation. For these institutions, it may be beneficial to form working groups that include not only museum representatives but also government officials and local administration representatives. The Benin Dialogue Group, led by Barbara Plankensteiner and others, serves as an example of such a group, bringing together professionals from Europe and Africa. Its recommendations have made the process of restitution possible (Van Beurden 2022: 61–75).

The main concern for groups in both Europe and Africa is to bring together various actors with a common interest in providing a better future for the cultural artefacts to be restituted. Ideally, it is not simply about the return of the cultural artefacts, but also about defining the basis for a sustainable collaboration. The insights gained from the histories of the objects, highlighting their specific potential to connect societies, cultures and continents, should ultimately foster an intentional and appreciative relationship between the actors and institutions

²⁰ In Ghana, for example, the Focal Team offers interested groups from different regions of the country advice and recommendations on how to proceed in coordination with the Ministry for Tourism, Arts and Culture, the museums in Europe, the National Museum of Ghana and the regional authorities. This process may differ for each individual restitution process.



involved. The remobilisation of the objects thus becomes the key to recognising the shared responsibility for their cultural meanings and relevance. Ideally, this will lead to a new appreciation of the cultural artefacts themselves.

The newly achieved possibility of remobilising cultural artefacts should be perceived as a starting point for dynamically changing the people themselves and their worldviews. The remobilisation thus has an effect on the people's self-image and their identities. It is of great importance for the actors' perspectives to recognise that the cultural artefacts cannot come back to the country of origin in their original state. The returned artefacts should rather be understood as an invitation to develop new meanings and new ways of dealing with them, for example with regard to the possible forms of future exhibitions. Understanding heritage in this sense is not simply about the safekeeping of certain material items, but more about the unfolding of perspectives in which the cultural artefacts become a call to action.²¹

The arrival of these artefacts evokes certain associations and embeddings. Therefore, their value as cultural heritage basically arises from the activities of the groups involved. While there are many different options here, the focus must always be on the question of what form of affiliation and responsibility can be discerned by local groups, institutions, cultural centres or the participating nations when looking at the cultural artefacts in question.

2.3 Different Ways of Valuing Material Things

The meaning of restitution also includes a consideration of the multiple contexts and valuations of the restituted cultural artefacts. From an object-centred perspective, restitution constitutes a remobilisation of cultural artefacts that were denied any mobility over long periods of time and existed in an artificially created and monitored 'inertia'. As explained in chapter 1, immobilisation in the museum collection has led in many cases to a loss of value, or at least to increased uncertainty about the actual value of cultural artefacts. To be as clear as possible: storing objects in depositories for a century or more not only results in a loss of knowledge about these cultural artefacts but also increases uncertainty about their true significance. Although those who acquired the cultural artefacts in the 19th and 20th centuries may have had clear expectations for the objects, for example their use for scientific examination or comparative studies of cultures worldwide, retrospectively it should be noted in that many of these activities either did not take place or did not yield relevant results.

The 'epistemic value' assumed by museum experts at the time of acquisition has proven to be minimal, comparable to the so-called 'show value' that could have been derived from significant exhibitions. With regard to the value of these artefacts as representatives or wit-

²¹ Key to this understanding is the concept of heritage not as a possession but as something that needs to be continually updated through performance (Hahn 2024; Haldrup and Boerenholdt 2015).



nesses of cultures from other continents, there is no clear statement on how or to what extent such ‘representation of the other’ might have worked. In many cases, it is unclear whether and to what extent the cultural artefacts displayed in museums actually represent the societies and cultures of other continents, or whether they primarily serve as witnesses to often violent encounters between cultures.

The recent debate on the value of cultural objects has given rise to a range of additional concepts of value (Hahn 2019a; Otto 2024; Rush 2020). For example, it makes sense to speak of the ‘value of uniqueness’ (Karpik 2010), and of course the ‘material’ value of certain objects also plays a role. Concepts such as ‘aesthetic value’ or ‘sentimental value’, however, are more controversial.²² In both cases, the question of the perspective from which the value attributions are made arises. The latter two categories clearly illustrate the extent to which an object’s value is based on the initiatives and activities of individuals or groups who, to a certain extent, ‘do value’ (Hahn 2022). The notion of ‘doing value’ probably best describes the motivation of all those engaged in restitution processes.

The uncertainty within European museums and among their professional actors regarding the valuation of the objects in their care opens up the possibility for activists and other civil society actors to ascribe meaning. The lack of clarity on why a cultural artefact was collected or why it has been kept opens up a discursive space for individuals and groups outside the museum to make their assessments explicit and to gain public recognition for their opinions. The museum thus loses its authority to define attributions, embedding and evaluation.²³

Here, as in every other area of material culture, the movement of items intended for restitution will lead to re-evaluation and the attribution of new valuations and contexts. The newly acquired feature of ‘being mobile’ will change their valuation by way of an enrichment of meanings and associations.²⁴ While this perspective is relevant, it is not sufficient on its own, because in the end it also involves political negotiation about which contexts are considered necessary or sufficient for mobilisation.

²² Art historian and museologist Vitantonio Russo (1980: 71–82) was one of the first to attempt a systematic listing of possible dimensions of value, with a special focus on museum objects. He established a list of over a dozen different types of value, including the following: material value, price of acquisition, distribution value, value of the position in a collection, show value, historical-evocative value, symbolic value, magical-religious value, creativity value, innovation value, art value, etc.

