

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

Sharing Digital Heritage: The Case of a Digital Repatriation in the Gwembe Valley of Zambia

BY VICTORIA PHIRI CHITUNGU AND SAMBA YONGA
LIVINGSTONE MUSEUM AND WOMEN'S HISTORY MUSEUM, ZAMBIA



**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper exploring a future in which digital repatriation can be a means in which African cultural objects in foreign museums are reconnected with their embedded Indigenous knowledge and communities of origin in Africa.

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*](#).

INTRODUCTION

The central function of museums is to preserve and interpret cultural materials. In Western museums, this can be traced to the history of the acquisition of these cultural materials, especially those of foreign origin, fetishized by curators and collectors for being exotic. This complex and multifaceted collecting practice is highly shaped by European colonialism and thereby influenced by Eurocentric views and colonial power dynamics. As such, non-Western cultural materials have historically been perceived, translated, and exhibited through Westernized perspectives, influencing how curators view and ultimately present them (Schorch 2013).

Western museums often acquired cultural artifacts from colonized regions during the colonial era, resulting not only in mass dislocation but also decontextualization of these objects from their places of origin. This is because the process of collecting was object-centered, focused primarily on tangible and physical form and steeped in commodity fetishism, especially for those objects whose origins were distant in terms of space and/or time (Clifford 1988). The cultural inclination toward object fetishism, and the power dynamics of colonialism at play, resulted in non-Western cultural materials collected and kept in these museums being appropriated and integrated into a Eurocentric system of meaning, denying them the contextual data and associated social meanings that defined these objects in their places of origin. (Anderson 1990). Over time, this separation of the cultural materials from their social, cultural, and historical space resulted in knowledge gaps where the physical and the intangible aspects did not adequately inform their interpretation.


In the post-colonial context, increasing discussions have emerged about these knowledge gaps surrounding dislocated cultural materials—discussions which, until recently, were overlooked and overshadowed by the meanings created within the Western museological context (Clifford 1988). This has included cultural materials dislocated from sub-Saharan African communities, including Zambia, which this study will focus on. In the case we examine, communities from which these cultural materials were removed were engaged in a meaningful and mutual knowledge-sharing exercise in which they could provide vital contextual and historical information associated with the objects in question. To beat the challenges of distance, the exercise used digital technology to digitally repatriate the cultural objects from Europe to the African communities in which the objects were removed. In showcasing the success of the exercise, this paper will also demonstrate how digital repatriation methods might reconnect African cultural objects in foreign museums with their communities of origin, reviving their intangible value and closing knowledge gaps. The paper will also address issues of community cultural amnesia associated with some of the objects taken due to different colonial practices experienced by some communities.



For the purpose of this study, this paper will use the experience of what came to be called the Gwembe Workshops, a provenance research project carried out as a series of workshops conducted in the Gwembe Valley of the Southern Province of Zambia in 2020. The aim of this project was to develop a collaborative and interactive digital interface between Zambian cultural objects in the Swedish Museum of Ethnography, part of the National Museums of World Cultures (NMWC), and their communities of origin. The project was a collaboration between Sweden and Zambia led by the NMWC, Choma Museum and Crafts Centre (CMCC), and Women’s History Museum Zambia (WHMZ).

BACKGROUND TO THE GWEMBE WORKSHOPS

Prior to the workshops, the NMWC had identified the Gwembe Valley as one of the places where a number of cultural materials had been acquired by Swedish collectors from about 1890 before ending up in its collections. Through the project, twenty-eight of these objects (artifacts and pictures of cultural objects and activities) were digitally repatriated to four villages located in the Gwembe, Zimba, and Sinazongwe districts—Munyumbwe, Siabaswi, Madyongo, and Siampondo—where a series of workshops with the communities were held from October 23rd to 29th of 2020. The major aim of the workshops was to allow the “owners” to first confirm whether they recognized the objects and then provide any contextual and historical information about them that was missing from the collection records. This would make it possible for the WHMZ and NMWC to improve the objects’ metadata for a wide audience that would want to access and use them on a digital platform that the two institutions are working on. This was part of a project whose aim is to develop a collaborative and interactive digital interface for sharing historical collections and women’s histories between Sweden and Zambia through the NMWC and WHMZ in collaboration with the CMCC. A total of forty-eight people participated, all of whom were residents of the villages in which they had lived for more than ten years, with thirty-eight of them born there. For the purpose of this paper, only four objects from these workshops will be presented.



