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Charles Amo-Agyemang

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Ghana's demand for restitution of material artifacts: a decolonial reflection

Charles Amo-Agyemang

Political Science Department, University of Ghana, Legon-Accra, Ghana

ABSTRACT

This paper incisively engages with the ways in which African leaders are not assertively demanding restitution of their material artifacts dispossessed in the eras of enslavement and colonization. It questions indigenous people's struggles for restitution of materialities colonially dispossessed beyond a simplistic view of decentering their hierarchy and ownership. Besides, the paper critically interrogates why Euro-America scholarship generously offers resilience discourse as perhaps the most important conceptual addition to international policy making in the last few decades to Africa, but it ironically does not care to reconstitute dispossessed material artifacts back to indigenous African peoples. The paper argues that colonial dispossession is about recentering indigenous people as masters and owners of material artifacts via restitution. Using coloniality of dispossession/theft this paper proposes a framework of restitution that aims to address resilient colonial dispossession enacted by the West. It is pointed out that decolonization will be achievable through restitution of indigenous material artifacts. I engage in the topic of restitution of material artifacts, particularly in the context of Asante people of Ghana. The paper contends that restitution of dispossessed material artifacts would empower indigenous peoples in Africa and strategically position them in global geopolitics.

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Introduction

The intention in writing this paper is to engage in conversations on the topic of struggles for restitution and repossession of indigenous people of Africa material artifacts and their role in the question of decoloniality/decolonization project. The discussion about indigenous artifacts from the colonial/imperial powers is becoming increasingly heated and intense (Abungu, 2008; Benyera, 2018; Beurden, 2017; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Effiboley, 2020; King, 2017; M'Bow, 2009). Over the centuries, a multitude of items – including 200 gold objects and other regalia of Asante royal family, community of 23 ancient pieces of jewelry of the Nama community of Namibia, power-objects from DR Congo, 60 bronze heads of Benin, Nigeria statues in museums are in private collections in Belgium, Portugal, France, Germany, Britain and the Netherlands by improper means and under horrific circumstances (McAuliffe, 2015; Mthembu-Salter, 2019; Sesanti, 2019). The restitution and

repossession of indigenous people of Africa artifacts lodged in Western museums and private collections has been a feature of indigenous group agitation and state-level diplomatic pressure over the last four decades (Akpang, 2022; Apoh & Mehler, 2020; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Hicks, 2020; Opoku, 2018; Robertson, 2020). Indeed, the discussion on materialities by way of restitution and repossession of indigenous people of Africa artifacts is not a recent one (Joy, 2020; Murphy & Tillier, 2019). Western museums promoting Western world's dominance and monopoly of interpretation over other people's cultures and colonization have proven reluctant to return antiquities.

The struggles for restitution of African material artifacts are complex, multi-faceted and a contentious issue of discussion. There are arguments and counterarguments around the unconditional return and the restitution of looted cultural materials from African countries during the period of European colonialism (Apoh, 2019; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Hicks, 2020; Opoku, 2018; Soirila, 2022). The debate has commonly been framed between those who argue for the return of colonially plundered artefacts to their countries of origin, and those who claim that these artifacts were possessed during times of foreign occupation and therefore have become ingrained in the host culture through principles of universality of cultural heritage (Apoh, 2019; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Hicks, 2020; Opoku, 2018; Soirila, 2022). The 2018 report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron entitled *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics* and known as the Sarr/Savoy report after its two authors is now widely seen as the starting point of restitution debates (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). The report frames the European illegal acquisition of African cultural property as a transgression for anyone concerned with provenance research and restitution. But the current international debate on repossession and restitution of imperially dispossessed and plundered indigenous artifacts to the African continent started after the demand for repatriation sent to France by Benin government on 26 August 2016. Despite the window of opportunity that the 2018 report presents for demands for the unconditional return and restitution of cultural heritage, many African states have not introduced applicable legal frameworks and policies. African Governments or traditional institutions and leaders are not assertively demanding restitution and repossession of their material artifacts.

The aim of this paper is to promote the restitution and repossession for (neo-)colonial plunder, looting and attendant criminality of dispossession of indigenous material artifacts (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Warikandwa, 2019). The paper also aims to emphasize the imperatives of indigenous people of Africa's autonomy, ownership, control, authority, and sovereignty over material artifacts to ensure that African culture and epistemologies, ontologies, values, perspectives, and world views are recentered and revived: this is done through the insights of decolonization/decoloniality by reframing repossession and restitution of material artifacts in contemporary Asante society, enabling alternative ways of being-in-the-world. The argument I seek to make here is that theorizing indigenous people of Africa in terms of the realities of the crimes of imperial dispossession and plunder makes it possible to see colonialism as essentially about dispossession and plunder (Nhemachena, 2023). The logic here is that frontloading (neo)colonial dispossession and plunder makes clear exactly what is going on or more precisely what is foundational to what is going on. The contention of this paper is that the solutions to colonization and imperialism lie in restitution and repossession of indigenous

people's material artifacts which were stolen and are lodged in their museums in Europe and America.

The problem with many analyses of materialities by way of restitution and repossession is that they do not sufficiently historicize and contextualize the logics of materiality in Africa (Apoh, 2019; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Hicks, 2020; Opoku, 2018; Robertson, 2020). The quest for materialities by way of restitution and repossession to colonially/imperially dispossessed, plundered, and robbed material artifacts of indigenous African communities is the problem of how to frame the question in a context where empire has refused restitution and repossession to the African indigenous human beings. Restitution and repossession to the African indigenous human beings sheds light on Eurocentric gaze and its erroneous interpretations that have been ingrained in our thinking. The questions that I raise herein are how does material restitution work in practice? To what extent does material restitution serve as a tool of decolonization/decoloniality in the context of provenance research?