²³ The loss of authority with regard to the attribution of meaning is a process that has already been described in regard to the ongoing digitisation of museums (Geismar 2018). In the context of digitisation, the museum has to accept the increasing diversity of its audiences and simultaneously a wide range of requests with regard to the meaning of the objects exhibited. Once the museum lacks information about who is looking at the material items in the collection and exhibition, and what motives audiences have for engaging with the collection, it must also expect to be confronted with new identifications and evaluations.

²⁴ Stephen Greenblatt’s *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (2009) sees itself as a document in support of a paradigm shift; alongside cultural values such as ‘continuity’ and ‘spatial constancy’ is the value of mobility.



2.4 Itineraries of Things

A characteristic of long-lived material objects is that they are often associated with contradictory and conflicting contexts. Unlike biological change in humans, which necessarily renders some contexts secondary and foregrounds others, this shift in the prioritisation of meaning over time does not exist with regard to material objects. The conceptual deficiency of the metaphor of 'object biographies' is thus obvious. This deficit and the resulting critical distancing are particularly relevant when it comes to material things whose lifespan extends over several generations (Miller 2001; Hahn 2020).

Long-lived objects often have provoking, irritating or surprising meanings, making it unclear which of this multitude of meanings have priority and which have been relegated to the background. The longer an object has been stored, cared for or used, the more parallel and sometimes competing meanings appear to be attached to it. These meanings will vary in relation to the interests of the individuals and social groups who interact with the object itself and the contexts in which it is embedded.

The cultural artefacts relevant in the debates on restitution are excellent examples of this multiplicity of meanings. During their long history of safekeeping in museums, a highly specific set of information was typically prioritised.²⁵ This included the place of acquisition, the name of the person who acquired it, its arrival at the museum, and the various contexts of exhibition or restoration. This snapshot of a particular historical moment was accompanied by other descriptive elements such as a physical description, including size, materials and techniques of manufacture. Other important aspects related to the classification within the collection, which were often based on the regions of origin, the materials used, or the names of the person who donated the objects to the museum, i.e. the so-called 'collector'. However, all these pieces of information, in principle, provide an inadequate description. Limiting the perspective solely to the physically present object, such data would be an untenable and myopic view. This view fails to grasp its wider horizons of contextual meanings.²⁶

²⁵ Museologist Peter van Mensch (2017) is one of the many authors who bemoans the loss of context in museums. According to him, it is part of the inherent logic of any collection to suppress individual and specific meanings and to prioritise typological classification instead. As a result, the museum loses its human context. Museal recontextualizations necessarily create a matrix of projected and standardised meanings (Jones 1992).

²⁶ The preservation of material objects in museums is fundamentally caught between the principles of conserving the material structure and marginalising or neglecting its contexts. It is also always a question of perspective whether the emphasis is placed on the collection's performance or on the museum's potential for transformation, which can also obstruct a holistic view of material culture. Anupama Arora (2021: 131) gives some examples of such one-sided information and calls for a revision of the information available in museums in order to counteract a 'petrification of objects'.



The fact that a cultural artefact has a longer history and is embedded in a life-world prior to its acquisition was often neglected. It is now understood that restitution draws its legitimacy precisely from this earlier phase of the object's journey, namely the period before its acquisition and integration into the museal order. This broadening of the object's historical dimension is linked to a substantial argument for the enrichment of cultural artefacts through their return. So, if museums have failed in their own claim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the objects in their often more than one-hundred-year history of establishing and arranging collections, then the arrival of the cultural artefacts in the country of origin could lead to a truly holistic approach.

Such a holistic approach is less about precision in terms of size, material and technology; instead, what is important is the expectation that an associative space of thought is opened, one in which the cultural artefact is no longer confined within an abstract category, but is understood within the context of a specific life-world of the past and, additionally, within a cultural self-understanding of the present. This may be perceived as giving the objects their dignity. If these aspects are respected, then restitution itself will be understood as the beginning of a new phase in the existence of the cultural artefact. This does not mean that, at the time of restitution, full evidence must be provided about the status this object will have in the future. Material objects are, in a sense, masters in the accumulation of implicit meanings, which are actualised by different people in different places and thus become the focus of perception.



3. Objects in Many Hands

Understanding the pathways of objects across different places and countries, and in varying contexts of ownership, availability and use, is central to an appropriate assessment of the many meanings associated with the restitution of cultural artefacts. At different times and in different contexts, specific histories and contexts unfold around material objects, each different from the other. This applies to their phases of production, use and, last but not least, even conservation in a museum for example. Recognising this diversity of contexts is essential to appreciating the wealth and meaningfulness of material objects (Hahn 2019b).

Restitution is fundamentally linked to the concern that returning the cultural artefacts will also entail a change in the objects themselves. This will be explained in more detail as follows: First, it pertains to the ways and paths the objects traverse through time and space (3.1). The next section deals with the divided ‘belonging’: restitution creates a different, extended and shared responsibility for the objects involved (3.2). This is followed by a section on the valuation of cultural artefacts, where restitution is fundamentally seen as a change in value (3.3). The last section of this chapter addresses the complex relationship between objects and identity, focusing on the capacity of material items to function as a reference for particular cultural or ethnic groups (3.4).