The workshops were divided into two teams of researchers, Team A and Team B. Team A’s major aim was to engage object owners to create an inclusive methodology for developing supporting knowledge of the objects on the digital platform. Team B’s focus was to identify the best software and tools to enhance digital access to historical collections by the owners of objects in village settings and develop a participatory methodology for developing a digital platform with owners of objects as both contributors and end users.

TEAM A TERMS AND REFERENCES

Team A's main objectives were as follows:

- Identify and distinguish a number of different objects and materials that are familiar to the participants stored on the NMWC collection inventory.
- Identify and distinguish materials used in making the objects.
- Map the geographic distribution of the object in the area.
- Identify the object-making space (is it a common space, within the privacy of homes, etc.)
- Identify the principal makers of the objects.
- Identify other players in the object-making process.
- Identify modes of transfer in the knowledge production of the object.

Here were their findings for four sample objects:

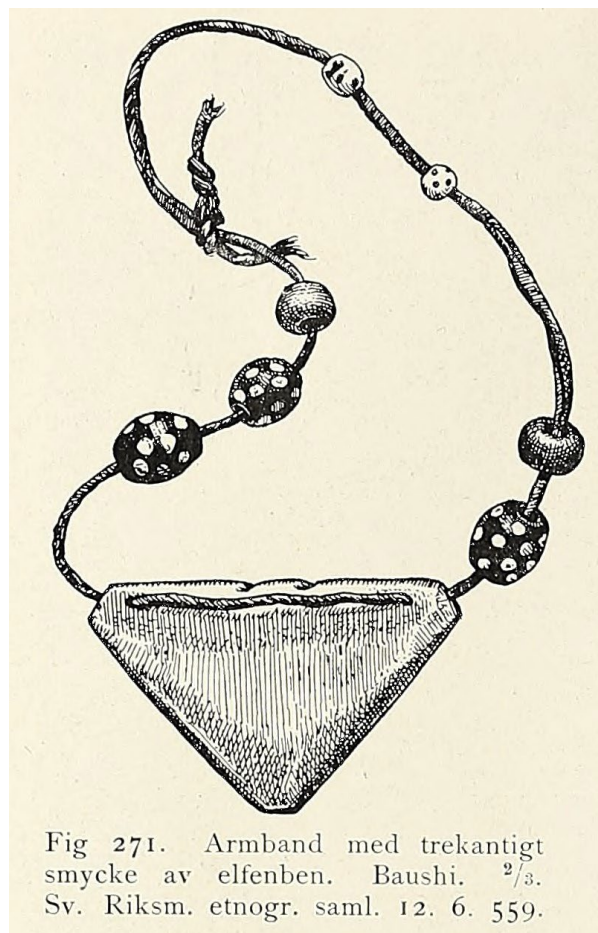


Fig 271. Armband med trekantigt smykke av elfenben. Baushi. ²/₃. Sv. Riksm. etnogr. saml. 12. 6. 559.

Figure 271

OBJECT NO. 1:

Siansalama Sinazongwe District

At Siansalama in Sinazongwe District, sixteen respondents identified fig. 271 as follows:

1. Name of Object: *Mpande*. Could be worn as a necklace with the string made long or short depending on preference.
2. Principal makers of the object: Not locally made. It was brought from foreign places (outside their locality) and was expensive, thus it was worn by rich people or people with power like Chiefs.
3. Materials used to make the object: Fiber locally called *kakuze*, seashells locally called *mpande*, beads locally called *man'gon'go* (which were normally bright-colored).
4. Space for making the object: N/A.
5. Other players in the making of the object: N/A.

6. Modes of transfer of knowledge in the production of the object: N/A.
7. Is the object still in use? No. The object has been replaced by more modern and acceptable necklaces/arm bands. The beads and shells used to make this necklace have been criticized as demonic by some Christian faiths, so many people avoid wearing this kind of necklace. Only older people or people with high prestige like Chiefs have them, as they have been kept for ceremonial purposes in the chiefly families as symbol of power and wealth from the olden days.

Madyongo: Zimba District

At Madyongo in Zimba District, respondents identified Fig. 271 as follows:

1. Name of object: *Mbanyina*/mpande.
2. Principal makers of the object: Not locally made. It was brought from foreign places (outside their locality).
3. Materials used to make the object: Fiber; seashells locally called mpande as principal material shaped into a triangle and called mbanyina; and beads called man'gon'go.
4. Space for making the object: N/A.
5. Other players in the making of the object: N/A.
6. Modes of transfer of knowledge in the production of the object: N/A.
7. Is the object still in use?: No.
8. Extra information: There is a basket pattern from madyongo that takes after this form of mpande shell. The pattern is also called mbanyina or mpande.

