

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

Restitution and Digitization of African Cultural Heritage: Time to Decolonize and Reconceptualize African Preservation Spaces

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**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper exploring a future in which African heritage conservation and exhibition spaces will be re-baptized as “shrineums” rather than “museums,” with a matching infrastructural reconceptualization based on community cultural sensitivities and epistemic knowledge systems.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM’s Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums’ evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).


GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The impact of colonial invasions and looting of African heritage, and the subsequent reluctance to return the heritage, or acceptance to return it only with conditions, is a pressing and urgent issue that Africans and the African diaspora are grappling with in the twenty-first century. The birth of invigorated restitution movements advocating the return of the loot and reparation of the damage caused is a testament to the situation's urgency. These movements have caused a review of public policy and legislation in concerned Western and African countries regarding the handling of illegally or unethically acquired African heritage. This paper, presented against the backdrop of this African heritage restitution awakening and African cultural activism in general, is inspired by conservative, Western-centric narratives that have proliferated in response to these movements. These narratives often cast misguided doubt on the inherent capability of African communities to preserve and sustain their looted heritage if returned. For example, researchers Alessandro Chechi, Anna Laure Bandle, and Marc-Andre Renold (2012), using Western barometers of "museum" standards, have recommended with emphasis that:

From a strict museological standpoint, conservation is an absolute priority. There is no merit in returning art objects if they are subsequently likely to deteriorate irreparably or end up in private collections in another country. Hence, it is argued that restitution of cultural objects should not be opposed only if it can be reasonably expected that the conditions required for their conservation can be met. (n.p.n)

While seeking to understand the implications of such assertions vis-à-vis African heritage practices, this paper envisions a hopeful and optimistic African future. In this future, African heritage conservation and exhibition spaces will be re-baptized as "shrineums" rather than "museums." This shift in terminology will be not just a linguistic change but a fundamental reconceptualization of these spaces based on each community's cultural sensitivities, civilizations, and epistemic systems. This essay thus draws inspiration from the restitution advocates seeking the return of their material heritage, including ancestral remains, and to decolonize and redefine their identity and knowledge systems. Conscious that decolonization in this context entails the intellectual counter-discourses on Western prejudices and biases against the African identity, personality, and possessions, the paper identifies such points of divergence in heritage narratives as the central concern.

Through relational and ethnographic research, I observe heritage practices and conservation in some traditional African communities to contend that the word "museum" does not fully accommodate these spaces, which have unique outlooks




and attached sensitivities. Consequently, I draw the conclusion that African heritage conservation spaces are more “shrines” in their physical and emotional outlook than “museums,” which in the West are spaces meant for object contemplation with no beyond-the-object considerations. This conclusion stems from critical observations of the physical structuring of Indigenous African shrines, the display of artifacts, and the spiritual attachment to each possession stored or grown in them. In the ensuing arguments, the paper answers: How will this new concept accommodate and advance African cultural sensitivities, epistemic systems, and civilizations in the digitization, restitution, and post-restitution eras? In the era of intercultural and decolonial dialogues that embrace and respect all cultural views, the African knowledge systems and civilizations are still significantly underexplored and underutilized. In this respect, accepting African heritage conservation spaces as “shrineums,” or pseudo-shrines that blend the traditional ritual space with the Western museum concept, would be justice to humanity. Such recognition would give meaning to the African perspectives in restitution and digitization endeavors.

THE AFRICAN BURDEN

This paper examines the concept of “museum” as it has been in practice in Africa since the colonial period, its suitability to African knowledge systems and cultural practices, and its relevance in the context of heritage restitution. While seeking to understand this concept, the essay does a brief comparative analysis of the “museum” with the heritage spaces that abound in traditional African societies and provides an Indigenous approach to conserving cultural objects. The main objective is to review, redefine, and re-baptize African heritage conservation spaces to decolonize and indigenize them through a shared, inclusive African nomenclature. The restitution movement becomes a clarion call to Africans to reconceptualize their identity, reclaim their self-dignity, and uphold their personality. Similarly, it highlights Africa’s rich heritage, managing, celebrating, and treating as part of humanity. Consequently, it adds value to African academics’ endeavor to decolonize African Indigenous knowledge systems.

UNIQUE VALUE OF AFRICAN HERITAGE



African heritage is unique in its art objects and epistemic systems, so its preservation, conservation, and exhibition are cultural, religious, and social manifestations of identity. African heritage finds meaning in its cultural context and performance. Therefore, transferring an art object, for example, from its original performance space to one that isolates it from its context is, in essence, tampering with its meaning, value, identity, and

functionality. This is because it is in the artifact's holistic existence and usage that its cultural or spiritual value is expressed.