Materialities by way of restitution and repossession should be understood not simply in terms of poverty and inequality in Africa, but it should be grasped in terms of demanding materiality which many indigenous peoples are doing for historical victims of enslavement and colonization over centuries (Nhemachena, 2023). It is restitution and repossession of materialities that would enable African indigenous peoples to retain ownership, autonomy, sovereignty, domination, dominion, and control over cultural resources (Nhemachena, 2023). It is important to recognize the fact that restitution is deeply imbricated with materialities (Nhemachena et al., 2018). The imbrication between materialities and restitution constitutes an important facet in the contemporary debates about old and supposedly new materialities (Nhemachena et al., 2018). Thus, materialities within the context of postcolonial Africa constitute the foundation of restitution that explains African realities as signifiers of materialization of enslavement and colonialism which help distinguish new and old materialities (Nhemachena et al., 2018).

African materialities rather than the contemporary theoretical postulations of new materialities which avowedly argue that art works are not an object to be recovered by indigenous human beings give due regard to the interplay of humans and non-human nature (Conolly, 2013; Coole & Frost, 2010; Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018). The point is that postulations of supposedly new materialities negate indigenous human beings of their autonomy and sovereignty in reclaiming (neo)colonially and historically looted and stolen artifacts by virtue of its emergent process of materialization (Nhemachena, 2023). Material restitution in this paper refers to the process and the ways it relates to restitution (return of looted and (neo)colonially dispossessed objects stored in state and private museums in Europe), payment of reparations (used especially in connection to North American slavery) and different kinds of truth and reconciliation processes (making amends for wrongdoing in the name of societal peace) (Akpang, 2020; Apoh, 2019; Eyssette, 2023; Opoku, 2018).

It is contended that instead of exhortation to be resilient to neo(colonial) dispossession in a supposedly Anthropocene world that serves to justify the sacrifice and disposability of some surplus humans living in the recesses of the empire, this paper focuses on materialities by way of restitution for the colonially/imperially dispossessed indigenous peoples. Whereas recently African leaders are demanding restitution and repossession, the imperial empire is now massively supporting and funding resilience ethos that effectively makes

human beings disposable, containable, dispensable, and manageable in the imperial world. Resilience discourses in the Anthropocene are not liberating and emancipatory. In fact, resilience discourses do not decolonize, but they facilitate and legitimize the recolonization of indigenous human beings. The question that arises from the foregoing is why then must and is Western/imperial empire attention focused only on augmenting or enhancing resilience of African populations in a supposedly Anthropocene world? Why do they not also focus on redressing crucial and centuries-old matters of neo-imperial dispossession, plunder, and looting of 'vulnerable' indigenous African societies without respite and without restitution? Indigenous African communities are not only 'vulnerable', but they are also colonially/imperially dispossessed and subjected to biopiracy, and this is what the exigencies of decoloniality/decolonization project must *a fortiori* address (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Warikandwa, 2019).

This paper is an attempt to think with literature both within African communities and in the context of Indigenous Studies in other places in order to engage the developing literature. Being 'indigenous' has meant different things to different indigenous peoples in different times and places, and different exponents of indigeneity within the West (Erickson, 2020). In his masterpiece *Indigenous Politics*, Kehaulani Kauanui provided a remarkably apt articulation of how 'indigeneity' as a term in Indigenous Studies represents a 'counter-analytic' to settler colonialism. For Kauanui, at least, the term indigeneity is not appropriate when used outside of settler colonial situations. It is true, of course, that the dynamics of restitution are not the same, and therefore to have effective restitution, one must really localize the context and understand the landscape of restitution for indigenous peoples in different regions of the world and in different historical periods (Erickson, 2020; Rene Albertus & Tong, 2019).

Thus, the return of the Benin bronzes, for instance, represents a very different kind of restitution than would be a restitution within Canada to a First Nation. This understanding risks erasing African indigenous communities such as the!Kung San in Namibia who have sustained and continue to sustain their own forms of settler colonialism. Despite this multiplicity of ways in which colonial domination and (neo)colonially dispossession have been experienced, it is claimed that different cases of restitution in different contexts both meaningfully distinct and yet connected in broader decolonizing project in the processes of return and repatriation. In this regard, I use indigeneity here to denote every community that has ever sustained any different form of colonial domination and dispossession. Being indigenous, in other words, is to have in some way undergone some form of colonial domination and to be dispossessed. This paper is especially interested in the forms of critique that valorize the condition of indigenous people's dispossession and domination as a starting point for rethinking decolonization project. This is what I chose to do in the light of burgeoning current debates.

Material restitution and the imperatives of decolonization

African materialities by way of repossession and restitution over the centuries of enslavement and colonial crimes are crucially vital for decoloniality/decolonization project (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2020). Nhemachena (2023) holds that decolonization/decoloniality should be understood within the context of indigenous African people's demand for repossession and restitution of their cultural artifacts that

were plundered, dispossessed, and subjected to biopiracy by colonialists/imperialists over centuries rather than to do so through hierarchies, hegemony, institutions, forms of order, structure which are conveniently portrayed in Eurocentric discourses as bad (Amusan, 2014; Nikšić, 2012; Rishani, 2017; Sell, 2017). Theorizing indigeneity in terms of colonial dispossession and biopiracy without remedy would reaffirm and reassert indigenous African people mastery, human essence, ownership, control, autonomy, sovereignty, domination, and dominion over their material resources including artifacts which indigenous people are known for since precolonial era (Akinbode, 2021; Crawford et al., 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2020; Táíwò, 2022). Indigenous African people had mastery, ownership, authority/authorship, dominion, and control over African patrimony including tangibles and intangibles more broadly before colonialism and enslavement (Nhemachena, 2023). Therefore, without African indigenous peoples autonomy and sovereignty over their material resources including artifacts, indigenous progress, liberation, development, and emancipation would be a mirage and elusive (Drieënhuizen, 2018; Nhemachena, 2023).

