

UK Rejection of Restitution of Artifacts: Confirmation or Surprise?

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Crown of Tewodros II, looted at Maqdala, Ethiopia in 1868, now in Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom.

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"Truth must be repeated constantly because error is being repeatedly preached round about all the time, and not just by a few, but by the masses. In the periodicals and encyclopedias, in schools and universities, everywhere error prevails, being confident and comfortable in the feeling that it has the majority on its side." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe." (1)

The United Kingdom Secretary for Culture is reported as having declared: "Never mind the argument about who owns this thing, let's argue about how it gets to be seen". (2) Mr. Jeremy Wright whose pronouncements on other

subjects have caused surprise made this statement in response to *The Times* with respect to the debate on restitution of looted artefacts. The Minister argued that if artefacts were returned to their countries of origin, there would be no one place where one could see multiple objects: 'if you followed the logic of restitution to its logical conclusion, according to Wright, there would be 'no single points where people can see multiple things' Wright also stated that the United Kingdom would not modify its laws to enable restitution of cultural artefacts to the various countries.



Parthenon Marble, headless statue of Greek river god, Ilissos, Athens, Greece, sent on loan in 2014 by the British Museum to Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Wright has been criticised in the United Kingdom. Sharon Heal writes:

'His argument seemed to rely on the tired misconception that there would be nothing much left in our museums and "no single points where people can see multiple things" if restitution was allowed.

This kind of thinking flies in the face of the informed conversation

about decolonisation, restitution and repatriation that is taking place in the sector in the UK and at government level in many countries in Europe. '(3)

What Jeremy Wright is attempting to do is to revive the long discredited universal museum argument that artefacts of different cultures are better seen and understood when they are all gathered at one museum such as the British Museum. This universalist argument has been put better by Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum and one of the founding directors of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. (4) Wright, like his predecessors, is past master at what we call, displacement of arguments. They try to avoid an argument by placing it on a level or in a field different from the original context.

No one has argued against a museum putting objects from different cultures in its exhibition hall or having in the same museum objects from different cultures. The debate has always been about the ownership of the looted artefacts. Supporters of restitution have argued that these looted objects should be returned to their original owners. Supporters of the universal museum do not want to discuss the looting aspect and answer that it is only in their museums that you can see objects from different cultures and that only in such museums can one appreciate these cultures. It is in the context of totally immoral or, if you prefer, amoral relations in the museum world, that those holding looted objects can openly declare that since they have more looted artefacts, you should not demand or discuss



Hip mask of Queen Mother Idia, Benin, Nigeria, now in British Museum, London United Kingdom.

restitution of any artefact. Thus, those who have more looted artefacts build their strength on their accumulation of wrong doings. **WN surprise**

We leave aside the glaring Eurocentric nature of such arguments and the total absence of sympathy for the peoples who lost their artefacts to the excessive greed of European nations in their quest for total hegemony over the world. Many of the deprived persons cannot obtain even a visa to visit the cities where the universal museums are located.

The statement by Jeremy Wright must be viewed against the background of recent discussions on restitution of looted colonial artefacts in France, Germany and in the Netherlands. Even Belgium which is considered by many as usually late in such matters, has signalled through the

director of the Africa Museum, Tervuren, a willingness to consider the restitution of certain artefacts to Africa. (5)

Readers will recall that in his famous declaration at Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron made a historical statement that African artefacts must not only be seen in Paris but also in Dakar, Lagos and Cotonou. (6) He added that there was no permanent historical reason why African artefacts should be kept in French museums and collections whilst Africans have none of their artefacts. He wanted to retribute African artefacts within the next five years. The French President appointed Bénédicte Savoy, French art historian and professor at *Collège de France* and Technical University, Berlin, and Felwine Sarr, Senegalese economist, philosopher and professor at University Gaston Berger, St. Louis, Senegal, to study the issue and make recommendations thereon. The Sarr-Savoy report, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Towards a New Relational Ethics*, based on wide and intensive consultation with several specialists, recommended that African artefacts that had been taken away from the continent by force or without the consent of the owners should be returned. (7)

The report sent shock waves across Europe and started a series of discussions and activities that are still continuing in many European countries and museums. On receipt of the report, President Macron announced that 26 artefacts that had been looted by General Dodd's invasion of Dahomey in 1892 will be returned to the Republic of Benin.



Rosetta Stone, Egypt, now in the British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

The Germans started with their Guidelines for handling objects acquired in a colonial context but soon realized that that was not enough. A political issue such as restitution of artefacts could not be solved by an instrument that was neither legal nor political. Recently culture ministers from 16 German Federal States (*Länder*) agreed to work out with the museums procedures to move forward with restitution of looted artefacts that were acquired in a way that would not be acceptable today. Dutch museums also issued new rules on claims for return of looted artefacts. Thus, many States recognize the need to advance on the issue of restitution.