Figure 1: Momyen masquerade from Nso on display with complementary paraphernalia (Researcher's archives).


The position here is that both returned and retained possessions should be preserved in spaces that convey African cultural sensitivities, civilizations, and knowledge systems, no longer in Western-imposed spaces called “museums.” It is, therefore, the hypothetical position of this paper that:

- a. African heritage should be chiefly conserved and exhibited in shrines and *shrine-like* environments.
- b. Traditional heritage conservation spaces and practices have existed in African society long before and after colonial invasions.
- c. African heritage is only meaningful in its creative communities, and its removal from these communities through looting and illegal appropriation disrupts its power, meaning, and identity.
- d. In creative African communities, effective Indigenous conservation and heritage management exists.
- e. African heritage restitution is not only about returning art possessions looted and stored in the West; it includes artworks, ancestral remains, ancestral lands seized from Indigenes, and epistemic systems.

PAN-AFRICAN VOICES ON RESTITUTION AND DIGITIZATION

In the present context filled with pan-Africanist voices throughout the world calling for the restitution of looted heritage to Indigenous creative communities, this paper’s arguments hang on the false Western assumptions that Africans are incapable of managing their heritage resources because they lack knowledge of heritage conservation and management. The false narrative that Africans are unprepared to receive and safeguard returned looted artifacts from Western museums, in effect, perpetuates Western meta-narratives that challenge the goals of humanity.

African activism around looted heritage has resulted in a clarion call for Africans and the African diaspora to unite, get into conversations about themselves and others, and ultimately decolonize and retell who they are as a way to reinstate their lost dignity, humanity, and identity. In this regard, restitution is not just about regaining the lost African art objects, land, and ancestors but also about removing colonially imposed prejudices and biases from African epistemic systems. Restitution is about enabling each creative community to tell its stories. As enshrined in the Accra Declaration on Restitution of African Heritage:



Restitution is not simply returning African heritage to its rightful places and peoples. Still, it is a matter of justice, restoration, reparation, and righting global power imbalances. It is, first and foremost, a collective venture for Africans to determine their hopes and visions for the future. (August 24, 2023)

This study thus seeks to decolonize and Africanize Indigenous African knowledge systems, especially in heritage management, by critically examining the concept of “museum” and its suitability and functionality in the African context.

It also contends with the complicating factor of digitization, seen as “intangible visualizations of our world” (Neema Lyer 2023), which today both coincides with and challenges the very essence of restitution. Digitization provides a third option for preserving and exhibiting looted heritage, allowing it to be conveniently conserved in a digital format in the West before being returned.

However, the question is, who creates the space and content? And who manages and orientates the knowledge systems stored in the spaces? And how much are African perspectives represented?

Given that digitization entails the storage of Western and African narratives on African heritage in intangible forms and formats, this paper worries about how the digitization of African heritage benefits Africans. This concern stems from the realization that digitization goes with computerization and information and communication technologies, which are far-fetched for many of the relevant communities, given that the custodians and promoters of African heritage are Indigenous people with little or no education in Western knowledge. Most of them live in rural areas without electricity and internet connections, and do not know how to use computers or smartphones. For these people, issues like hunger are more of a priority than digitizing their heritage. Nonetheless, digitization could reach educated or literate Africans living in contemporary contexts, allowing Africans and Westerners to enter a new collaborative relationship in which shared narratives that consider Indigenous voices are central. In this respect, digitizing Indigenous African heritage preservation and promotion methods would significantly contribute to the future of museums in the world.



RETURN AND PRESERVATION OF AFO-A-KOM IN KOM-CAMEROON

In 1966, a sacred wooden Afo-A-Kom sculpture was looted from a royal compound in Cameroon. As Paul N. Nkwi relates, “It was stolen from its *storage sanctuary* (emphasis

mine) in 1966 and was ‘mysteriously spirited away by thieves using a highly organized system of logistics that included land rovers, trucks, and planes’ (*Time Magazine*, 5 Nov. 1973, quoted in Nkwi 1978). By describing the preservation space of Afo-A-Kom as a “storage sanctuary,” Nkwi makes a conscious distinction between a museum and a shrine as storage and conservation spaces in Africa. As a deity, Afo-A-Kom’s place is in a “sanctuary,” not a glass case in a Western-aped structure called a “museum.”