Decolonization/decoloniality is a function of abating the dispossession and looting of indigenous peoples artifacts and biopiracy of Africans by imperialists and descendants via restitution and repossession (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nhemachena, 2023; Táíwò, 2022). To decolonize, it is imperative to exercise mastery, dominion, hegemony, authority, authorship, ownership, and domination over materialities and epistemologies that existed in precolonial African society to avoid the biopiratic forces of the predatory world (Nhemachena, 2023). Decolonization must be premised and anchored on dispossession, plunder, and biopiracy by colonialists/imperialists rather than an erroneous assumption that African people are liable for the supposed benefits of colonialism (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Warikandwa, 2019). At the center of colonialism are resilient dispossession and wanton robbery of indigenous people of Africa artifacts and biopiracy which continue in this twenty-first century, and for which contemporary decolonial scholars and thinkers must propose a remedy (Nhemachena, 2023). The charge is simply that colonialism/imperialism was about the destruction of indigenous people of Africa material resources including artifacts so that they would not be able to reclaim their ownership, dominion, domination, mastery, hegemony, and authority over their patrimony and heritages that existed in precolonial African society (Nhemachena, 2023). In this regard, the exigencies of decolonization/decoloniality must therefore ensure mastery, domination, authority/authorship, and dominion by Africans/indigenous people over Africans/indigenous people material artifacts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nhemachena, 2023).

Decolonizing materialities by way of restitution are a necessary component of the process of reversing colonial/imperial dispossession and plunder of material artifacts, and of destruction of indigenous epistemologies for which they should be compensated rather than erroneous definition of colonization in terms of domination, hierarchy, oppression, order, structure, binaries just to mention a few (Nhemachena, 2023). Plunder, dispossession, and biopiracy of material resources negate indigenous people of Africa's originality, agency, history, and identity (Nhemachena, 2023). However, decoloniality/decolonization project disturbingly ignores African mastery, ownership, authority/authorship, dominion, domination, and control over African patrimony via restitution, which must be recentered in any analysis of contemporary imperial relations by

postcolonial Africans (Bruchac, 2014; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Warikandwa, 2019; Tlostanova, 2017). I would like to suggest that decolonization/decoloniality project must go beyond merely tinkering with questions of charity, recognition, and inclusion as if these are ends in themselves. Decolonizing African indigenous ways of knowing must avoid fruitless equivocations (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The crux of the matter for fruitless equivocations is that decolonial scholars and critics of different disciplines must avoid merely addressing Cartesian binaries in their quest for restitution and other materialities. Tuck and Yang (2012) in writing about the need to avoid fruitless equivocations argue for decolonization involving restitution and other materialities. It is for the above reason I argue that decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies or an approximation of other experiences of oppression (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonization must demand an end to the disruption and subversion of colonial legacies through recentering African autonomy, mastery or having dominion over African heritages (restitution of cultural objects and epistemologies) and control of lands.

To think decolonially is essential to recognize African people's mastery, ownership, authority/authorship, dominion, and control over African patrimony/heritages including indigenous material artifacts (Nhemachena, 2023). Indigenous African people who were the original owners of land and other resources including tangible and intangible resources were robbed and dispossessed by colonialists/imperialists and their descendants (Nhemachena, 2023). The colonialists/imperialists and their descendants subverted and negated African mastery, ownership, dominion, and control over African patrimony/heritages including tangibles and intangibles (Nhemachena, 2023). In this vein, Nhemachena (2023) argues that one cannot decolonize by deconstructing, critiquing, and decentering indigenous African people mastery, dominion, hierarchies, order, structure, institutions, domination, authorship and having ownership over their material resources, including indigenous epistemologies. Put succinctly, any analyzes that deconstruct, critique, and decenter African mastery, ownership, dominion, hierarchies, patrimony/heritages, and authority/authorship effectively replicate colonial/imperial subversions and deepen recolonization which decolonial scholars must urgently tackle (Nhemachena, 2023). The point is that one can only decolonize by enhancing and promoting African mastery, ownership, authority, dominion, and control over African patrimony/heritages including material artifacts by postcolonial Africans (Nhemachena, 2023). African mastery, ownership, dominion, hierarchies, patrimony/heritages, and authority/authorship reverse colonial/imperial dispossession, looting, and biopiracy of indigenous people so that real progress and evolution can start with indigenous people who are victims of colonization and enslavement (Nhemachena, 2023).

The idea is that Western institutions that hold material artifacts must retribute and return what they dispossessed and plundered from African indigenous people. There is absolutely nothing wrong in having hierarchies, domination, dominion, ownership, structures, mastery, and authorship/authority (Nhemachena, 2023). Nhemachena (2023) puts it better when he avers that the exigencies of decolonization and deimperialization must recenter indigenous people as masters, authors, and owners of African material resources, patrimony/heritages and of indigenous epistemologies. As a matter of fact, to be decentered and deconstructed is to be colonized (Crawford et al., 2021; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2020). Specifically in the Ghanaian context, the Asante people

are rewriting their histories to (re)claim and repossess aspects of their material artifacts which were colonially/imperially dispossessed and plundered, and its epistemologies subjected to biopiracy in the history of colonialism.

The looting and dispossession of indigenous people material artifacts, epistemologies, tangible and intangible resources, and other resources more generally are what Nhemachena (2023) magisterially refers to as the coloniality of dispossession. The coloniality of dispossession Nhemachena (2023) argues is not reducible to the coloniality of power, the coloniality of being, and the coloniality of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021); and this sadly for centuries is absent in contemporary indigenous people of Africa discourses on coloniality. Indeed, not every exercise of power is necessarily colonial, after all precolonial indigenous people of Africa exercised power over what they owned or what belonged to them (Nhemachena, 2023). To be sure, precolonial indigenous people of Africa power over ownership was not premised on wanton robbery and resilient colonial dispossession of other people's heritages (Nhemachena, 2023). The exercise of power over ownership becomes colonial and deeply problematic when one opportunistically exercises power over what one does not rightly own and over what belongs to other people (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Coloniality must be understood in terms of coloniality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023), so that dispossession and plunder of indigenous people of Africa's material resources and knowledge are foregrounded, privileged, and frontloaded (Nhemachena, 2023).

