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## Restitution of Cultural Material to Africa

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E. K. AGORSAH

## Restitution of Cultural Material to Africa

As African nations search for means to establish viable and authentic cultural identities, an increasing number of demands have been made on European Governments to return art objects, archives and antiquities taken during the colonial era. In a sense these demands come as attempts to turn back history, the history which denuded Africa of its culture in order to impress the fact of colonial subjugation.

For centuries, the movement of African art and antiquities has been an outward flow and as thousands of military and political conquerors, administrators, missionaries and adventurers took home souvenirs of their African experiences, and with the growing awareness of the unique nature of African antiquities in Europe and America, large investment in African art commenced. In its contemporary form, this process continues as African and European art and antique dealers, attracted by huge profit margins, buy and sell African antiquities despite well publicised national laws against export of these. Thus the waves of colonial incursions which involved administrators, traders, missionaries and the like turned into almost complete depletion of the culture which was the force behind the African personality. Some missionaries who on occasions encouraged Africans to burn their so-called „pagan effigies“ as proof of real conversion quietly collected the best examples and shipped them back home. As a result of these activities rows, or rather piles, of African cultural objects sit like jewels behind glass in European public and private Museums often grouped with those of other so-called „primitive“ societies. The British Museum for example houses its African specimens in a specialised „Museum of Mankind“ with articles from Polynesian and Mayan Cultural traditions.

Now the situation about the flow is turning inward as African Governments or traditional institutions and leaders increasingly demand an equitable share in the heritage of the past with justifiable urgency. In some cases the demands have been respected perhaps as prices for continuing good will or good trade relationships. Thus, for example, at the urging of a British firm the question of returning Asantehene's regalia was introduced in the House of Lords; the Belgian Government publicly acknowledged an old agreement to return significant works of art to Kinshasa; and President Giscard d'Estaing of France announced the return of some ancient Algerian archives during the first visit of a French President to Algeria since the War of Independence. In some other circles, however, talk of restitution has provoked a tortured outcry from a public which regards the treasures as their heritage as rightly gained of former empires.

The most significant case for the restitution of cultural objects is the fact that there is a deep-rooted and indissoluble bond between nature, man and his artistic creations. The cultural riches of the poor countries are at their best in their natural setting because "they glow a sensual aura" as has been succinctly put by Mr. Ipoto Eyebu-Bankan'Asi of Zaire. Such works represent the manual skill and the innermost feelings of African ancestors and serve as a guiding light and inspiration. It is therefore proper that the laws of fundamental telepathy be obeyed. It is also both natural and just that these guiding lights and authentic objects and symbols be brought back against its surviving cultural traditions and placed in the context of their creation. There is no doubt that this background inspiration has a superhuman force like one possessed by the spirit of the ancestors.

The result of the curse which arises out of the pollution of these by their removal from

their natural traditional setting is the inability of the alien owners to present them or generate around them the true nature of these antiquities.

Furthermore, African scholars are increasingly restless about the nomenclature of European and American conceptions of African art and culture. Several Western scholars, such as William Fagg formerly of British Museum and Frank Willet of Northwestern University, have pressed to develop criticism of African art which would transcend the dominant anthropological-ethnographic emphasis. Yet their analysis remains rooted in European perceptions of abstraction and naturalism. A fine art professor at the University of Ife would say: "Because they are in Europe rather than in their place of birth, misinterpretation is easy". The misrepresentation of African art and culture is the result of provision of inaccurate information, mistakes in European accounts, errors of attribution and characterization. Sometimes these errors can be traced to African sources often meant to satisfy western academic conceptions. This, one would consider, is an attempt to perpetuate the slavery of the African to Western aesthetic standards. Restitution of these objects should therefore be considered as a war against incorrect information on, and contamination of the African culture.

Another important point to consider on the question of restitution is that one means of achieving political stability is to celebrate the value of the glorious past. At the First Inter-governmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa, held on Accra in 1976, highly placed officials from thirty-five countries stressed the increasing value of culture in African politics. The consensus was that culture is at least as important as economics in the development of modern Africa, and perhaps more critical for internal cohesion and continental solidarity.

There is no truth in the argument that Africans do not appreciate these old things beyond their monetary value and would sell them unscrupulously if given the chance. African governments are committed to retrieving and maintaining their priceless heritage even at a price. The Asante Traditional Council for example recently bought a gold embroidered cap which had belonged to Nana Kofi Karikari for £ 2,250 at an auction in London. The Nigerian Government has purchased some Benin bronzes from the British Museum during the 1950s and has continued to purchase unusual pieces when they become available. Very recently again the Ghana National Museum retrieved an Asante State Chair from London for the Asantehene for a huge price. The concern of Africans about Africa's cultural property is even reflected in national budgets. Nigeria, for example, increased its annual budget for collection of cultural material from 300 000 Naira in 1974—75 to 400 000 Naira in 1975—76.