Figure 2: Afo-a-Kom, the Kom deity, was looted in 1966 and returned in 1973 to be displayed in his sanctuary in Kom.

On the other hand, in the narration of Alessandro Chechi et al.: “The Afo-A-Kom (literally, the Kom thing) was stolen from *Ngumba House* [emphasis mine], Laikom, a village of the Kom Kingdom, a tribal population of approximately 30,000 people in the north part of Cameroon” (pdf n.d). Afo-A-Kom was conserved in a sacred location, which the authors describe varyingly as “Ngumba House” and “storage sanctuary,” from where he played a significant spiritual and cultural role in the lives of the Kom people. The synergy in his existence with other artifacts in the shrine in Kom is evident in the ensuing narrative. The nomenclature these researchers give to the conservation space of Afo-A-Kom is common in the Grassfields languages and refers to secret/sacred spaces that house sacred possessions in palaces. “Ngumba” to the Kom people is “Kwifon,” and to the Nso people, it is “Nwerong.” “Ngumba House” is “Kwifon House” in Kom and “Nwerong House” in Nso. These houses are secret institutions exclusive to men that serve as regulatory

mechanisms to ensure sanity and peace in the land. In these spaces, there are sub-spaces where the paraphernalia of performance that constitute the land’s cultural heritage are stored and conserved. Initiated individual artisans and conservators ensure the preservation and conservation of these possessions using recognized Indigenous preservation methods.

Similarly, the occasions for their public display are determined by the traditional, cultural, and social calendar that the community engages in. Heritage conserved in these “Ngumba Houses” is never opened to public visitations. It is either heard or seen during performances within or without. Alessandro Chechi et al. claim that Afo-A-Kom was conserved in a “Ngumba House.” These researchers refer to a sanctuary or secret and sacred space, as Nkwi describes. Their use of the word “Ngumba House” is inappropriate when cultural sensitivities of the Kom people come into play.

MUSEUM AS A WESTERN CONCEPT

Godfrey D. Lewis and Saumya Sharma (2020) hold that the word museum “has classical origins. In its Greek form, museum meant ‘seat of the Muses’ or ‘a shrine or temple of the Muses’ and designated a philosophical institution or a place of contemplation.” Lewis further points out that the Latin derivation “museum” in the Roman context was restricted to places of philosophical discussion and that “the idea of an institution called a museum and established to preserve and display a collection to the public was well established in the 18th century” (n.p.n). In his telling, the concept of the museum as a building accommodating cultural material to which the public had access was perpetuated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This concept has continued to evolve in the twenty-first century as creative communities started agitating against the exclusion of their heritage spaces in this nomenclature. In this evolution, “museums” are no longer only buildings housing cultural artifacts but also open-air locations where people’s cultural heritage and their natural ecology can be exposed.

Throwing more light on the functions and objectives of museums, Lewis maintains that “Museums have been founded for a variety of purposes: for example, to contribute to the quality of life of the areas where they are situated; to attract tourism to a region; to promote civic pride or nationalistic endeavor; or even to transmit overtly ideological concepts” (n.p.n). Lewis concludes that despite the diversity in form, content, and function, museums and libraries have a common goal: to preserve and interpret some material heritage of a given society’s cultural consciousness.

SHRINE

Shrines generally, in an African cultural context, constitute sacred and esoteric spaces adorned with an assemblage of natural and artificial material. As Allan C. Dawson (ed.) holds, “Shrines are more than just spiritual vessels or places of worship. They are cultural signposts, markers of identity, powerful symbols of solidarity and cohesion, physical manifestations of presence and ownership and more” (Review). Michael

Sheridan similarly postulates that African shrines “serve as ‘cultural signposts’ for ethnic, territorial, and social boundaries” (162). Shrines to Igor Kopytoff are determined from the dynamics of social frontiers, settlement patterns, and ritual authority in Africa. At the same time, Dawson sees them as “physical manifestations of a group’s claim to a particular piece of land.” Judith Sterner and Nicholas David observe that shrines in the Mandara mountains are filled with sacred pots which “are not all kept in the darkened recesses of a shrine room or beneath a granary; some are left upon the tombs of their former owners; some are tucked into rock outcrops to protect against dangerous spirits, and others are reused for secular purposes or abandoned” (n.p.n).