The processes of dispossession which entailed plunder and looting destroyed African institutions, structural order, politics, religions, hierarchies, power, dominance, politics, epistemologies, tangible and nontangible resources by colonialists/imperialists and their descendants (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Hlabangane, et al., 2020). In this regard, the coloniality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023) takes note of how the Asante people, for instance, had been (neo)colonially and historically dispossessed of their institutions, structures, modernization, authority, politics, religions, hierarchies, dominance, politics, epistemologies, material resources and so on. To understand the ongoing processes by which indigenous people of Africa are being dispossessed of their materialities, one needs to draw insights from the coloniality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023). The coloniality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023) holds that real decolonization cannot take place without repossession and restitution to the victims of colonial dispossession. This paper takes note of the fact that mere delinking or disconnecting or deimperialization does not bring about real decolonization (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2020).

Indeed, delinking or disconnecting or deimperialization emerges when empire restores its African victims back to their *terra firma* through restitution for enslavement and colonization (Nhemachena, 2023). This paper further takes note of the fact that it is within ownership, mastery, and possession of land and other resources that empowerment, liberation, and emancipation are effectively guaranteed (Nhemachena, 2023). Decolonization tends to hide more than it reveals when it is merely defined in terms of domination, hegemonism, structures, hierarchization, etcetera (Nhemachena, 2023). Contemporary decolonial theorists must facilitate unthinking and rethinking, and so it needs to start being curious about this coloniality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023). The issue is that what contemporary decolonial theorists must *a fortiori* do is to ensure that indigenous people of Africa are compensated for their heritages and patrimony which had been and are being plundered and dispossessed by colonialists/imperialists and their

descendants (Nhemachena, 2023). Contemporary indigenous African people must repossess their knowledge, structure, politics, order, institutions, looted and dispossessed material culture including artifacts to rewrite their unique stories (Nhemachena, 2023).

Conjugating materialities and artifacts in contemporary Ghana: the case of the Asante people

Here I interrogate discourses around restitution in Ghana in relation to contemporary broader debates around African materialities particularly in relation to dispossessed and plundered (Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018) Asante people's cultural artifacts. It is argued that artifacts are embodiment and constitutive of material culture. They are not necessarily portrayed as indistinct from each other (Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018). The point is that putting them on the same plane is not necessarily liberating, progressive and decolonizing as it perpetuates logics of enslavement and colonial era (Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018). Precolonial Asante people were civilized enough to distinguish themselves from humans and non-humans. There are material distinctions between humans and non-human nature especially from Asante people's worldview (Gyekye, 2010). Without Asante people material artifacts their mastery, sovereignty, dominion, domination, ownership, and autonomy are effaced and deconstructed in ways that are reminiscent of enslavement and colonial epoch (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). The point of the foregoing is that the issue of material restitution and repossession of artifacts is relevant to the historical and continuing resilient dispossession and plunder (Nhemachena, 2023) particularly in the context of Asante people. Demands for material restitution and repossession should be construed as addressing contextual conditions that have resiliently and consistently dispossessed and looted (Nhemachena, 2023) indigenous people of Africa's artifacts.

The Asante people's case is illustrative of a painful historical process and a long struggle over many years of demand for restitution and repossession of looted and shamelessly dispossessed material artifacts. Their demand for unconditional return and restitution of looted and plundered material artifacts from British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the Wallace Collection and private collections brings new meaning to Africa's demand for restitution and repossession (Apoh, 2019; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Opoku, 2018). Asante people are demanding an unconditional return and restitution of more than 200 gold objects and other regalia which were looted and plundered by British troops through mayhem and under horrifically violent circumstances (Akpang, 2022; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Opoku, 2018). The latest move in response to mounting calls in Africa for Western countries to hand back colonial spoils from their museums doubtlessly necessitates the return of these looted and plundered material artefacts. Ghanaian governments from pre-colonial and post-independence eras have made several requests for unconditional return and restitution of illegally acquired Ghanaian material artifacts in the collections of European museums (Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020).

As far back as 1974 the Asantehene, the late Otumfuo Nana Opoku Ware II (the ruler of Asante people) with support and endorsement of the government of Ghana petitioned the British officials to return their heritage in the form of two ceremonial swords, gold mask, gold ceremonial head-dress, amulet box, royal stool, a pipe, three pectoral discs, a pair of anklets and a number of beaten gold which the British army looted and stolen in

their invasion and destruction of Kumasi in 1874, 1884, 1896 and 1900, respectively (Akpong, 2020; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Opoku, 2018). Indeed, unconditional return and restitution of looted and stolen material artifacts and other intangible cultural heritage of Ghanaian origin became much more louder during the symbolic return of diaspora Africans to Ghana in 2019. Since then, the British Museum has been under increasing pressure to unconditionally return and retribute looted and stolen items in its collection to their countries of origin. In this regard, the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II and the government of Ghana on 12 April 2020, formally and specifically asked the British Museum to return two ceremonial swords, gold mask, gold ceremonial head-dress, amulet box, Asante royal stool, a pipe, three pectoral discs, a pair of anklets and beaten gold plundered and stolen as booty during a raid by British troops during colonial rule (Akpong, 2020; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Otumfuo, 2014)

The demand for the restitution of these looted and stolen material artifacts were made because they point to the nature of Asante people's materiality, way of life and constitute the very soul, the very essence of Asante people's human societies, without them their history cannot be fully told (Akpong, 2020; Opoku, 2018). The restitution and unconditional return of these cultural materials would also offer the Asante people the opportunity to develop local knowledge of technological, cultural, and social value of the pieces illicitly stolen. Again, Asante people cannot look at these items as just mere objects considering the complexities and wounds created by colonialism, enslavement and years of systemic plunder, exploitation, criminal dispossession, and looting. The demands, however, have been denied or ignored (Asante, 2019; Opoku, 2018). Ghana's relentless requests have been largely rejected, treated as trivial, baseless, and meaningless. To be sure, Ghana's demands for unconditional return of looted material artifacts have been ineffective and uninspiring. This is precisely because Ghana has continued to show weakness in engaging British museums on the question of return and restitution. Ghana has agonizingly failed to appreciate the fact that cultural resources shamelessly dispossessed, plundered, looted, and taken away by the colonialists/imperialists under horrific circumstances cannot be returned except through power pressure. The British museum does not appear to have any long-standing policy to retribute and unconditionally return any of the looted and stolen Asante material artifacts (Akpong, 2020; Opoku, 2018). Rather, the director of Victoria and Albert Museum, for instance, has proposed the idea of exploring the possibility of lending and loaning the dispossessed and looted material artifacts to the Asantehene and the Ghanaian officials (Akpong, 2020; Opoku, 2018).