3.1 Pathways through Time and Space

Material culture in general, and cultural artefacts in particular, have features that distinguish their mode of existence from living beings such as humans or animals on a fundamental level. Most of the time and in most cases, the specificity of the material goes unnoticed. Things surround people and animals, fulfilling expected and usual functions. They appear to be predictable, their abilities can be anticipated, and they serve the purposes intended by people. Sometimes, however, the perception of material objects is quite different. The presence of certain things, especially cultural artefacts, can evoke associations, memories, and a sense of recognition or appeal. Cognition through the presence of objects often provides insights into how society should change. Because of this potential, some scholars, like Bruno Latour, have ascribed agency to things, viewing them as actors. While this is not strictly necessary, it is sufficient to consider the evocations and affordances that objects offer, making it possible to develop certain ideas and to advocate for their implementation.

Combining different histories is one of these specific affordances of material items, but at the same time also a challenge for any possible scholarly access seeking to identify one paramount meaning for any given individual material object. In this context, it is important to pay attention to the different emplacements of things, to their forms of mobility in the past, to their uses, and to the forms of spatial distribution. This includes the histories of the items before



they left their places of origin and the biographies of the people who have brought such things to the museums. This handing over to an institution may have been conceived as a gift, a donation or an inheritance by those involved.

However, it should be clear that the information collected in 'entry books' tends to camouflage the realities, and the question of how those who transferred the items to museums acquired them requires additional research. It is indeed possible that these individuals received the objects as gifts, or purchased them as commodities. Frequently, however, the modes of appropriation involved theft, looting, coercion or other illegitimate means.²⁷ In many cases, instead of providing a precise description of these forms of acquisition, the 'entry books' of museums merely contain brief references to a collector, donor, or benefactor or to the acquisition 'by purchase'. Provenance research has shown that many of these formal statements serve to conceal much more complex histories of acquisition. The formalisations recorded in these books are primarily interest-driven trivialisations or attempts to downplay what actually happened.

This can be considered as part of the ongoing coloniality of museums, particularly in the past, where certain contexts of the cultural artefacts held by museums have been neglected or even deliberately hidden from the public. For a long time, detailed questions about the former contexts and uses of these items before arriving in the museum collection were considered less important. Such practices of erasing the complexities of the past and the resulting ambiguity of ownership can be seen as a smoothing out of object histories, often fraught with tension and accompanied by antagonistic forces. Simultaneously, for many decades, this smoothing of the past served to legitimise the history of museums by making more intensive research into the origins and forms of appropriation from earlier owners seem unnecessary. However, anyone who takes a closer look at the violent colonial conditions in the regions of origin will quickly realise how such entries about acquisition often serve as trivialising pretences.

Entry books are, first and foremost, lists that seem to convey a kind of objectivity. Even if we do not examine the veracity of the individual entries at this point, it is clear that such lists make a political argument. Lists are characterised not only by what they include, but also by what they omit, and the omissions can be especially revealing in cases like this. The 'order of the list' (Jullien 1990) is implicitly an instrument of control and epistemic homogenisation.

Basically, material objects have a different form of existence than humans or other living beings (cf. chapter 2.4). What is irritating about the presence of objects is their potential to establish connections to different moments with different, sometimes distant, time horizons. This applies especially to old cultural artefacts that have existed for more than one generation.

²⁷ Sela K. Adjei and Yann LeGall (2023) provide a whole series of such problematic modalities of acquisition. Simultaneously, their book contains voices from the places of origin, reflecting on the challenges of such an estrangement of heritage.



In the same way, objects can establish connections to other places, some of them spatially distant. It should be emphasised that, in general, material things have the ability to link epochs to each other as well as to different continents and places. This general observation is of great importance for museum objects in particular, and certainly of even greater importance when one examines so-called ethnological collections more closely, since these always contain objects that have come to museums from spatially distant places.

3.2 Debating 'Ownership'

Talking about objects in 'many hands' refers to a specific perspective that not only underlines the connection of places 'A' and 'B' through the history of the objects themselves, but also to the reference – materialised in the objects – to different owners who often did not know about each other and whose actions also did not relate to each other. While not every owner leaves visible traces on his or her material possessions, in many cases the transition from one owner to another can be inferred from traces in the cultural artefact itself, even if this is revealed only on closer inspection. Inside the object, on its surface, and through traces of wear and tear or through the adding or removal of parts, there is a wealth of information that can be linked to different owners. Understanding how the handling of an item relates to a particular owner requires a second, more thorough, examination of the material structure of the object itself.²⁸

A classic example of this are the so-called bronze plates from the Kingdom of Benin, whose capital, Benin City with the Palace of the King, the Edo, lies in present-day Nigeria. As is well known, these objects were forcibly removed from the palace in Benin City in 1897 (Coombes 1994) during a punitive expedition. Regarding these bronze objects, particular attention should be paid to the corners of these artefacts. During the violent acquisition in 1897, soldiers and officers of the British colonial army had no qualms about causing damage to the objects through their improper and hasty removal; as a result, many of the corners are now broken off or torn.

Curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor therefore rightly points out that a deeper understanding of these unique works of art and their violent history should start by looking at the damaged corners (Enwezor, personal communication, June 2011). In a broader sense, it is appropriate to regard these damaged corners as a silent witness to the acts of violence associated

²⁸ In 1991, Nicholas Thomas, director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, published one of the most widely cited studies in research on material culture regarding the differing meanings of particular pieces of cloth, first in their original 'use-context' and then in the 'museum-context' (Thomas 1991). He convincingly shows how meanings can be inverted or eliminated by categorisation through the logic of museal categories. Twenty years later, Thomas published an essay titled 'Museum as Method' on how to proceed in investigating objects (Thomas 2010), underlining that any exhibition has to deal with partial knowledge about objects.



with these works of art. Whoever looks carefully at these cultural artefacts can hardly fail to notice the material traces of violence, which indicate their passing from one owner to another.²⁹

The obvious violence, which was somehow silenced in the debate about the attribution of the status of 'world art' that was assigned to those objects, motivated Fazil Moradi (2022) to develop his concept of 'catastrophic art'. According to him, the objects taken away in colonial contexts are not merely witnesses to African skills, refined culture and the historical development of a specific aesthetics; rather, they are witnesses to the catastrophic intensity of violence involved in the transcultural contexts of that time which engendered their acquisition and transfer from Africa to Europe. Moradi's concept highlights an aspect of transcultural encounters that is often silenced in the (European) debates about the art value of those artefacts. Moradi's important article thereby contributes to a more holistic understanding. However, he neglects another important aspect, namely the connection to the precolonial culture of the origin of these cultural artefacts. The Benin bronzes are, of course, indicators of an important political and historical period in West Africa before the advent of colonialism.

Gaining a broader understanding means first and foremost reading the traces of the objects, looking at them from all angles and, ideally, proceeding to a material analysis. There is another category of such 'traces' that needs to be mentioned here. This concerns the labels attached to or written on the objects themselves. In the context of museum collections, statements of 'ownership' can often be found in the form of an inscription attached to the object at the moment they entered the museum collection. Alternatively, this can also be realised in the form of a label attached to the object with thread or wire. In a broader sense, it can be argued that each item in a collection necessitates the presence of all documents available in the hosting institution and elsewhere that refer to that item, describe it, or contain information about specific contexts.

Examining all kinds of traces on cultural artefacts, indicative of appropriations, violence, categorisation and other processes, enables a visual understanding of the complexity of their histories. The increasing awareness of the need to know the history of objects and the stories interwoven with them in the interest of a holistic description contributes significantly to the rapidly growing interest in so-called 'postcolonial provenance research' in recent years.³⁰

²⁹ Arthur Danto and Susan Vogel (1989) have found something similar with regard to a fishing net. This net was folded up by the person who had acquired it. The net was folded in such a way that it now appears to be rather like a bird's nest to the observer who has not accessed the related information in the database. Transport and storage have damaged the object to such an extent that its original function is no longer recognisable.

³⁰ The term 'postcolonial provenance research' was originally coined by Larissa Förster and her team. In a broader sense of the term, provenance research always has a legal basis: according to the ICOM statutes, every museum is obliged to research the origin and the various stages of the objects' stay in their collections. Provenance research initially played a major role in the identification of looted artworks from the private property of Jewish families and individuals. In this context, provenance research prepared the way for negotiations that often led to the return of artworks to the descendants of the original owners by way of an amicable settlement.



Provenance research functions much like a spotlight, illuminating the depths of space, time and different owners of the cultural artefacts under investigation. The first priority is to assess the gaps in knowledge of the object's history and to gain an idea of how much has been overlooked.

At its best, provenance research is able to create its own perspective on history, connecting places and actors. Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Reist (2012) argue that provenance research produces an alternative history of art. 'Postcolonial provenance research' can be regarded as a subfield within the larger framework of provenance research, contributing substantially to an enrichment of the objects through various methods of decipherment. This approach allows for the stories of the things to be told with more precision and also involves the study of antagonistic elements. It enables a new evaluation of the objects, in which the different contexts are considered.

Taking into account the asymmetries of colonial power, postcolonial provenance research examines the paths of cultural artefacts from an often unknown producer in a place outside Europe via colonial actors to the museums, which strategically controlled this collection of artefacts by paying a purchase price or by offering other advantages to those who acquired them. A particular challenge is that the museums have often not documented how exactly the person named in the 'entry book' acquired these cultural artefacts. The specificity of provenance research in colonial contexts lies not only in the fact that the problematic acquisition practices under investigation go back more than a hundred years, but also in the fact that the available information is structured quite differently compared to the Jewish art losses.

Postcolonial provenance research must be much more systematic and comprehensive [compared with other kinds of provenance research]. It should aim to understand the genesis of collections, institutions and disciplines as a whole, with a particular focus on their problematic and violent aspects. This requires a proactive, systematic and comparative investigation of collection items from the colonial era or from formerly colonised areas, and a systematic clarification of their status and significance in the context of transnational debates on indigenous cultural heritage, cultural property, restitution and shared heritage. Provenance research of this kind differs significantly from earlier approaches to research into the history of acquisition and the biography of objects. (Förster, Edenheiser and Pfründt 2018: 18)³¹

³¹ Gesa Grimme (2018) contextualises this kind of provenance research further by asking museums to develop a new understanding of themselves through increased awareness about the ethical dilemma of having a considerable share of 'objects with violent histories' in their collections. As shown by Franziska Bedorf (2021), a positive factor in provenance research might be a kind of reconnection between the museum and the places of origin.



