VOL. 10 NO. 6,
NOVEMBER, 2025
E-ISSN 3027-1401
P-ISSN 3026-9148



African Scholar Publications & Research International
www.africanscholarpub.com

Journal of Arts and Sociological Research (JASR)

Situating the Reparation Conversation of Nigeria's Cultural Relics from Foreign Lands within Local Nuances: A Metaphor for "Charity Begins at Home"

Emmanuel Paul Idakwo
Department of Mass Communication, Federal University of Lafia, Lafia, Nigeria.
Corresponding Author: emmanuel.idakwo@arts.fulafia.edu.ng
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/ajasr.v10i6.086

Abstract

Over half a century after Nigeria's political independence from Britain, there have been several campaigns for the reparation of her priceless cultural relics, looted by European expeditionists during Slave Trade and her colonialisation. These campaigns, along with demands for commensurate compensations to their original custodians, have got louder over many mediated channels of communication in the 21st century. In a nuanced context, however, this study drew attention to the seemingly hypocritical dissipation of energy and resources on the reparation narrative of Nigeria's stolen cultural assets by foreigners, at the expense of focusing critical attention on the huge local pilfering of the nation's economic and cultural wealth by local actors since independence, and without recompenses. The dimensions of these indigenous lootings have left damning humanitarian consequences in their tracks. Anchored on the Afghanistanism ideology, which explains an excessive focus on foreign issues at the expense of pressing local concerns, the paper employed a qualitative interpretive framework, relying on document analysis, historical synthesis, and moral reasoning. It submitted that all manifest acts of misconduct on the part of local actors in positions of public responsibility, which led to negative outcomes on the Nigerian society, should have reparations demanded of them in the spirit of the rule of law. This is because, until Nigeria puts its house in order, through a surgical self-cleansing and purgation of internal pilfering, the international community, from whom Nigeria demands reparations for material and cultural injustices, may not take her seriously. Charity must begin at home. The Nigerian homestead must be tidied up to house the recovered relics being demanded from foreign lands.

Keywords: Postcolonial Ethics, Afghanistanism, Cultural Heritage Governance, Decolonial Accountability, Nigeria.

Introduction

Reparation campaigns by colonised nations in Africa, for their cultural assets, looted by their former colonial masters, have gained momentous attention in the wake of the 21st century. These agitations have existed in the decades preceding the 2000's, which were the decade's most colonised nationalities gained their political independence from their colonial masters. What is common among the agitators across Africa, Asia, and Latin America is that they are voices emerging from the Third World. The surge in reparation campaigns in recent times, however, may be traceable to the influence of sophisticated means of communication, such as the social media, and the increasing access of the agitators to these tools. Hitherto unheard voices from the communities plundered, were now louder and faces put to them, providing more contexts to the conversations about the ancestry of the artefacts. The strategies employed by agitators, largely dwelled around establishing the morality in reparation, their rights as original owners, and ethnic and national pride that the artefacts represented for them. Some of the campaigns almost seemed like appeals borne out of helplessness before much powerful counterparts, some of whom had managed to bring the colonisers, mostly from European countries, to round tables with the agitators for negotiation (Shyllon, 2017; 2019). In most of those cases, activating legal instruments by the agitators, to press for their rights, were hardly explored due to power imbalance tilted against them (Opoku, 2019). Literature identified some of the major pillagers and keepers of stolen artifacts from colonised entities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to include Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Belgium, and Germany (Oladumiye, Bolajoko, & Tolutope, 2013). Some of the pillages even occurred before the actual commencement of colonisation, with some dating far back as the era of Slave Trade. Violent expeditions by European adventurists, targeted at palaces, sacred grounds, and homes of wealthy individuals and nobles characterised those campaigns (Eyssette, 2023). The violence inflicted on these communities resulted in extensive human and material losses. This devastation was marked by the systematic ransacking of ancestral homes, during which assailants employed foreign and coercive methods to forcibly seize priceless cultural artefacts, mostly of earthenware, metal, and wooden crafts as well as, in some cases, human remains (Savoy, 2022). These were shipped to Europe and sold to wealthy collectors, museums, and universities, many of whom have perfected their own version of (illegitimate) ownership of them (Eyssette, 2023). Africa was a major destination for European treasure hunters during Slave Trade and colonisation. They travelled deeper into the hinterlands, beyond the coastal areas where their ships docked for

many sinister reasons including search for raw materials, slaves, imperialist expansion, and looting of artefacts (Adefarasin & Adefarasin). West African nationalities along the costal lines heavily affected were Ashanti, Dahomey, Oyo, Benin, and Opobo (Steinmetz, 2023). Centuries after these plundering, many campaigns have been carried out on variegated media of mass communication to compel western countries still keeping the artifacts to return them to their original owners. This yarning is fundamental and legitimate as this paper supports them in the spirit of fairness and justice. However, within a nuanced and metaphorical context, this paper drew attention on an equally critical need for reparations from local actors within the Nigerian context of pilfering committed from the Independence era by Nigerians, which are yet to be restituted. Within this development was the problem and objective of this paper situated. The paper employed a qualitative interpretive framework, relying on document analysis, historical synthesis, and moral reasoning, to drive home this argument.