Seven royal Asante artifacts that were looted 150 years ago from Ghana's ancient Asante kingdom have been returned on 9 February 2024, after decades of resistance from European and Western governments and museums. The stolen artifacts included an elephant tail whisk, an ornamental chair made of wood, leather and iron, two gold stool ornaments, a gold necklace and two bracelets. The seven royal artifacts were received by the Asante kingdom to mark the 150th anniversary of when British colonial forces sacked the Asante city in 1874 as well as to support celebrations for the Asante ruler's Silver Jubilee. The elephant tail whisk, ornamental chair made of wood, leather and iron, two gold stool ornaments, gold necklace and two bracelets are seen as symbols of prestige and reverence for the Asante ruler and embody the souls of the Asante people. The imperatives of the return of Asante kingdom material

artifacts represent a hard-won and long-awaited victory for the Asante people who are original owners after centuries of colonial dispossession, plunder, and looting by the imperial Other. But the nagging question is why would Britain propose to loan and lend the looted and plundered material artifacts as opposed to simply handing them back?

Material restitution and the resilience of coloniality on Asante people

Restitution and repossession of Asante people material artifacts is a testimony that contemporary Asante people have existed before and an eloquent testimony to what they have known and know (Asante, 2019). Asante people have historically been subjected to colonial dispossession and plunder of their material artifacts for centuries such that they lose their Africanity, Africanness, and **Afrocentricity**. Asante people resources including material artifacts lodged in British museums and private collections hark back to colonial brutality that must be reclaimed and reversed as part of the process of decolonization/decoloniality and deimperialization. For them, their material artifacts represent their cultural identity, genealogies, lineages, agency, and way of life. Their material artifacts provide them with an essential sense of pride and destiny. Possession of essential elements including identities, agency, destiny, and pride is crucially important for reclaiming restitution and of what was imperially dispossessed and looted during enslavement and colonialism (Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Asante people's material artifacts play an essential role in embodying, transmitting, identifying, and preserving culture and traditions in contemporary Asante societies.

Precolonial Asante Society's material artifacts are evidenced in ceremonial swords, gold mask, gold ceremonial head-dress, amulet box, royal stool, a pipe, three pectoral discs, a pair of anklets and beaten gold. These relics of Asante heritage suggest cultural affinities with Asante societies. Ignored in Eurocentric scholarship is the fact that these relics of Asante heritage colonially dispossessed, plundered, and looted were part and parcel of the daily lives of the precolonial Asante people's forebears and embodied aspects of their philosophy, cosmologies, views, beliefs, practices and so on. The sense here is that dispossession, plunder, looting, and biopiracy by the imperial Other effaced and subverted various forms of indigenous Asante society's sovereignty, mastery, domination, dominion, authority, possession, autonomy, and control over cultural artifacts (Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Subversion of various forms of indigenous sovereignty, mastery, domination, dominion, authority, possession, autonomy, and control over cultural artifacts (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020) has deprived the Asante people of their human essence, values, epistemologies, ontologies, worldviews, perspectives, identity, agency, and originality. There is an intricate connection between mastery, domination, dominion, authority, autonomy, authority, and control over material artifacts. Indeed, for denied and deprived of mastery, domination, dominion, authority, autonomy, control, and authority, one cannot possess, protect, and claim material artifacts (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Mastery, domination, dominion, authority, ownership, autonomy, control, and authority rest on possession and restitution of materialities and entail independence from Euro-American neo-imperialism (Nhemachena, 2023).

Colonial/imperial dispossession and plunder of material artifacts has left contemporary Asante people without knowledge of their past, present, and future. Asante people need mastery, domination, dominion, authority, autonomy, control, and authority to govern their territories. They need the ownership and control of their cultures, human essence, kingship systems, politics, traditional institutions, political and social institutions, and material artifacts that were trampled by the colonialists/imperialists and their descendants. Asante people demand for restitution and repossession is to reposition themselves to defend their sovereignty, autonomy, control, dominion, domination, authority, and ownership over material artifacts. For Asante people, there is no clear distinction between the human and non-human. Asante people recognize the existence of human essence, autonomy, sovereignty, values, identities, epistemologies, ontologies, worldviews, and perspectives (Fijn & Kavesh, 2021; Gyekye, 2010). Of course, colonialists/imperialists have for centuries depicted and regarded indigenous African people as indistinct from non-humans nature (Nhemachena & Mabale, 2018; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). However, it would be unwise in the view of Asante people, for example, to assume that there are material distinctions between humans and non-human nature. Precolonial Asante people were civilized enough to distinguish themselves from humans and non-humans.

The priceless material artifacts colonially dispossessed and looted in their cracks and in their crevices represent pride, loss, pain, identity, anguish, self-expression, and sense of belongingness of precolonial Asante people. Precolonial Asante people were guided by the tenets of material artifacts which spelt out their humanistic philosophies, including morality, genealogies, dignity, epistemologies, ownership, and control of resources, and so on. It is germane to note that Asante people material artifacts belong to each and every individual who has been denied the fundamental right to appreciate and access tangible links to his or her own identity, history and to the communities from which they were taken (Akpang, 2022; Asante, 2019). Colonially dispossessed and robbed of their original human identities, human essence and history, Asante people have been forced to adopt fabricated identities. Relics of Asante heritage in the form of ceremonial swords, gold mask, gold ceremonial head-dress, amulet box, Asante royal stool, a pipe, three pectoral discs, a pair of anklets and beaten gold in many ways represent cultural identity and agency; a way of life that provided precolonial Asante society with an essential sense of pride and destiny (Akpang, 2020). The Asante people have lost their indigeneity and indigenous heritages and patrimony including material artifacts from the crises of colonial/imperial dispossession. The amulet box, for instance, was said to embody the spirits, political and cultural soul of the Asante army. In precolonial Asante, the amulet box was imbued with medicinal and spiritual properties in shrines (Akpang, 2022).

