

Share or return of objects: How Africa can own what is hers

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For a long time, Africa has been asking for the return of her plundered heritage, which is currently held captive in the museums of her former colonial masters. This continued agitation was recently heightened by French president Emmanuel Macron's 2017 announcement that France would start returning all wrongfully acquired African cultural materials and objects to their rightful owners.¹ While this move was received very positively and appreciated as a long overdue gesture, several follow-up questions have been raised. Some of these pertain to the wider unequal relationships that prevailed at the time of acquisition.² Other more logistical queries are about whether Africa is ready to receive its heritage,³ as it has been argued that the continent does not have proper infrastructure for storage, exhibition or even conservation of these objects. After the report by *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper about the less than optimal conditions under which African objects had been stored in the Humboldt in Berlin,⁴ it is now clear that citing infrastructure as a drawback to restitution is a mere distraction ploy. Additional points of concern here are that African objects were removed from their natural habitats (i.e. tropical climates), where they did not require environmental conservation as they do in the temperate zones where they are currently housed: these temperate areas are characterised by extreme weather conditions (conditions which, ironically, require aggressive taming). In addition, the African objects served different functions and were in constant use, thus not requiring longterm storage, exhibition or conservation.

Cultural heritage was taken to Europe for the purpose of exhibiting African 'backwardness' and 'barbarism'⁵ in the eyes of the colonizer and the conqueror, thus affirming the colonizers 'superiority'. In its turn, natural heritage was taken for the purpose of research and study, as well as for boosting the colonizer's sense of pride⁶ and even omniscience—that there is nothing on the earth which the coloniser has not seen or does not know. When I attended a recent conference organized by the Berlin Natural History Museum, I was privileged to see a collection of dinosaurs from Tanzania which was acquired between 1909 and the 1930s by Werner E. M. Janensch.⁷ One of these dinosaurs, *Giraffatitan brancai*, holds the Guinness Book of World Records title of the largest dinosaur ever to be mounted. It is an awesome, fascinating sight, and understandably the centrepiece of the whole institution. People come from far and wide to view the phenomenal creature which lived 150 million years ago, whose skeleton stands at 22 meters tall, and which may have weighed up to 78.3 tonnes⁸ when alive. While it is greatly appreciated that Germany was able to turn these bones from Tendaguru (Lindi), Tanzania into an accessible sight for the world, the question that begs is:

¹ Sarr, F and Savoy, B. (2018). *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Rational Ethics*.

² History Today (2019). *Do historical objects belong in their country of origin?* Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/head-head/do-historical-objects-belong-their-country-origin>

³ Waweru, N. (2018). *Is Africa really prepared for the return of its stolen artefacts?* Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/is-africa-really-prepared-for-the-return-of-its-stolen-artefacts>

⁴ Von Jörg Häntzschel (2019) *Verseucht, zerfressen, überflutet*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/ethnologisches-museum-raubkunst-1.4516193>

⁵ Matowanyika J.Z.Z et al eds. (2020). *Decolonising Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (stem) in an Age of Technocolonialism: Recentring African Indigenous knowledge and belief systems*.

⁶ Stoecker, H. (2019). *The Brachiosaurus brancai in the Natural History Museum Berlin. A Star Exhibit of Natural History as a German and Tanzanian Realm of Memory?* Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://boasblogs.org/humboldt/the-brachiosaurus-brancai-in-the-natural-history-museum-berlin>

⁷ Museum Für Naturkunde (2020). *The World of Dinosaurs*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/museum/exhibitions/world-dinosaurs>

⁸ HisoUR (2020). *Giraffititan: Back to Life in VR*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.hisoour.com/giraffititan-back-to-life-in-virtual-reality-360-video-museum-of-natural-history-berlin-50918/>

which world? Or rather, is it actually an accessible sight for the owners of this heritage—the Tanzanians?

It is a pity that Africans, who are the owners of some of the most amazing items held in the former colonizers' countries, will never have a chance to see them. This is not only a problem of raising the necessary monies required for travel expenses, but also a result of the litany of rigid migration laws and suspicions that African travellers are held subject to. In many cases, it does not matter whether one is travelling to attend a conference, study, trade or even go on holiday for pleasure. Will the villager in Tendaguru, from where these bones were taken, ever have a chance to see them or learn about them? Do they not have a singular right to this heritage? Recently, after calls for the return of the dinosaur, the Germany government offered to help Tanzania to do more research into Tendaguru, continue promotion of fossil conservation in the museum, and support further scientific research in Tendaguru in order to find similar fossils since returning the requested dinosaur “would be a complicated affair”.⁹

The Tendaguru case is not an isolated one. Several other archaeological and paleontological objects from the Eastern Africa lie in the collections of Western museums. The most unfortunate thing is that African researchers are not aware of, and have no comprehensive records of, what is out there. Some museums have done inventories of these items and published them for the public to see in academic papers and their websites. For example, out of the 47,000 objects in collections of archaeological value held in Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford, 35% come from Africa, with Kenya being the third largest contributor after Egypt and South Africa. Most of this collection was donated to these museums by the colonizers before the second world war.¹⁰ This serves as an example of large numbers of archaeological materials found in a single museum. Paleontological specimens from Africa are held in other places, including several natural history museums in the western world: the Horniman museum in the UK, the Smithsonian in the USA and the Musée de l'Homme in France, among others.

Another good example can be seen in the ‘Man-Eaters of Tsavo’, two notorious lions who were killed during the building of the Uganda-Kenya railway: they roamed the Tsavo National Park in Kenya, killing several railway builders. Kenyans can only read about these in history textbooks because they are currently very far away, having been acquired by and mounted in the Chicago Field Museum in the USA.¹¹ While Kenyans of African and Indian descent had their ancestors mauled and killed by these animals in 1898, the history of the building of this railway is always told to Kenyans without the significant role these lions played in its narrative—even though their story, alongside the lions themselves, is available in full elsewhere. This illustrates how natural history objects and collections of importance from Africa may never be seen by the correct heritage owners, or even in their source countries.