Overall Findings:

From the general consensus, the object above is generally called mpande, a name derived from the principal material of the seashell. This particular shape of mpande is called *ndolo* in Siabaswi of Sinazongwe District and mbanyina in Madyongo of Zimba District. There are also basket patterns influenced by this shape that are also called

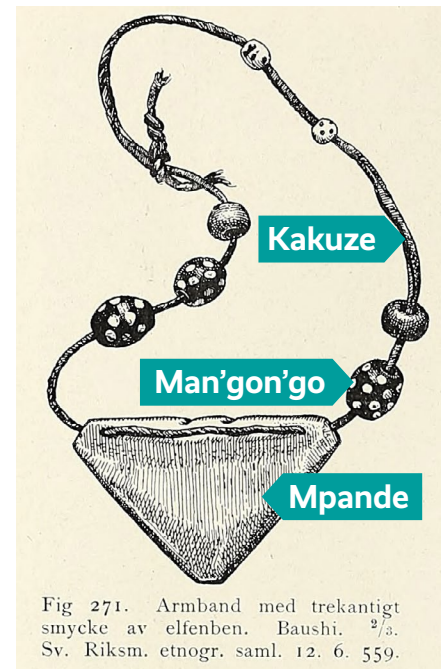


Fig 271. Armband med trekantigt smykke av elfenben. Baushi. ^{2/3}. Sv. Riksm. etnogr. saml. 12. 6. 559.



Mbanyina, a diamond-shaped pattern basket influenced by the mbanyina necklace pendant: Madyongo village, Zimba District.

mbanyina. The object was not locally made. It was worn as a necklace as a symbol of prestige. Beads were added to beautify the necklace. The object is no longer in use as is it is also associated with demons, but some Chiefs and older people retain them as ceremonial objects. This developed meaning could be attributed to the influence of the inculturation of Christianity and the colonizing mission.



Figure 1912.564

OBJECT NO. 2:

In Sianslama and Siabaswi in Sinazongwe District and Madyongo in Zimba District, respondents identified Fig. 1912.564 as follows:

1. Name of Object: *Nchoko*, used to be worn around the legs and arms by women.
2. Principal makers of the object: They were bought.
3. Materials used to make the object: Brass, iron.
4. Space for making the object: Public space.
5. Other players in the making of the object: N/A.
6. Modes of transfer of knowledge in the production of the object: Participant observation where others watched and learned from the experts and helped in the making was possible.
7. Is the object still in use?: No. It is seen as backward to wear this kind of jewelry. During colonial times, this kind of accessory was not acceptable at formal places of work like offices. So the object fell out of use among young people and eventually it was associated with backwardness and so fell into disuse.
8. Additional information: Women also wore the *nchoko* as a weapon to protect themselves from attackers. This was common during inter-ethnic wars when women were often abducted by the winning group as booty, or during the slave raids when women often fell prey, or during any other form of physical attack. The *nchoko* was heavy and if used to hit an opponent could be fatal.

Overall Findings:

The respondents from the three villages above identified fig. Fig. 1912.564 as a *nchoko* that used to be worn on the arms and legs. It was mainly worn by women as accessories which could also serve as weapons. Women no longer wear them as they are associated with backwardness and were not permitted to be worn in Western formal spaces such as offices during the colonial period.

OBJECT NO. 3:

In Munyumbwe in Gwembe District, Madyongo in Zimba District, and Siansalama in Sinazongwe District, respondents identified Fig. 1912.6.533 as follows:

1. Name of object: *Munkonde*, worn around the neck.
2. Principal makers of the object: Women.
3. Materials used to make the object: Beads, cloth, and fiber.
4. Space for making the object: Public space.
5. Other players in the making of the object: Girls help their mothers or elder sisters to make them.
6. Modes of transfer of knowledge in the production of the object: Participant observation.
7. Is the object still in use?: No. During the Christianization of the area, anything made from or linked to beads became associated with witchcraft by the new faith, and therefore those converted to Christianity were forbidden from wearing them. Eventually, the *munkonde* fell out of use. Today only a few elderly people still wear them.

Overall Findings:

The respondents from the three villages above identified Fig. 1912.6.533 as *munkonde* that used to be worn around the neck by both men and women for beauty. *Munkonde* fell out of use during the Christianization of the area as anything made from or linked to beads became associated with witchcraft by the new faith.