This paper theorizes that colonial dispossession, plunder and looting of artifacts and biopiracy of epistemologies flattened (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2019) the precolonial Asante society in ways that demobilized hierarchical social and cultural institutions, hegemony, forms of order and structures. The colonialists/imperialists destroyed and demonized Asante people's cultural institutions, nationalism, nation state, genealogies, lineages, communities that would otherwise motivate Asante people to reclaim their ancient material artifacts that were looted and dispossessed during the colonial era by means of which the Asante people are already claiming restitution and repossession. The Asante people's educational institutions and structures are also

flattened in ways that demobilized hierarchies, forms of order, hegemony, structures etcetera since the enslavement and colonial eras. With colonial dispossession and plunder of material artifacts, social movements and organizations of the Asante people have been flattened in ways that demobilize resistance to neoimperial penetration, invasion, and forces. The imperial Britain did not only destroy precolonial Asante society's politics, structure, institutions, order, hierarchies, autonomy, sovereignty, and hegemony, but they also importantly depoliticized Asante people by depriving them of memories on the basis of which they are demanding for repossession and restitution. The looting and attendant criminality of dispossession (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena et al., 2019) of Asante people's material artifacts has deleted and edited the memories of the Asante people in ways that negate their genealogical histories. Implicit in this is to make it difficult for Asante people to claim the primacy of their material artifacts in the face of neo-imperial dispossession and plunder.

With their memories deleted and edited, Asante people would unthinkingly develop amnesia to forget the criminality of enslavement, colonialism, their stolen material resources including material artifacts and historical crimes. With their memories deleted and edited, their traditions, their performances, and their relevance to the people are also lost forever. Asante people need structure, cultural institutions, order, sovereignty, hierarchies, and hegemony destabilized by Euro-American neo-imperialism and to protect themselves from plunder, looting and dispossession from neoimperial forces. Structure, cultural institutions, order, sovereignty, hierarchies, autonomy, control, and hegemony (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020) are central to Asante people's devolution of heritages and patrimonies. This is also crucial for self-assertiveness in seeking restitution and repossession of, and control over Asante people's resources that were looted, dispossessed, and plundered during the colonial eras (Geller, 2014; Mheta, 2019; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). With their politics destroyed, their social-cultural lives destroyed, with their religious ways of life destroyed, and with their artifacts colonially dispossessed and plundered, Asante people *a fortiori* are interested in ownership, sovereignty, mastery, authorship/authority, autonomy, and control of their resources including artifacts through restitution and repossession for enslavement and colonization.

Material artifacts are in fact repositories of Asante peoples time in so far as they curate the ways and words of their religions and ancestors which colonialists/imperialists and their descendants have targeted for dispossession and plunder. It is important to note here that the Asante people's demand for repossession and restitution is to underline the fact that those colonially dispossessed and plundered can only absolve themselves by compensating for their crimes. The colonially/imperially dispossessed and plundered material artifacts depersonalized, de-rooted and disembodied (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020) Asante people from their cultures, local contexts, realities of living, beliefs, worldviews, perspectives, traditions, philosophies, genealogies, history, identities and so on (Opoku, 2018). More broadly, the destruction of cultures/social mores and values that otherwise historically held Asante people together guaranteed Asante collective conscience that involved legitimation of secular hierarchies. Asante people need their cultural institutions, nationalism, nation state, communities to protect them from cannibalization and ravages of oncoming neo-imperial invasion, penetration, and to repossess their original mastery over their own lives. In fact, Asante people's

autonomy, integrity, human essence, sovereignty, cultures, societies, genealogies, politics, philosophy, morals, histories, epistemologies, ethics and ownership and control of material artifacts are a useful analytical tool for any serious decolonization/decoloniality and liberation of indigenous human beings.

Euro-America scholarship has arrogantly depicted indigenous African people in ways that suited colonial racist ideologies. Euro-America scholarship has arrogantly portrayed indigenous African people as without history and inconsequential in world history, and therefore fit for enslavement and colonization (Geller, 2014; Mheta, 2019; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Emancipation, decolonization/deimperialization and liberation for indigenous African peoples does lie in material restitution and repossession rather than exhortation to be resilient (Eyssette, 2023; Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2020; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). Theorizing indigenous African people's emancipation, decolonization, progress, and liberation in terms of exhortation to be resilient was meant by imperial Others to preempt indigenous African peoples claims to effectively reassert their autonomy, ownership, mastery, control, autonomy, and sovereignty over its artifacts and heritages since enslavement and colonial eras (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020; Taiwo, 2010). Decolonial scholars and theorists need to carefully think through the conceptualization of dominant tropes of resilience discourses in contemporary times. This paper prefers theorizing indigenous African peoples in terms of material restitution, looting, plunder, and attendant criminality of dispossession of artifacts and biopiracy (Nhemachena, 2023). When indigenous African people resist resilience ethos, they are not necessarily resisting the resilience ethos in the sense of deceptive appearances of logics of inclusivity, multiplicity, pluralism, and diversity, but they are resisting a particular form of resilience ethos premised on colonialism, imperialism, dispossession, and ruthless plunder (Nhemachena, 2023).