The dynamism in shrine creation across varying spaces accommodating different ritual objects adds value to the argument that African heritage conservation and exhibition spaces shift remarkably from the Western concept of “museum.” For objects to have meaning, they must be studied in their performance context, which among the Dagara and other groups in northern Ghana and Burkina Faso could be either in “a proper house” or in an “earth shrine” with jurisdiction over a whole village.

HERITAGE CONSERVATION SPACES IN NSO-CAMEROON

The Nso Fondom is located in the Bui Division of the northwest region of Cameroon. “Fondom” in the Grassfields Cultural Zone is equivalent to kingdom. At the helm of a Fondom is a mighty monarch called Fon, who is revered by subjects as a spiritual and cultural guide. Nso Fondom is estimated to be the largest single Fondom in all of English-speaking Cameroon (Verkijika G. Fanson 2013). As part of their heritage, the Nso people have spaces where their possessions are stored, displayed, and used in performance. These spaces, in their outlook, content, and uses, suit the definitions identified in “storage sanctuaries,” “Ngumba houses,” compounds, cult houses, family houses, traditional healers’ homes, kitchens, caverns, caves, farmhouses, on graves, and

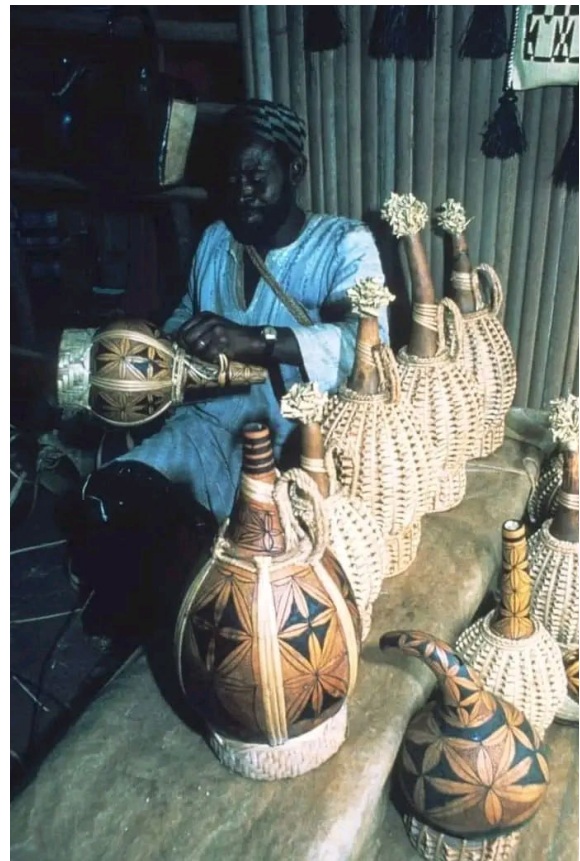


Figure 3: A Nso calabash designer at work (Researcher’s archives).

more. However, the uniqueness of these spaces in Nso is reflected in the nomenclature drawn from the Indigenous language called Lamnso. The storage spaces include, among others:

- a. Kitav (kitav ke memvemve [of old things], kitav ke wong [for state totems], kitav ke Shishwaa [of hunger cult], kitav ke shiv [of medicines], kitav ke Nwerong [of Nwerong totems], kitav ke bom Fon [of sacred totems for the Fon's wine], and more.
- b. Kire' ke (Kire' ke anyuy [the place of the gods], Kire' ke chu [the place of sacrifices], Kire' ke Shoh [the place of the Shoh family divinity], Kire' ke Shoh attangwen [the place of the Shoh village protection divinity]).
- c. Buu, including Buu Manjong (storage of Manjong), Buu Chong (storage of totems for women cult), and Buu Shiv (storage of cult central totems). What is common among these spaces is that the paraphernalia or charms from one space cannot replace the other in its space. Some do not even admit contact with the other. Most often, any misuse has disastrous consequences on the individual or members.
- d. N'ko a cult sanctuary for some dance groups with secret possessions that only initiated members have access to. These possessions are only heard during the performance, but initiated members see and touch them.



Figure 4: Nsii cult shrine on display at the Nso Palace Courtyard during the Ngonso Cultural Festival.



Figure 5: Kire ke Shoh' (Family Divinity shrine) in the Nso Fandom (Researcher's archives).

In these different spaces, movable and immovable possessions can be identified; lineage members can seek protection, blessings, fertility, abundant harvest, good health, peace, prosperity, and reproduction from Kire' ke Shoh, located within the residence of the family head or priest. Likewise, the villagers can seek protection and justice from the Shoh Ataagwen, which is believed to be a time immemorial judge.