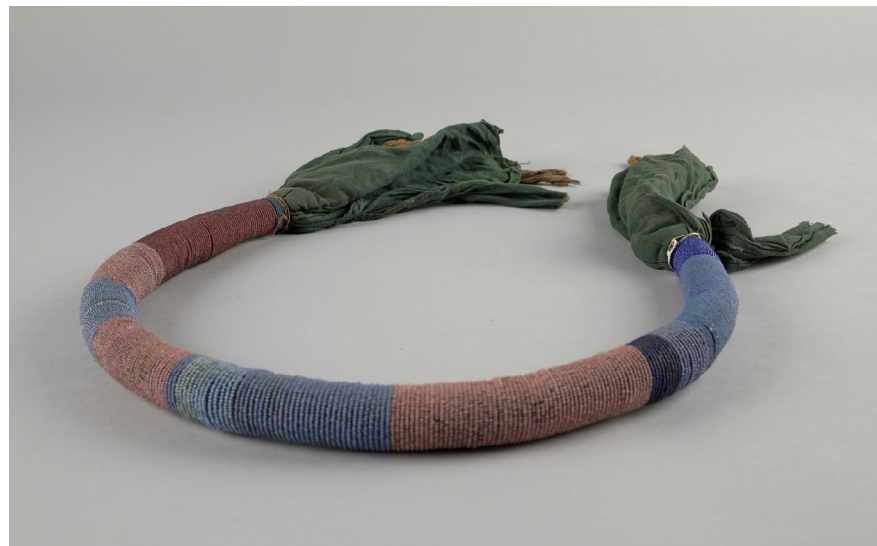


Figure 1912.6.533



Figure 1884.15.0030

OBJECT NO. 4:

At Cisumba in Gwembe District, Siansalama and Siabaswi in Sinazongwe District, and Madyongo in Zimba District, respondents identified Fig 1884.15.0030 as follows:

1. Name of Object: *Munkuli*, used to store liquids such as milk and water.
2. Principal makers of the object: Planted and harvested by women.
3. Materials used to make the object: A naturally grown gourd; fiber.
4. Space for making the object: Public.
5. Other players in the making of the object: Men and children helped to clean the inside of the object for its domestic use.
6. Modes of transfer of knowledge in the production of the object: Participant observation.
7. Is the object still in use?: Yes, but not very common as most people today use plastic containers as a modern alternative to store liquids such as water and milk.

8. Additional information: The string of fiber tied around the munkuli is supposed to give grip to the container, as it can be very slippery when it comes in contact with liquid. The extra loose end acts as a handle.

Overall Findings:

Fig. 1884.15.0030 above was identified by all the four villages as a munkuli, used to store liquids like water and milk. It is not commonly used today as it has been replaced by plastic containers that are considered more modern.


CONCLUSION

The Gwembe Workshop series demonstrated that most objects removed from sub-Saharan communities and now housed in museums in the diaspora lack important context and historical interpretations. The workshops further demonstrated that it is possible to digitally repatriate objects in the diaspora to communities of origin and attempt to restore their intangible value. As the “owners” of these objects, the communities were able to provide a wealth of contextual and historical information and enrich the collection’s metadata. The end product of this project will be to use this information to create a digital platform that can be accessed by the community of origin and other interested parties. The whole exercise allowed the communities of origin to participate in the restoration of the knowledge systems that were lost through inculturation.


However, it is also obvious from this project that under the colonial systems that operated within these communities, it was common practice to promote European cultural preferences over Indigenous ones, as observed by Clifford (1988). In the case of the communities above, Christianity and Western culture preferences were used not only to misrepresent the material cultures of the local people but also marginalize the cultures, as was the case with the mpande necklace, the munkonde necklace, the nchoko accessories, and to a certain extent the munkuli gourd. This practice resulted in certain items of culture falling into disuse in favor of Western alternatives, often regarded as “modern” or “Christian” by contrast. This has resulted in community cultural amnesia with regards to some of the cultural materials that were not deemed acceptable by the colonial dominant culture. This was obvious during the workshops, as not everyone had knowledge of the material culture presented to them, even if it had been collected in their area and identified by the collectors as coming from their community. In that sense, the workshops turned out to be a re-learning forum for some members of the communities about their own cultural materials.