Thus, ironically presupposed as suffering from internal colonization by self-ignorance, indigenous people of Africa people were conceived to be in need of the aid of imperial Other who evangelized themselves as civilizers, liberators and messiahs in the same way contemporary resilience discourses are being increasingly evangelized as liberating, emancipating, and progressive (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena, Warikandwa, et al., 2020). For this reason, contemporary indigenous African people are simply urged/exhorted to be resilient to neo(colonial) dispossession that will dangerously supposedly provide antidote to their challenges in the Anthropocene moment (Nhemachena, 2023). The foregoing underscores that exhortation to be resilient to neo(colonial) dispossession is hardly sufficiently and adequately teased out in relation to the exigencies of decolonization and liberation in Africa. The guise of emancipation, participation, freedom, and being resilient to neo(colonial) dispossession do not *ipso facto* amount to liberation and decolonization, as indeed it can (wittingly and unwittingly) lead to the opposite or the contrary (Nhemachena, 2023). Decolonization/decoloniality in the twenty-first century needs critical thought processes that reimagine and creatively produce indigenous African people thought that has power to remake African world and in the Global South more generally (Nhemachena, 2023).

The exhortation to be resilient to neo(colonial) dispossession should be teased out in relation to the logics of colonial/imperial dispossession and plunder of material artifacts and illegal grabbing of natural resources by global elites and their transnational

corporations and institutions even in the twenty-first century (Erickson, 2020; Mheta, 2019; Nhemachena, 2023). Rather than framing indigenous people of Africa's problems as emanating from Eurocentric discourses such as resilience, the problems of indigenous African people should be seen as emanating from colonial/imperial dispossession and plunder during colonial eras (Nhemachena, 2023). Colonization/coloniality cannot be conceived only in terms of mere existence of oppression, hierarchies, structures, forms of order, dominance, power, and binaries, but also *a fortiori* through dispossession and plundering of material artifacts (Nhemachena, 2023). There is a need to decolonize materialities inexorably constituting global coloniality which Asante people are increasingly demanding repossession and restitution from colonialists and their descendants (Chitonge, 2022; Dunham, 2017; Spitzer, 2021; Wittmann, 2016). Dominant tropes of contemporary decolonial research methods must reassert and reaffirm indigenous Africans autonomy, sovereignty over its natural resources, identities, structures, power, institutions, forms of order and to depose colonialism and neo-imperialism. Indigenous Africans are colonized not simplistically by being dominated, exploited, and oppressed by global matrices of power, but by being colonially dispossessed, and not been able to effectively reassert their autonomy, sovereignty, and possession over its material artifacts, thereby destroying indigenous people's polities (Nhemachena, 2023; Restrepo, 2018).

It must be realized that theorizing coloniality as plunder and dispossession makes it possible to conceive the limitations of theories that define coloniality merely in terms of hierarchies, power, structure, forms of order, oppression, dominance etcetera (Nhemachena, 2023). African states and leaders have been imperially and deliberately set up for failure in the global matrices of power after they have been shorn of and deprived of autonomy and sovereignty over their invaded natural resources by global elites and their transnational corporations and institutions (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2022). Indigenous people of Africa resistance and struggle to imperial dispossession, ruthless looting and plunder have suffered colonial deconstruction and decentering for centuries. Indigenous people of Africa resistance and struggle are premised essentially on the necessity to pass on heritages to offsprings which do not shackle back to the imperial matrices of power, including extermination, dispossession, and exploitation without restitution, repossession and without respite (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2022). In this regard, indigenous people of Africa must actively seek to 'decolonize' and 'liberate' themselves by mapping up alternative plausible futures from their own liberation movements.

The resilient imperial Other is still struggling and failing to ensure restitution and return to indigenous African peoples after centuries of enslavement and several decades after the end of formal colonization. The question that this paper raises is if the imperial empire claims to be 'efficient' and 'effective' in science and technology, democracy, good governance etcetera, then why has empire failed woefully to fast-track restitution to African victims of enslavement and colonization? The Asante people had been denied the opportunity to learn from their material artifacts which were the basis for producing knowledge about themselves. The Asante people have been deprived of the opportunities to use and profit from their material, nonmaterial property, and epistemologies that were stolen for centuries now, and therefore, Asante people are entitled to compensation from the colonialists and their descendants who have profited for centuries from the theft of material and nonmaterial property, epistemologies, tangible and intangible resources,

and other resources. It is emphasized that restitution would help to reassert the identity, possession, autonomy and sovereignty over resources, and cultural practices of the Asante people and to inspire African youth not to yield to neo-imperial depredations (Nhemachena, 2023). Restitution must pay attention to repairing the damage that the actions of the colonial/imperial oppressors and their descendants caused. African leaders and government need to redress (neo)colonial dispossession on their land, material artifacts, and other resources (Nhemachena, 2023).

Thither restitution? Forward or backward?

Decolonization of the materialities cannot possibly take place without attending specifically to restitution and repossession of colonially dispossessed and looted resources. Put in other words, decoloniality does not have to be merely conceptual or a principle divorced from the reality of restitution and repossession in practice. What is important to understand is that restitution and return of colonially looted, plundered, and dispossessed Asante people's cultural materials have encountered British museum gatekeepers with entrenched views to derail, dismiss, and ignore these requests. To be sure, Ghana's relentless requests have been largely rejected, treated as trivial, baseless, and meaningless, although Ghana has made modest steps forward in demanding the unconditional return, restitution, and repossession of looted and plundered cultural materials under dubious circumstances. However, given the claims that Western museums are better placed to take care of these artifacts, there is concern as to whether looted and plundered cultural artifacts will be returned and restituted. This argument that African countries are completely incapable of taking care of their own artifacts because of the apparent insecurity in the African museum environment is a false narrative meant to alienate. For me, the critical question is about how can Africans succeed in demanding artifacts which are in Europe and America if Africans are failing to effectively demand their land back?