Power Imbalance and Reparation Politics

The reparation conversation is enmeshed in the geopolitical and economic interests of the western countries in custody of that relics stolen from Africa, nay Nigeria, beyond the subjects of culture and national pride of the original owners of the relics. International power imbalance influences the attitudes and decisions of the western countries being persuaded to make returns (Eyssette, 2023). The campaigns for the return of the relics basically should be legal issues because they relics were stolen by force from their original owners. Morally and legally, they should return to their original owners, and with huge compensations, based on the rule of law. However, the power imbalance tilts not in favour of the countries demanding for the return of their own relics because the relics are in the custody of the Western superpowers (Aguigah, 2024). The international legal institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague, are appendages of Western powers (Moran, 2023). For the agitators, it might be taken to be a situation of the proverbial strongman who wields control over the yam and the knife, or that of the cockroach who never gets justice in a court where fowls are judges (Rotimi, 1971). This scenario informed the resort to moral suasion, persuasion, and campaigns, to put pressure on the Western superpowers keeping the relics to release and return them to their original owners out of morality. Probably, that was why art historians like Achilles Mbembe viewed the relics' continued stay outside of their ancestral homes, as confiscation (Hickley, 2021).

Over the past few years, some modest gains were recorded with the receptiveness of some countries to return some of the relics in batches to Nigeria. One of the contemporary positive responses to these clamours came from Germany and Britain within the last decade. These clamours were now being considered more to be legitimate calls beyond the Afrocentric context. Germany entered a deal to transfer ownership of more than 1,000 of these precious objects to Nigeria in phases (BBC, 2022). This was unprecedented. Therefore, in 2022, Germany handed 22 of those artefacts in its public spaces to Nigeria in Abuja through its foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock. According to the minister, Germany wanted to deal with a dark colonial history (BBC, 2022). This was instructive, seeing that the 1884-1885 Berlin

Conference heightened colonial activities in Africa (Could this be a conscience appeasing move by Germany?).



Figure 1: Former German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, former Minister of Information and Culture of Nigeria, Lai Mohammed, Nigeria's former Minister of State of Foreign Affairs, Zubairo Dada, and German Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth, after signing an agreement in Berlin, Germany, July, 2022
(Source: AP Photo, 2022).



Figure 2: German and Nigerian government officials attend a handing over ceremony of returned Nigerian artefacts in Abuja, December, 2022.
(Source: Global Times, 2022).

In the same year, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, returned 29 bronzes from the 1897 loot to Nigeria. Horniman Museum in London followed suit with the return of six artefacts to Nigeria (Sherwood, 2022).



Figure 3: Prof. Abba Tijani, former Director General of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments receiving six objects from Horniman Museum.
(Source: Sherwood, 2022).

Another country which indicated commitment to return Nigeria's stolen artefacts in its custody is the Netherlands (Kupemba, 2025). This was expressed in 2025 when this paper was being put together. Kupemba (2025) noted that although thousands of the artifacts were stolen and during the raid of Oba of Benin's palace and sold to museums and private collectors in the Netherlands, only over 100 of these are being returned, as captured verbatim thus:
Thousands of these culturally significant sculptures and carvings were stolen during the violent destruction of Benin City, in modern-day Nigeria's Edo state, in 1897…. (Para. 2).
The treasures were sold, some to private collectors and others to museums like the Para in The Netherlands, which has displayed these artefacts for decades…. (Para. 4).
The return of the 119 artefacts is the largest repatriation of Benin antiquities…. (Para. 5).

Afghanistanism as Ideological Framework

This study relied on the ideology of Afghanistanism to drive home the subject of this paper. Afghanistanism is a journalism concept which explains the prioritisation of external and far issues by journalists over local and more pressing issues. The ideology evolved from conversations and commentaries of the media in the United States during the country's military campaigns in Middle East, covering the nation of Afghanistan. Many journalists and news media focused their agenda on the war going on in Afghanistan over local issues in the country, such as crime waves, unemployment, immigration, healthcare needs, etc. (Apuke,

2017). This phenomenon was christened Afghanistanism, and adapted to other issues bearing similar traits, whether in journalism or other spheres.