The question of illegal transfer of both natural history specimens and paleontological fossils continues to the present day. Due to lack of local research funds, individuals who have connections with the West, where funding is available, take any available opportunities to come and conduct research, but have also been known to use this generously given access to plunder these sites, and even take away the most important finds. This brings to mind the unknown whereabouts of the world's second oldest human ancestor, *Orrorin tugenensis*,

⁹ Qorro, E. (2018) *Germany to help Tanzania to promote Tendaguru*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.ipmedia.com/en/news/germany-help-tanzania-promote-tendaguru-dinosaur>

¹⁰ Hicks, D. and Stevens, A. (2013) *World Archaeology at The Pitt Rivers museum: A Characterization, Oxford, England*

¹¹ Platt, J. (2017) *The strange history of the man-eating lions of Tsavo*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/the-strange-history-of-the-man-eating-lions-of-tsavo>

who is about 6 million years old.¹² The current location of this hominid is yet to be established after its unexplained “disappearance”, having been excavated in the year 2001 in Tugen Hills, Baringo. We are currently only able to read about him/her in international publications. While it is not unusual even in the modern day for heritage owners not to have a glimpse of their land’s palaeontological and archaeological finds, having these collections in the local national museums provides heritage owners with realistic hope of seeing and getting to know them someday, besides creating opportunities for all manner of essential stories to be told and remembered with these valuable finds at the centre.

Contrary to what was suffered by movable cultural and natural heritage, any immovable cultural heritage which colonial period researchers considered of value, such as the stone walls of the East African coast, or the great walls of Zimbabwe, were attributed to races other than African. Examples include the phenomenal, massive wells in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia, known as Tula wells, which have been credited to white people.¹³ Moreover, immovable natural heritage, such as great lakes and high mountains, were also portrayed throughout “world” history as having been “discovered” by white people.

By corrupting local commemorations, the West created a dominant worldview that portrayed Africans as lacking any meaningful history or foundations for technological growth, ensuring permanent gaps in the mind of the African child. These misconceptions are eternally featured in school text books, not allowing the African child to imagine a past where their ancestors were creative or innovative, or even lived in lands where their natural geographical features mattered to them or their way of life. Furthermore, rescue of this African past remains elusive, as the ceremonies, rituals and functional values of stolen cultural heritage (whether spiritual or aesthetic) is not easily achievable, due to the breach that was created by their looting and deliberate destruction. This not only caused memory loss, but also effected the comprehensive disappearance of technical knowhow for the reproduction of these objects, since some (especially ritual items) may have been the last remaining examples at the time of their theft.

While some stolen heritage has remained in deplorable conditions in the museums of their captors, a lot of it has created and retained wealth and scientific knowledge for these same captors. “Research” has been cited as the main reason for removing natural history fossils, such as dinosaur bones, from their domicile countries. This may sound legitimate to some. However, the purposes they serve today in those permanent exhibitions has far more to do with economics than it does science. Questions relating to shared benefits, or creation of conducive environments for storage and display upon return, must be addressed in order to allow our children and the general public to appreciate, imagine and recreate the history of the environments they have inherited. The vital questions that should be addressed do not only lie in the importance of the stolen heritage as spiritual and cultural identity of the people—they also must consider all associated economic gains, since these are retrievable with relative ease, even in the immediate and short terms. When the dinosaurs were in Tendaguru, for example, they were used by the local people for worship and actually protected as *in situ* exhibits, even though they were not exhibited in the western style. People still marvelled at them and went to see them. It is for this reason that the Tendaguru folk took the visiting Germans to the site, only for those Germans to plunder the site. The Germans quickly claimed the land where the dinosaur bones lay, and systematically

¹² Kiprotich, A. (Jul. 19, 2009). *Mystery over the missing 'Millennium Man' deepens*. Retrieved 11 March 2020 from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/1144019635/mystery-over-the-missing-millennium-man-deepens>

¹³ Tiki, W. (2010). *The Dynamics of the Ancient Tula Wells Cultural Landscape: Environmental and Social History, ca. 1560 to the Present*. Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) Thesis

removed them through deliberately unequal arrangements.¹⁴ Indeed, one of the dinosaurs which was taken away from Tendaguru was at that time named "Nyorosaurus" after Seliman Nyororo, the Tanzanian national who led the Germans to it, but is now named *Dicraeosaurus sattleri*, after a German mining engineer.¹⁵

It is of note that if the dinosaurs and other natural history specimens had been preserved and exhibited *in situ* or in African museums, where climatic conditions are closest to that of the environments where they were found, inordinate costs of conservation and mounting would never have arisen. These exhibits would have attracted visitors and scientists from around the world, giving source countries an opportunity to benefit from their own heritage. In this regard, it is important to reassess the key responsibility of the colonizers' museums in repatriation debates. The intangible negative effects of these atrocities will take a very long time to reverse, while many will forever remain irreversible—but the tangible economic benefits to the owners of these heritages can be immediate and self-sustaining.

¹⁴ Stoecker, H. (2019). *The Brachiosaurus brancai in the Natural History Museum Berlin. A Star Exhibit of Natural History as a German and Tanzanian Realm of Memory?* <https://boasblogs.org/humboldt/the-brachiosaurus-brancai-in-the-natural-history-museum-berlin/>

¹⁵ Vogel, G. (2019). *Countries demand their fossils back, forcing natural history museums to confront their past.* <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/03/countries-demand-their-fossils-back-forcing-natural-history-museums-confront-their-past#>