Some people still deride the current efforts for restitution as a "nationalistic" drive contrasting it with nobler sentiments of the "universality" of art. They advocate the spirit of sharing or of exchange which is outlined in a proposed UNESCO recommendation. Academics particularly ask why Africans are not more interested in collecting European and other art. The call of restitution has therefore been considered a selfish motive, even though it is accepted that return of such objects is essential for cultural identity. So far no African country has called for the return of all the artifacts and art objects which were taken during colonialism. Where there are more than one of an African object in foreign hands it has been fair enough to consider sharing. Close examination of policies of cultural institutions in African countries indicates a very liberal hold on exchange systems of these objects.

No strong case can be made for keeping another person's cultural property other than its return to its bona fide maker. Attempts being made in various ways to return to their original owners cultural objects, therefore constitute a fight in the right direction. Like other third world countries African countries have looked for relief in the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illegal Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This convention was expected to play a deterrent role in the trafficking of cultural objects. Without the support of the consumer na-

tions, however, the convention is virtually a dead letter. The efforts of the resolutions of the First Inter-governmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Africa which called for co-operative regional efforts also does not seem to have been effective. Perhaps it is too short a time to judge its effectiveness. The above together with national efforts, it is hoped, will, with time, bring pressure to bear on non-supporters of the restitution call, to recognise that the best way to understand or appreciate African art and culture is to see it in its natural and true setting.

These works convey messages which can be understood only by the most elderly of the African society today and death is taking toll of those alive now who understand these symbols. In a few decades they would have passed away and would have gone with the knowledge they possess. Those who can do this interpretation are illiterates and can only do it in their natural setting. Why then can one refuse to understand the return of these cultural materials to their places of origin? It is better, not only for Africans, but for all people especially people with identifiable cultural history, to collect the correct information and records about the art and culture of Africa.

Finally the search for cultural identity which has been one of the main features of recent African history needs serious consideration, especially as it is a major requirement not only for nation building but also constitutes one of the most powerful implements of the present liberation movements and the on-going struggle against colonialism, racism and apartheid. In this also is a case never to be offset by any contrary view, on the question of restitution. It is hoped that with time the true message of restitution of Africa's cultural property will go down the ears of all people. Then Africans will proudly say to themselves: „This is our true world“.

## Zusammenfassung

*Es entsprach historischem Brauch, daß afrikanische Kulturgüter von Vertretern der Kolonialmacht wie Kaufleuten, Missionaren, Verwaltungsbeamten und Offizieren fortgenommen wurden. Diesem Brauch, der heute in der neuen Form des nationalen und internationalen Antiquitätengeschäfts fortlebt, treten jetzt afrikanische Regierungen, traditionelle Herrscher und kulturelle Institutionen mit der Forderung nach Rückerstattung entgegen. Mit der Rückgabe dieser Güter, die von bestimmten Kreisen für ungerechtfertigt gehalten wird, würde den Grundregeln der Telepathie entsprochen, die nur möglich ist, wenn diese Objekte in die Nähe ihrer natürlichen und herkömmlichen Umgebung zurückgebracht werden. So können sie auch besser und leichter verstanden werden; Mißdeutungen und falsche Darstellungen unterbleiben. Die Rückerstattung wird auch die politische Stabilität, den inneren Zusammenhalt und die kulturelle Solidarität fördern. Da die Generation, die die meisten dieser Objekte noch genau kennt, in Kürze aussterben wird, kann die Rückgabe nicht dringend genug gefordert werden; denn mit dem Tod dieser Menschen könnte die wertvolle Information über das Erbe, das diese Objekte repräsentieren sollen, verlorengehen.*

*Neue internationale Konventionen und Resolutionen wie auch nationale Haushalte und Vorschriften zeigen, daß Afrikaner ihrem kulturellen Erbe große Bedeutung beimessen, ein Erbe, um das sie viele Menschen in hohem Maße beneiden. Die Forderung auf Rückerstattung wird zur Verteidigung dieses Erbes erhoben und ist daher ein Schritt in die richtige Richtung.*

## Résumé

*L'habitude historique par laquelle des objets culturels africains étaient emportés par les représentants de la puissance coloniale tels qu'hommes d'affaires, missionnaires, administrateurs et officiers, habitude qui a pris aujourd'hui une nouvelle forme avec le trafic national et international d'antiquités, cherche maintenant à être contrecarrée par des appels à la restitution de la part des gouvernements africains, des dirigeants traditionnels et des institutions culturelles.*

*Avec la restitution de ces objets, considérée par certains milieux comme injustifiée, les lois naturel-*

*les de la télépathie seraient respectées, ce qui n'est possible qu'en replaçant les objets dans leur environnement naturel ou traditionnel. En outre, ceux-ci peuvent être ainsi mieux facilement compris. Les mauvaises interprétations et représentations sont évitées. Le retour de ces objets facilite aussi la stabilité politique de même que la cohésion interne et la solidarité culturelle. Comme la génération qui possède les informations exactes sur la plupart de ces objets est en train de disparaître rapidement, on ne peut assez insister sur l'urgence de cette restitution puisque la fin de cette génération peut entraîner la perte de cette riche information sur l'héritage que ces objets représentent.*

*Des conventions et résolutions internationales récentes tout autant que les réglementations et budgets nationaux indiquent que les Africains attachent une très grande importance à leur héritage culturel, héritage que beaucoup envient plus que toute autre chose. C'est pourquoi l'appel à la restitution cherche à défendre cet héritage et se situe par là dans la bonne direction.*