The paper considered the subject of reparation from literary and metaphorical perspectives, but leaning more to the latter. Reparation conversations and campaigns about Nigeria's cultural relics in Europe and the Americas, have been on for decades on different mediated channels of communication (Pugh, 2025). The campaigners have cut across nongovernmental organisations, individuals, and agents of government, geared toward neo-nationalism. This paper's metaphorical approach to this phenomenon lies in an unpopular postulation that the campaigns were more of Afghanistanism, with excessive focus on those relics at the expense of local improprieties done by local actors, with life and death consequences on citizens. The call for the physical relics in foreign lands is noble, but even nobler would be the determined focus on local issues with immediate consequences on the life of citizens.

Infrastructural Debate: Sustainable Storage and Safety of Relics Locally

Infrastructural deficits have been over flogged in discourses about preserving and maintaining relics in Nigeria, yet have not yielded significant gains. The lifespan of the artefacts, the spaces they are kept, and the knowledge required to preserve them, within the Nigerian context, have come under heavy criticisms. One of such criticisms was that governments at various levels in Nigeria, have yet to see the need for deliberate efforts to build infrastructural capacities for the country's cultural relics, both those within the country and those still in foreign lands illegally (Mba, 2025). It is a truism that because the rightful owner of a property cared less in safeguarding their property does not give legitimacy to a thief to steal it, just because the thief is able to take care of the item better. Legally and morally, a thief has no rights to possess an item that does not belong to them, whether the rightful owner was careless or not (Burrows, 2011). However, practically looking at the Nigerian situation, with her relics housed in western countries, as it has been for many other African countries, geopolitical and economic power imbalance does not favour the country. Hence, the continued agitations for the return of these assets, based on legality and morality, continued to be ignored. This must have been the reason other strategies were deployed in form of moral suasion, protest, and activism, but scarcely legality. Another angle to this perspective is that the legal institutions and instruments favour the Western countries keeping the relics, as members of the bench are mostly Westerners. This is akin to the allegory of the cockroach who can never be innocent in a court where fowls sit as judges.

Discussion

The precolonial Nigerian society prided itself in its cultural heritage, integrity, and social justice. Its identity and character were codified in its material and nonmaterial histories, which have been passed down from one generation to the other. The individual within that society was accountable to their extended family, clan, community, and the larger society more than they were to themselves. Their conduct was closely monitored by all within that society. Literature documented that the precolonial and colonial Nigerian societies lost much of their

cultural assets to European expeditionists through massive lootings to other parts of the world for profiteering. These relics have since then remained in places where they do not 'rightfully' belong. Several campaigns by Afrocentric solidarities to return those relics to their ancestral homes have raged on in recent decades but with little positive outcomes. While only a handful were returned, several are still been held in museums, universities, arts galleries, libraries, and private homes across Europe and the Americas (Abodurin, 2022). As loud as the Afrocentric cries are, at the home front however, a nuanced reparation form is obscured. Many acts of local impropriety, of both material and nonmaterial dimensions, have gone unaccounted for, in variance to the ancient cherished codes of the Nigerian society. The Nigerian society failed to demand for recompenses for local misconducts committed by Nigerians in places of public responsibility, which, have posed grave humanitarian implications. These individuals roam free and powerful. This study contends that until the international community, from whom Nigeria demands material reparations, sees that local looters paid for their acts, it would not take the country's agitations for reparations from foreign lands seriously. Unless charity began at home, it cannot be demanded from abroad.

Conclusion

While contemporary Afrocentric movements have rightly foregrounded the injustice of foreign possession of Nigerian relics, this paper argued that the credibility of these agitations is weakened by unresolved local contradictions. The widespread tolerance to corruption, elite predation, poor repository infrastructure, and unpunished abuses of public trust represent a profound rupture with Nigeria's indigenous moral codes. This internal failure to demand accountability for domestic economic, institutional, and cultural lootings undermines the ethical authority of Nigeria's international reparation campaigns. The paper therefore concludes that reparations cannot be pursued as an exclusively external justice project. Rather, they must be situated within a broader moral and institutional reconstruction at home. Without visible commitment to justice, accountability, and restitution within Nigeria, international actors are unlikely to regard Nigerian claims as grounded in principle rather than politics. In this sense, reparations are not only a matter of historical redress but also of contemporary governance ethics. Until internal looters are held accountable and recompense becomes a lived practice domestically, Nigeria's external reparation demands will continue to face resistance, skepticism, and symbolic concessions rather than substantive outcomes.