As comprehensible and plausible as this form of research is, and as fruitful as its methods are in many cases, it must be conceded that such research is not always successful. Sometimes it turns out to be impossible to find additional information on the objects' origins. In particular, the long period between acquisition and the date of research makes it even more difficult to properly assess the old documents and to identify the wrongs of the past. Even in those cases where certain forms of acquisition can be assumed due to the age and contexts of the material things examined, it is still sometimes impossible to prove what actually happened at the moment of acquisition.

In addition, there is another question, instead related to the possible scale of such research: it is difficult to imagine that such research can be undertaken for the many hundreds of thousands of artefacts from colonial contexts stored in European museums. Tracing the journeys of all these objects would take decades and require financial resources far beyond current budgets. With ongoing research over the years, provenance researchers risk becoming mere 'inspectors' of collections, while most data would remain limited to individual cases. Christian Fuhrmeister and Meike Hopp (2019), who have formulated this critique, call instead for a more universal exploration of forms of appropriation.

In doing so, we might avoid generating data waste for the future, and we might prevent researchers from having to serve as criminal investigators who must dig into archival data garbage to reassemble individual fragments and trace data paths to identify the source and the original compiler. (Fuhrmeister and Hopp 2019: 226)

Owing to their specific temporality, material objects have the ability to connect heterogeneous fields that otherwise lack or have only ephemeral connections. Postcolonial provenance research aims to uncover these remarkable connections through the close investigation of the objects and all available documents related to their history. The possible discovery of violence, looting and illegal forms of acquisition lead to questioning the legitimacy of ownership claims by the holding institution, i.e. the museum.

The ideal image of cultural artefacts covering different periods of use and being embedded linearly along a timeline is just as problematic as the idea that the different meanings and contexts of a material item surround it like layers of an onion.³² It is much more correct to say that different modes of use and ownership are sometimes completely unrelated to each other, or are only possible because, from the point of view of the current owners, the earlier relationships have been silenced or have disappeared.

³² This would result in a formal description that indicates usage (1), then usage (2), then usage (3) etc. Such linear models are possible but actually apply only in few cases.



Every object can signify many things. However, this statement tends to understate, and misses, the actual provocation inherent in material epistemologies. Every cultural artefact has a past and a context that cannot be discerned in its current material form; the selectivity inherent in each individual concrete observation is fundamental for dealing with material items. This conceptual insight applies equally to provenance researchers.

These purely theoretical remarks are important for understanding why European museums have been able to develop an appreciation for objects and simultaneously largely ignore the initial forms of use.³³ The shortsighted and isolated internal perspective of museum experts, looking at ‘their’ collections and their ‘entry books’, which often rely on a positivistic approach to object description, leads to the marginalisation of the specific temporality of the cultural artefact. As a result, museums conceal the gaps in knowledge regarding the long history of the custody of these collections. Only recently has there been an increasing awareness of these gaps, which, even today, often cannot be compensated for by empirically accurate information. Every material object carries within it the ignorance of its past; experts in material culture must always be prepared to encounter new object properties, hitherto unknown or ignored.

Despite the precision of the discourse on ethnographic collections and the characteristics of the objects throughout museum history, the gaps in knowledge from today’s perspective are glaringly obvious. Gradually, current practices of description are changing, for example by adding the words ‘producer unknown’ to the object description when applicable.³⁴ This applies not only to the persons who created the cultural artefacts but often also to their place of origin. ‘Producer unknown’ should therefore be understood also as ‘place of manufacture and first use unknown’, although experts can sometimes uncover elements or fragments of this use. Nevertheless, close observation often forces the expert to admit the limits and incompleteness of their knowledge. In a sense, reading the traces on cultural artefacts confronts us with the limits of what can be known: today, references to the persons and places of first use have often become illegible.

These remarks show how problematic it is to limit the understanding of objects to the idea of purely material properties. Such limited knowledge constitutes a type of epistemic appropriation: although museum experts rarely reflect on the fragmentary nature of their engagement with the objects, these items have always been and still are subjected to specific epistemic interests. Once this problem has been recognised and acknowledged, it follows that the museum itself does not have the expertise to describe objects adequately. Museums and

³³ The valuation of cultural heritage is a matter of political negotiation and fixing. Tompkins (2022) equates provenance research to a judge who decides on the rightful ownership of an object in a collection, or the necessity to reconstitute it.

³⁴ Recently, photographer Tal Adler and museologist Sharon Macdonald edited a volume on *Artist Provenance Research*, focusing on the emotional aspects of acquisition, violence and humiliation (Adler and MacDonald 2025).



their experts are dependent on the craftsmen and their descendants at the place of manufacture, who can provide detailed information about the production process. Against this background, it makes sense to regard the craftsmen as stakeholders. They have a legitimate right to participate in the management of the objects because only their knowledge can provide a holistic picture of the artefacts.

3.3 Careers of Things

Material objects assume varying roles across time and space. The ways they are valued change when they are collected, taken away from their producers and users and from the contexts in which they were produced and used. The valuation changes again when they arrive in collections, and custodians, curators and other museum professionals process, deposit and display them. As different audiences interact with the objects, the interests, goals and emotions of those who interact with the objects, among other factors, influence how and in which contexts new values are ascribed. Collectors may keep the cultural artefacts they acquire, donate them, or sell them to museums and other interested parties, while curators focus on exhibition, seeking to showcase such objects.