The government of Ghana in 2022 began the complex process of demanding the return of its cultural heritage by inaugurating a twenty-member restitution committee in Accra to look at the return of cultural heritage that were dispossessed, plundered, looted, and taken away by the colonialists/imperialists and their descendants from the Asante palace and which are now lodged in collections in British museums (Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020). The committee is Chaired by Professor Kodzo Gavua, Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, university of Ghana (Apo, 2019; Dzidzienyo & Nkumbaan, 2020; Opoku, 2018). However, the twenty-member restitution committee inaugurated by the government of Ghana has been patently weak, ineffective, and unable to exert effective power pressure on British museums in any meaningful dialogue, to say the least. Ghana and other African countries must step up both moral and power pressure tactics/strategy against countries and museums stubbornly holding onto colonially dispossessed, plundered, looted, and stolen cultural heritage resources. Moral power pressure in Ghana would entail public demonstrations, lectures and discussions aimed at getting the public to buy into the restitution efforts and struggles. Power pressure tactics will also entail Ghana refusing to contemplate receiving artifacts that had been looted, dispossessed, and criminally stolen from the country on loan or lending request. This would amount to a classic case of turning looters and thieves into owners and

owners into borrowers (Opoku, 2018). Ghana can effectively demand restitution and return of her material artifacts by training professionals, improving facilities in museums and archives, and forging formidable inter-institutional partnerships for facilitating negotiations for the return and restitution of cultural heritage. Ghana should develop a roadmap that would facilitate the process and the push for the return and restitution of identified material artifacts that were looted, plundered, and stolen. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture and Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB) should make inputs that would ultimately result in Ghana realizing the restitution of colonially looted cultural heritage assets demanded. Indeed, they should be charged to identify and support researchers to elicit data that would support the government's call and demand for restitution, unconditional return, and repossession.

Ghana, as part of the Africa renaissance movement, should lead the charge for restitution and repossession. In this sense, Ghana should feverishly work with other African nations to form a strong voice, bind together as a collective, and importantly create synergy in pushing for restitution, unconditional return, and repossession of cultural heritage and artefacts. Encouragingly, the importance of returning and repossession of illegally dispossessed and plundered cultural artifacts in Africa has been demonstrated by the African Union through the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance in article 26 adopted in 2006. The African Union (2006) has now recognized that cultural artifacts are essential to the development of the African continent and is playing significant role in the struggles and restitution of looted, plundered, and dispossessed cultural artifacts for African peoples and equally indigenous peoples (African Union Charter for African Cultural Renaissance, 2006). The Charter for African Cultural Renaissance (2006) is a legal framework that supports the restitution of African cultural artifacts in museums of the former colonial powers as they have been linked to the identity of peoples, the identity of the state, tells a unique story about the past, present and future of that people and encapsulate the history of African indigenous peoples (African Union Charter for African Cultural Renaissance, 2006).

In this context, the African Union Charter for African Cultural Renaissance imagined the urgent need to return African cultural artifacts contextualized in the encouragement of African cultural values, knowledge, and know-how. The Charter stipulates that African governments should take steps to end the theft, dispossessed, and plunder of their cultural artifacts. Equally, very recently, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also addresses this issue (ECOWAS Regional Action Plan, 2019). ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on the return of African cultural artefacts to their countries of origin adopted by ECOWAS Ministers of Culture is a legal framework which articulates a similar philosophy that called for strategic guidelines to safeguard regional cultural artifacts. ECOWAS Regional Action Plan 2019/2023 on the return of African cultural artefacts to their countries of origin provides West African states with the means to develop key instruments, legal frameworks for action on negotiations, and guidelines to seek the restitution of stolen or dispossessed cultural artifacts under the colonial period. Despite all the legal instruments in place, it is very difficult to secure the restitution of cultural artifacts to Africa as many Western museums claim that the restitution of cultural artifacts will not be well preserved in African states. This is regrettable since the demands for restitution of plundered and looted cultural

artifacts are intended to redress some of the historical injustices of colonialism and enslavement.

Conclusion

Indigenous Africa people demand for restitution for having been colonially dispossessed, plundered, and looted in various ways. This paper has argued that restitution of material resources including artifacts would empower indigenous African people and strategically position them in global geopolitics (Nhemachena, 2023; Nhemachena & Mawere, 2022). Contemporary debates about restitution of material artifacts have been ongoing for many decades but have acquired a new urgency recently with the intensification of scrutiny of Euro-America museums and private collections acquired in the colonial period. The paper has argued that it is more appropriate to theorize African indigeneity in terms of colonial dispossession and robbery (Nhemachena, 2023) than it is to do so through contemporary resilience discourses in the Anthropocene epoch. The point is that theorizing African indigeneity in terms of (neo)colonial dispossession and robbery would reaffirm African sovereignty, autonomy, ownership, and control over their material resources (Nhemachena, 2023), while resilience discourses would deny same to African indigenous people.

This paper has argued for a framework of specific forms of concrete and practicable restitution that aim to address (neo)colonial dispossession and plunder. The demand for material artifacts taking place today in many indigenous communities is an affirmation and a reclaiming of the past (and its cultures and traditions) which has been historically demonized, (neo)colonially dispossessed, plundered, and subjected to biopiratic forces of this world. This paper has shown that the demand for restitution in the case of the Asante people of Ghana is primarily one of resistance to Eurocentrism. I have interpreted material artifacts as a way of generating knowledge that rupture, contest, unravel, and dislodge the reproduction of hegemonic Eurocentric and colonized knowledge and domination. I have argued that instead of notions of resilience we should talk about colonial/imperial dispossession, looting, plunder, and exploitation of epistemologies by colonizers (Nhemachena, 2023). And it is such thinking that should mark the success of the indigenous people of Africa transformation and decolonial project.

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Notes on contributor

Charles Amo-Agyemang is a lecturer in the disciplinary history of International Relations at the department of Political Science, University of Ghana. Since completing his PhD, Amo-Agyemang has been developing new research in Ghana on the politics of indigeneity in a specifically African contexts, as well as other subjects. His work makes several contributions to theoretical and empirical knowledge concerning global governance, global power relations, postcolonialism, post-structuralist political theory, neoliberalism, resistance, governmentality, resilience thinking, environment

politics, and African development, including specifically Ghana. He has already published extensively in this area, impacting several important scholarly debates with weight. Amo-Agyemang is the fellow of the Partnership for Africa's Next Generation of Academics (PANGeA), Stellenbosch University, and was a speaker at the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA) Academic Conference on Africa held on 5-7 December 2023 at the UN Headquarters in New York. A team member of Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on Decolonising Resilience from the Global South.

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