Recommendation

This study recommends that Nigerian diplomatic efforts on cultural repatriation should clearly incorporate internal reforms and practicable accountability strategies. This is because evidence of domestic justice strengthens legal and moral arguments against the validation of foreign retention of looted artefacts.

References

Abodurin, A. (2021, July 25). Looted artefacts: FG asserts supremacy over Edo, Oba of Benin. *Nigerian Tribune.* Retrieved July 22, 2024, from: https://tribuneonlineng.com/looted-artefacts-fg-asserts-supremacy-over-edo-oba-of-benin/

Adefarasin, R., & Adefarasin, O. (2023). Clash of Euro-African civilisations: Cultural and ideological tensions. *Global South Social Sciences Digest, 1*(1), 7–12.

Aguigah, E. (2023). Restitution of looted artefacts: A politico-economic issue. *Journal of Cultural Policy and Heritage Studies, 10*(4), 219–235.

AP Photo. (2022). Germany, Nigeria sign accord for return of Benin bronzes [Picture]. *AP.* https://apnews.com/article/africa-germany-berlin-13e1a65da1b08644d3c5d5032d24e426

Apuke, O. D. (2017). Review of some ethical issues in Nigerian journalism practice: Afghanistanism, character assassination and junk journalism. *Global Media Journal – Indian Edition, 8*(1), 1-6. http://www.caluniv.ac.in/

Burrows, A. (2011). *The law of restitution* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eyssette, J. (2023). Restitution vs. Retention: Reassessing Discourses on the African Cultural Heritage. *African Studies Review, 66*(1), 101-126. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.153

Global Times. (2022, December 22). Germany hands over 22 artifacts looted by British colonists to Nigeria [Picture]. *Global Times.* https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202212/1282392.shtml

Hickley, C. (2021, March 23). Germany moves towards full restitution of Benin bronzes. *The Art Newspaper.* Retrieved July 22, 2024, from: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/germany-moves-towards-full-restitution-of-benin-bronzes

Joint Declaration. (2022). *Joint Declaration on the return of Benin bronzes and bi-literal museum cooperation.* Retrieve September 16, 2024, from: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2540404/8a42afe8f5d79683391f8188ee9ee016/220701-benin-bronzenpolerkl-data.pdf.

Kupemba, D. N. (2025, February 19). Netherlands to return stolen Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. *BBC.* Retrieved February 21, 2025, from: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly8397e7gno.amp

Mba, O. J. (2025). Preserving African heritage: Curatorial and public perspectives on conservation, tourism, and repatriation of artefacts at the National Museum, Benin City, Nigeria. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 12*(08), 150–171.

Moran, C. F. (2023). Postcolonialism and Bias in International Criminal Law. In *The Authority of International Criminal Law* (pp. 94–111). Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108678629.007.

Ogunniyi, O., & Osadola, O. (2023). The dark legacy of European Imperialism in Africa. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research Studies, 3*(6), 913–919.

Oladumiye, E. B., Bolajoko, E. S., & Tolutope, O. A. (2013). Nigerian museum and art preservation: A repository of cultural heritage. *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum, 6* (2), 93-107. Onmuseums.com

Opoku, K. (2019). Benin Dialogue Group removes restitution of Benin artefacts from its agenda. *Modern Ghana.* Retrieved, May 19, 2025, from: https://www.modernghana.com/news/924239/benin-dialogue-group-removes-restitution-of-benin.html

Oriakhogba, D. (2022, September 17). Repatriation of ancient Benin bronzes to Nigeria: reflection on copyright and related issues. *Journal of Intellectual Property Law and Practice,* 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1093/jiplp/jpac089

Pugh, C. (2025). Echoes of History: Legacies of the Benin Bronzes and Restitution Within the Black Atlantic. *The Journal of African History, 66,* e17. doi:10.1017/S0021853725100637.

Rotimi, O. (1971). *The gods are not to blame.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Savoy, B. (2021). *Africa's struggle for its art: History of a postcolonial defeat.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sherwood, M. (2022, November 28). London museum returns looted Benin City artefacts to Nigeria. *The Guardian* (UK). https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/28/london-museum-returns-looted-benin-city-artefacts-to-nigeria

Shyllon, F. O. (2019). Benin Bronzes: Something grave happened and imperial rule of law is sustaining it. *Art Antiquity and Law 274, 24* (3).

Steinmetz, G. (2023). *The colonial origins of modern social thought: French sociology and the overseas empire.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

UNESCO. (2022, July 1). UNESCO welcomes the signing of a historic between Germany and Nigeria for the return of 1,130 Benin bronzes. *UNESCO.* Retrieved July 22, 2024, from: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-welcomes-signing-historicagreement-between-germany-and-nigeria-return-1130-benin-bronzes.