Depending on the specific contexts in which they end up, a particular item in a collection may be considered priceless, ephemeral, symbolic, or commercial. Objects that were once valued in their places of origin – considered as part of life-worlds, secular entities, cherished personal belongings or sacred items – may be devalued when museums confine them to archives, restrict access to them, or fail to display them (cf. chapter 2.4). The same cultural artefacts may, in other contexts, increase in monetary value because they have become part of an international (art) market.

The increasing value of material items, much like their devaluation, may be linked to their epistemic value but this is not always the case. Sometimes, important aspects of highly valued objects are totally ignored. A typical characteristic of museums is the marginalisation of knowledge, in particular those dimensions that cannot be described using standardised, parallel or homologous formats, especially when compared to the specificities of other items in the collection. Objects in museums often form series of similarity (Bouquet 1990).³⁵ These series are based on the categorisations established at the very beginning of collecting. While differences within these categories are extremely significant, they only matter insofar as they position the item on a specific continuum of similarity or difference. Uniqueness that cannot be contextualised within such pre-established frameworks of distinction tends not to be documented. This

³⁵ Ina Heumann (2022) convincingly describes the epistemic limitations when working with entry books and inventory lists. Cf. also Francois Jullien's (1990) work on lists as instruments of power.



kind of marginalisation applies primarily to contextual aspects, i.e. characteristics attributed to the object that may only become explicit by talking about things.

When museums deal with collections, the revaluation of objects is often linked to activities of preservation and conservation (Dupré 2022). However, such a perspective is only valid if it is based on a specific idea of what is important about a cultural artefact. In fact, if one considers the amount of investment in working hours by experts and the infrastructure provided for the preservation of an object, this can result in significant value being attached to this item. Thus, it becomes obvious that appreciation in the context of a museum collection is not solely related to the inherent qualities of the object but rather to the result of ongoing efforts by museum professionals to compare, describe and systematise.

Within a larger framework, this perspective is a by-product of the positivist view of science stemming from the 19th century. Such concepts are inextricably linked to the positivism of the sciences of that era: instead of the many meanings that cultural artefacts take on and through which they are mobilised, the presumed 'objectivity' of the object was foregrounded. Material objects were seen as witnesses to a culture and a society. Neither the subjectivity of the craftsman or the artist who created the object nor the embedding generated by the owners and users seemed to be of importance. Given the state of research into material culture today, this view needs to be revised. The somehow paradoxical idea of a loss of value through collecting has been explicitly stated as early as in 1910, albeit in a personal letter by German anthropologist Leo Frobenius. Michaela Oberhofer recently found this intriguing document in the archive and published the relevant part, which is quoted here in English translation.

As soon as these objects were removed from their living context in their homeland and stored away in European cabinets, they lost their vitality. They were taken away from the indigenous people who had expressed their cultural, spiritual and social life in them and placed before Europeans, to whom the way of life [of the first owners] is as foreign as the polar landscape is to peoples from a New Guinea tribe. (Frobenius in a personal letter in 1910, quoted in Oberhofer 2016: 229)

Nowadays, it has become clear that, in some situations, museum objects are also 'disobedient' (Message 2017) in that they do not cease to generate new meanings even in the museum. The presumed inertia of the objects stored in the depositories is a delusion, as it massively underestimates the possibilities of interactions between material things.

On the other hand, a holistic view of the collected objects must prioritise other assessments of the value of things. In fact, if the valorisation of objects through the contexts associated with them in the earlier stages of their existence is considered, the vast majority of material objects will lose some of their museological value. A holistic approach, which also takes into



account forms of appreciation from the period before the object was musealised, must recognise that the evaluation in the museum is only a partial one. Important aspects of appreciation that are linked to the object's life-world context before it became part of a collection have been lost as a result of its storage in the museum. This is particularly true if the objects have been stored for an extended period, as is the case with many artefacts from colonial contexts.³⁶

Contrary to the museums' ideal of preservation and conservation in their collection rooms, there is a constant shift, and often also a loss, of value with regard to information, especially when considering contextual dimensions. After a hundred years or more of storage, the material appearance of cultural artefacts, such as surfaces and colours, relies heavily on conservation measures.

Looking only at the surfaces of the objects obfuscates the loss of knowledge with regard to use and embedding in the time before their musealisation. While objects in museum collections tend to undergo only minor changes in their material structure, at the same time they are affected by massive changes regarding their contextual value. This results from the fragmentation and partial destruction of their contexts.

Talking about the careers of objects is initially valid, as it highlights their capacity to establish connections with contexts that are both temporally and spatially separated from one another. Objects are valued because they contain information about past eras and other cultures. Museums are often referred to as 'keepers of treasures' because they contain cultural artefacts in their collections that evoke meanings from distant or past worlds.

However, the career of an object can also entail loss. This is especially true when the preservation of its material structure is associated with a loss of knowledge about its earlier contexts. For example, the minimal information contained in the 'entry book' represents only a fraction of the total value of an object throughout its existence. As experience shows, cultural artefacts often endure such shifts in meaning quite well, moving away from their embeddedness in the life-world towards becoming part of a collection. Paradoxically, this process is at once both a career in the sense of a new attribution of value and a fragmentation in the sense of the loss of contextual information.