The terminology varies from one shrine to another depending on the traditional and cultural roles such a space and its members play. The most common possessions in this Fandom include masks, bamboo crafts, sculptures, cane art, embroidered and woven fabric, blacksmith art, stone art, calabash art, animal skin art, musical instruments, clay pots, and kitchen utensils. The people's attachments to these possessions make them treat them with reverence. Each

storage shrine differs regarding paraphernalia, setting, rituals, membership, mood, location, and spirituality. As this discussion has established, the shrine concept in the African setup denotes conservation spaces that host material, immaterial, spiritual, and human heritage.

SHRINEUM: THE CASE FOR A COMMON NOMENCLATURE FOR AFRICAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION SPACES

The above storage spaces and artifacts, as well as performers, constitute the heritage of Africans. As in most, if not all, of Africa, the heritage is exhibited within specific cultural and spiritual contexts, even within the same artistic and traditional community. The holistic value of each possession is emphasized from the observation that an object isolated from its creative context, performers, or custodian/audience loses its cultural and spiritual significance. Any attempt at defining its value in a strange context becomes faulty and could be qualified as a knowledge-aping endeavor whose result will be distortion in the knowledge systems surrounding the possessions.

A look at the physical structures, contents, performances in related spaces, mood,

audience response, and accessibility to the public concludes that the African concept of heritage conservation spaces falls short of fitting into the idea of “museum” as



Figure 6: Exterior aerial view of the Bamoun Heritage Preservation Space *la Musee des Rois* in Fomban, Cameroon, designed on the community's cultural sensitivities and knowledge systems.

promoted in Western contexts. For instance, African conservation and exhibition spaces consider the cultural beliefs attached to active and inactive possessions: gender-sensitive, seen and heard only, touchable and untouchable (as in royalty), access restricted, spiritually endowed natural sources, and more. No matter the Indigenous appellation of the preservation space, the common notion in each is that the possessions have spiritual connotations, have meaning in context, and, when considered in synergy, give each a holistic existence.

Consequently, the architectural design of the envisaged new spaces should reflect traditional totems, local habitats, and the bio-ecological life of the community. Such structures should be conceived as each community's most cherished totems or bio-




Figure 7: Ground view of the Bamoun Heritage Preservation space in Fouban (Fred Photos, Bamenda).

ecological life.

Similarly, the space should not prevent physical contact between its traditional custodian, conservator, and promoter and its members. It should not be a space where conventional dicta determine shared knowledge systems to the disregard of cultural sensitivities. Its knowledge system must authentically reflect the cultural background from which it emanates, and its contents should not be displayed in isolation from others against community practices. Those restrictive practices that provide aesthetic value to these possessions and their conservation spaces must be respected. Indigenous preservation methods should be given cognitive value and promoted as the world's recognition of African ingenuity.

A shrineum should create an atmosphere of spirituality and a mood of reverence each time one approaches or visits it. It should consider the Indigenous conception of the physical storage know-how and the knowledge systems linked to that conception. For



instance, in the Bamoun Sultanate located in Fouban in the west region of Cameroon, the architectural design of the new heritage space called La Musee des Rois (The Kings' Museum) is a serpent with two heads and a scorpion (see pictures above). These bio-ecological symbols inspired the architectural designer to consider cultural sensitivities, knowledge systems, and the community's bio-ecological life. According to the Bamoun oral history, the serpent with two heads incarnates force, might, and the mastery of military art. The origin of this symbol of heroism is linked to the Bamoun king, Mbeumbe, who is said to have won two simultaneous wars against the Pou and the Mgbetnka warriors at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For its part, the scorpion that stands on the serpent symbolizes community wisdom and warrior intelligence. The metal instrument at the central entrance is played as a rallying call instrument, especially during times of war.

CONCLUSION

The reconceptualization of African heritage spaces under this new identity will not mean that African communities detach themselves from the Western world. Instead, it will be the dawn of a new collaborative network where knowledge systems from both worlds are shared, and cooperation to realize heritage sustainability becomes imperative. Such collaboration will give meaning to restitution and digitization, thus convincing Africans about the new world citizenship, its inclusiveness and goodwill toward shared humanity and development. Therefore, the future of heritage in the world will be guaranteed by the collaboration between promoters of “museums” and “shrineums” across spaces, thus giving value to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals of promoting cognitive cultures and world balances in power.



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