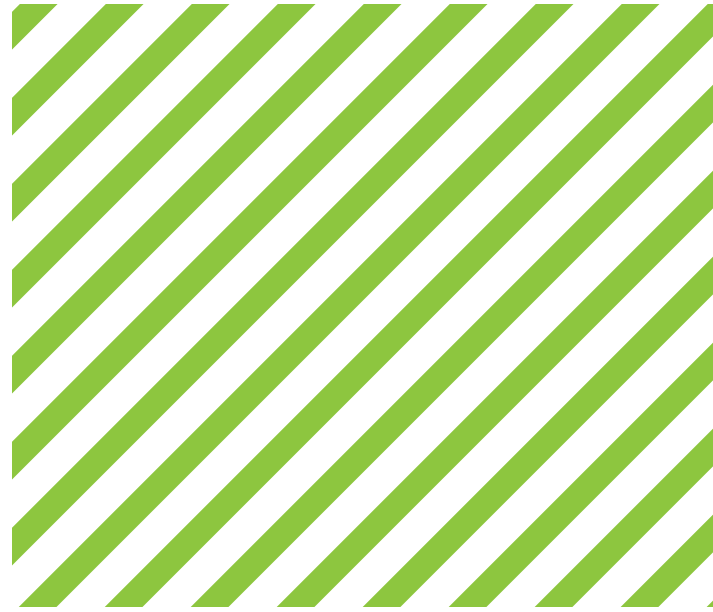
Despite the obvious amnesia in some cases, and evident difficulties with being able to fully revive the intangible value of the cultural heritage, this demonstrates that the Indigenous community members possess agency and can be key stakeholders in the process of renewing meaning and forming new ways of producing knowledge in future museum efforts.

With a growing body of literature to support us, we argue there is need to reexamine the framework of museum-making and meaning-making, especially in the case of contested colonial collections. We further argue that it is only the “owners” of these objects who can revive the object and restore missing information back to them.



However, we are quick to admit that cultural amnesia is real depending on the kind of experiences different communities had with their colonizers, who more often than not marginalized the cultures of the colonized. The loose threads that are being strung together to revive the missing data and knowledge need to be collected and archived with haste in order to create a landing space where invisible knowledge can be made visible. This was plainly evident in the Gwembe Workshops, as demonstrated above. In addition, we advocate for reactivating knowledge lost within the community in the process of colonization. This is a holistic way to both reconstitute cultural material and restore justice and dignity to the communities from which they were removed. Distance and space should not be a real issue, as digital technology enables digital repatriation as the future of heritage-sharing.





ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Victoria Phiri Chitungu is a cultural historian and Director of Livingstone Museum in Zambia. She is also a Cultural Consultant for the Women's History Museum Zambia, a member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), where she once served as the Africa Regional Coordinator for CECA, and a Board Member for African Museums and Heritage Restitution (AFRIHARE), an organization that looks at the protection, preservation, and restitution of African artifacts and heritage in the diaspora.



Samba Yonga is a Zambian journalist, media consultant, and co-founder of the Women's History Museum in Zambia. Yonga is also the founder of Ku-Atenga Media, a media consultancy firm, and was named one of Destiny's "Power of 40" most influential women in Africa in 2017.





Center for the Future of Museums

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS

The American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) helps museums explore the cultural, political, and economic challenges facing society and devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. CFM is a think tank and R&D lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways. Find research, reports, blog content and foresight tools at aam-us.org/programs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/.



American Alliance of Museums

ABOUT THE AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) is the only organization representing the entire museum field, from art and history museums to science centers and zoos. Since 1906, we have been championing museums through advocacy and providing museum professionals with the resources, knowledge, inspiration, and connections they need to move the field forward. Learn more at aam-us.org.



This report was generously supported by

DAVID BERG FOUNDATION



“Sharing Digital Heritage: The Case of a Digital Repatriation in the Gwembe Valley of Zambia” © 2024 by Victoria Phiri Chitungu and Samba Yonga is licensed under Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Attribute to Victoria Phiri Chitungu and Samba Yonga and the American Alliance of Museums, and include the URL aam-us.org. To view a copy of this license, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Report design by [Brevity & Wit](#)

HELP US KEEP AN EYE ON THE FUTURE

Center for the Future of Museums (CFM) projects and reports are supported by American Alliance of Museums member dues and donations. If this report sparked your thinking and you would like to see CFM's work prosper, please consider supporting the Alliance by joining or making a tax-deductible contribution. For over a decade, CFM has been helping museums explore today's challenges and shape a better tomorrow. We welcome your investment in our shared future.

Support CFM today and help create a better future for museums. Visit aam-us.org/membership or aam-us.org/donate.

Foundation and corporate support are also welcome. To learn more, contact Eileen Goldspiel at egoldspiel@aam-us.org.



**American
Alliance of
Museums**