Many sacred, mundane and ephemeral objects may therefore be revalued in two different frameworks: Either they are perceived as trophies by collectors and new custodians, or they are regarded as memorabilia of past social injustice and crimes against humanity by the descendants of the communities from which they were collected. The dual and opposing trajectory of the value curve has also been addressed by Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet (2011). Using the example of the *Bekom* mask from Cameroon, she shows how objects that initially

³⁶ It might be worth asking, together with Hannah Turner (2020), to what extent the positivist attitude of listing objects (or elements of knowledge) is a legacy of the 19th century and part of a colonial knowledge structure.



appear as iconic museum pieces are depicted on posters. At the same time, however, there is also a process of neglect and marginalization: the origin and earlier history of the objects are not investigated, which can be understood as a loss of value.

Thus, collections of objects held by museums and private people may be devalued while others are upvalued (Hahn 2022). A basic visual representation would show a curve, with time on the horizontal axis and value on the vertical axis. In principle, this curve is irregular, as both increases and decreases in value can occur at any time. Furthermore, this can only be influenced to a limited extent by the actions of the professional museum actors.

The metaphor of an object's career also implies an appreciation of restitution. Restitution means the bringing together of different contexts, some of which were lost in the museum. In this respect, every restitution is an upvaluation of the object. When cultural artefacts are returned to their place of origin, there is a very good chance that they will be reassociated with contexts that were lost in the course of their existence in the museum. This is a genuine upvaluation of the objects, based on an enrichment of contextual knowledge, and thus also allowing new forms of appreciation.

3.4 Objects, Identities and Changing Contextualisation

An important factor for both the career and the loss of significance of objects is their identification with certain persons, groups, cultures or, in a more abstract sense, value orders.³⁷ There is no doubt that such moments of identification are also the most important reasons for demanding restitution. Following the critical remarks of Stuart Hall (1996) on the concept of 'identity', it is particularly important to speak of identification as an active process and not to address objects in a passive sense as 'having an identity'. In this context, it should also be noted that several disciplines, such as archaeology and art history, are based on the idea that objects with particular formal features can be equated with the identity of a culture or a social group.³⁸ Such passive mechanisms of identity attribution are dangerous, as they might lead to a political agenda of forced collective identity, which is incompatible with the idea of self-determination and belonging (Appiah 1996). The issue of belonging remains contentious, at least as long as the referent for belonging is a cultural or political group that might have internal differences about prerogatives origination from the past (Thomas 2021).

³⁷ It is not without reason that highly popular novels revolve around the identification of people with objects. Examples of this are Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* und Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (Ireland and Lydon 2016). However, these belletrist texts reflect popular imaginations of an identity. Scholars in the humanities like Stuart Hall have repeatedly shown that relations between people and things are more complex (Hahn 2023).

³⁸ Whereas Florin Curta (2014) critiques such identifications, Pierre Lemonnier (2014) response is affirmative. Lemonnier's argument mainly refers to the repetition of formal principles and uses of specific things. He believes that using things of a specific form again and again will lead to the confirmation of a collective identity.



Paradoxically, the multiple meanings attributed to material things, as presented in detail in the last section, cannot be used as a counterargument against the perception held by certain individuals or groups that they have a special connection to certain objects. The objecthood of things signifies, first of all, the ambiguity and multiplicity of identifications. At the same time, it also has the potential for such identifications to lead to specific claims about the location and special treatment of the objects in question. The evaluation and appreciation of cultural artefacts are closely linked to the stories evoked when people are in their presence (Gurian 2001).

Nevertheless, moments of identification and the contexts in which such identifications with objects from the past are rediscovered are significant. At the same time, they serve as compelling arguments for restitution. For good reason, museum collections and exhibitions become the sites of such identifications, as they offer the freedom for subjective interpretations, whether new or rediscovered.³⁹

However, identity constructions based on returned cultural artefacts are likely to be contentious. Looking at the time elapsed between acquisition and return, movements of people, individual migration and relocations of settlements since the collection and transfer of the objects to Europe complicate such claims. Therefore, it is often difficult to establish a clear 'identification' between those who were exposed to looting, theft and other forms of violent appropriation in the past and those living in the same places today or speaking the same language.

Through provenance research, connections between cultural artefacts and present-day communities of people can possibly be established. Yet those who claim inherited rights to specific objects within a given community may not always be of the same lineage as the owners, users, or custodians of the objects when they were collected. Many groups or representatives of cultures and societies use cultural artefacts as the basis for constructing, defining and asserting their identities. But objects have multiple meanings, which means they may be used simultaneously by other people to symbolise their own history and identity.

We are dealing here with the interplay between self-attribution and external attribution. It is irrelevant whether certain attributions have an objectivised historical character or are based more on subjective perceptions. Thus, attempts may be made by peoples from formerly colonised countries to use repatriated cultural artefacts to re-conceptualise, re-define and (re)present themselves at national and local community levels to enhance decolonisation processes and foster patriotism.

Museum objects, especially if they have been kept in the museum for a long time, can potentially be associated with a broad range of identity claims; the same applies to their valuations. There is no more problematic statement than that of a museum expert associating

³⁹ It is against this background that Guido Fackler and Brigitte Heck (2019) rhetorically label museums as 'identity factories'.



a particular object in the collection with a particular social group or culture. Even if such a statement is based on reliable comparative data, multiple interpretations of most objects are possible. As has been stated in the last section, material objects inherently carry more than one meaning. This holds true especially for cultural artefacts whose existence is documented across historical periods, as they have many different embeddings and contexts. Consequently, the appreciation of a cultural artefact cannot be exclusively linked to just one identification.

One of the most important competences of scholars in the humanities is to deal with identities in society as well as with differing appreciations of cultural artefacts. Labelling an object as 'culturally relevant' expresses what appears to be important for a society as a whole or for groups in society. This is based on a much more open and broader concept of identification than purely historical and documentary evidence. As is the case for social and cultural values, attributions of identity are often based on relevance. People discover what is important to them, express this through their appreciation and also convey it through an attribution of identity.

These theoretical considerations regarding the polysemy and diversity of meanings of cultural artefacts have important consequences for restitution. In principle, restitution must recognise that, upon its return, different groups with different ideas will express their appreciation for the restituted object. There is no doubt that, at the moment of return and in the period thereafter, there may be uncertainty about the legitimate identity of a group of people, political entity or government actors. This uncertainty, together with negotiations and, hopefully, the development of a new consensus, is simultaneously the result of the increased attention paid to the object – a form of upvaluation – and a part of the restitution process itself.



4. Conclusion: Restitution as a Process

The complexities involved in the return of cultural artefacts from institutions in different European countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and France, as well as North America, to formerly colonised countries suggest that restitution encompasses more than just the physical return of such materials amid the accompanying pomp.⁴⁰ Restitution may be seen as a process comprising a series of actions that include discourse, advocacy, lobbying, formal claims of objects, claim processing, diplomacy, negotiation, dialogue, and both ethical and security considerations among state and non-state parties.

Such actions at national, institutional, municipal, local community and private levels require patience among the stakeholders to deliberate, reconcile diverse tendencies and arrive at consensus on pertinent issues. Apart from provenance records and other information that the holders of restitutable cultural artefacts may have, all culturally important objects are potentially relational. The various parties engaged in a restitution exercise may connect differently to the same item, gleaning from them, or assigning to them, variable and multiple meanings, whether technological, spiritual, social, symbolic, aesthetic, commercial, political, or a combination of these. Each group has different 'rights' to the object and different contexts that justify their status as stakeholders. On this basis, and with all due respect for the different forms of connection to this cultural heritage, it might be appropriate to speak of a 'shared cultural heritage' with regard to the future dealings with the restituted objects. This implies an 'ethics of sharing' which is based on the idea that multiple and shared responsibilities may enhance the care, sensitivity and valuation given to the items in question (Snoep, Keita, Sala-berry and Hugounenq 2023).

The return of cultural artefacts requires resolving issues that may be pertinent to the mobilisation, conservation, storage, display, meaning and function of restituted objects. Amid advocacy, ethical and other considerations, some museums and private collectors may wish to return cultural artefacts of colonial and precolonial origins to their sources unconditionally, caring less about what may happen to the objects thereafter. Some claimants, activists and community leaders may also expect the return of such cultural artefacts without deliberating their future. Whatever the case, the modalities for exhibiting or storing the cultural artefacts following their return must be of concern for all actors involved in the respective negotiations and activities in any restitution case.

Part of this concern relates to the security of returned objects in their new environments. The cultural artefacts must be handled carefully and kept safely to provide opportunities for producing knowledge and learning about past cross-cultural contacts and interactions, as well

⁴⁰ Discussions by Jos van Beurden (2012, 2017) of the return by Dutch institutions of cultural materials to some former Dutch administered territories for example highlight some of the intricacies of restitution.



as for strengthening, revising or building new relationships between previously colonised people and colonisers. More generally, the role of museums in the security of cultural artefacts and other restitution actions and activities is paramount.⁴¹

Museums have the expertise to render pertinent curatorial services, identifying and developing inventories, conserving, contextualising, recontextualising and exhibiting returned cultural artefacts. However, the peculiar circumstances of the cultural artefacts being conserved and kept in European depositories over relatively long periods of time under changing contexts call for capacity building through the training and retraining of museum professionals to enhance their ability to manage the objects efficiently. Such partnerships may be extended to local knowledge holders. It will require the strong will and dedication for museum experts to establish and maintain such partnerships.

The authors of this paper firmly believe that there can be no simplistic approach to restitution. What is more, each restitution case will be unique and will vary in relation to the peculiar circumstances of the holders of cultural artefacts, claimants, museums, local knowledge holders, and other relevant institutions and participants. The success of the process in each case will require strong partnerships based on mutual trust and respect between the stakeholders. Partnerships will not only minimise undue suspicion and tension among stakeholders but will also stimulate the revision and development of cultural policies to consolidate restitution.

⁴¹ This explains why major museum renovation projects have been launched in several West African countries in recent times. While in the Republic of Benin, the construction of new museums, for example in Ouidah, has already been completed, there is still work to be done in other countries. Although there is still a great need for improvement in exhibition technologies and building infrastructure (for the Ghanaian case, see Gavua and Kuntaa 2022), it can be said that the technical basis for secure storage in the countries of the destinations is available everywhere.



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