The Minister's rejection of restitution comes after the Benin Dialogue Group (BDG) has decided to remove the item of restitution from its agenda and was offering temporary loans of

looted Benin artefacts to Nigeria/Benin. The Minister's rejection then is a confirmation that restitution is definitely not among the objectives of the United Kingdom in cultural diplomacy. The director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, who declared that the Parthenon Marbles do not belong to Greece and that their removal from Athens was a '*creative act*', has also declared that the collections of the British Museum have to be preserved as whole. (8)

The position of the UK Minister for Culture, Jeremy Wright and Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, is a repetition and continuation of the British Museum's position since decades. David M. Wilson, a former director of the museum has stated this in his book *The British Museum A History*:

'The Museum's arguments against the return of property were first expressed in a statement by the Trustees in 1984:

Demands by Greece and others for the return of parts of the collections have consumed considerable time and energy in recent years. The Museum- with support of government-has continued to withstand these demands and has sought to correct lack of understanding of its proper function as a universal museum which plays a unique role in international culture. The Museum's collections are vested in its Trustees

In accordance with legislation enacted by Parliament, which since 1753 has prohibited them from permanently disposing of any object (other than duplicates and has required them to ensure that the collections are preserved for the benefit of international scholarship and the enjoyment of the general public. In fulfilment of this responsibility the Museum is open seven days a week, free of charge, throughout the year. The Trustees would regard it as a betrayal of their trust to a precedent for the piecemeal dismemberment of the collections which recognise no arbitrary boundaries of time or place in their enduring witness of the achievement of the human race'

The Museum's arguments, which have been restated on a number of occasions in different contexts, do not rest purely on legalistic view; rather they encapsulate a moral position which has been forcibly repeated'. (9)

Neil MacGregor, predecessor of Hartwig Fischer, had in many speeches indicated he was against restitution. He is reported to have declared:

"I do not believe that there is a case for returning the marbles. It is a very happy result of history that half of these surviving fragments of these sculptures are in London. They have a purpose here because this is where they can do most good. The British Museum can situate the achievements of these Greek sculptures in the context of the wider ancient world."

Furthermore, he praised his own museum: *"The British Museum is one of the great cultural achievements of mankind: it is very important that there is a place where all the world can store its achievements. Lots of people would not agree that there should be a special case for the Parthenon. It is an argument but not necessarily a fact. I personally don't see any difference between Greek visual culture and the visual culture of Italy and Holland, which is also spread around the world."* (10)

Former British Prime Minister David Cameron, when asked in India about the return of the Koh-I-Noor diamond responded that he did not believe in returnism. The *Telegraph* reported: *But the Prime Minister said: "If you say yes to one you suddenly find the British Museum would be empty."*

"I think I'm afraid to say, to disappoint all your viewers, it's going to have to say put." (11)

Cameron is reported to have told Indian TV *"The right answer is for the British Museum and other cultural institutions to do exactly what they do, which is to link up with other institutions around the world to make sure that the things which we have and look after so well are properly shared with people around the world."*

"I certainly don't believe in 'returnism', as it were. I don't think that's sensible."(12)

Incidentally, several public opinion polls held in Great Britain on the question whether the Parthenon Marbles should be returned to Athens have resulted in overwhelming majorities for restitution. But the British Government and the British Museum have not paid much attention to the wishes of their people and carried on as usual with their negative retentionist policy of retaining looted artefacts. (13) It is noteworthy that Governments that pride themselves of leading representative democracies are often unwilling to fulfil the wishes of their people. It is true though that in recent times such governments have considerable difficulties in implementing the clear wishes of their peoples resulting from popular sources such as referenda

The political and social changes that have taken place in the world do not seem to have in anyway motivated the directors of the British Museum and the British Government to change their imperialistic views on the looted artefacts that fill their museums. For them,

their museum and country constitute the centre of the world and artefacts of others that have been looted and brought to the museum are rightly there and should remain there.

During the long period in which the Europeans, especially the British were proclaiming loudly that they would not return any Nigerian artefacts, the Nigerian Commission on Museums and Monuments was busy organizing with the Europeans major spectacular exhibitions such as *Benin Kings and Rituals Court Arts from Nigeria 2007-2008*, *Kingdom of Ife: Sculptures from West Africa, 2010*. Sadly, these exhibitions would not be shown in Nigeria and in other African countries. Another successful cooperation was the *African Lace Exhibition* in Vienna, 2010-2011. Would the Europeans have adopted a different policy if Nigeria had not been so cooperative despite the negative attitude of the Europeans and insisted on reciprocity? (14)

In view of the foregoing, it is difficult to understand how some people came to believe that temporary loans could be turned later into permanent loans or restitution. Wright's rejection of restitution certainly dampens enthusiasm for restitution and lays to rest all hopes that the United Kingdom may adopt a policy similar to that of France and return looted artefacts. Wright's rejection of restitution has the merit of clarity of position. The real question is whether the other parties involved in disputes over looted colonial artefacts have been equally clear. Have they also made it clear that they would accept nothing but full restitution?

It cannot be said that, like Britain or like Greece, Nigeria has always been consistent, clear and determined in her policies on the subject of restitution. True, almost every Nigerian government and Parliament since Independence has called for the return of the looted artefacts from abroad. But decisions of governments and parliament were hardly implemented nor followed up. For example, under the government of Jonathan Goodluck, after a successful stopping of a sale of Benin Queen-mother head by Sotheby's in 2010 through the activities of Africans in the Diaspora, it was announced that a delegation would be sent to Britain to discuss the issue of the Benin Bronzes. Nothing was heard about this decision. The names of the delegation were never announced and there was no report about the delegation visiting Great Britain. Often one had the impression that many Nigerian announcements were made for domestic consumption. Thus, many demands were

not addressed to any particular government or museum and just hung in the air. For example, a recent declaration of the Nigerian Commission on Museums and Monuments (NCMM) demanding that Nigeria's looted artefacts be returned unconditionally was not addressed to any particular government or institution. (15) That declaration was followed a few months later by discussions of loans of Benin artefacts. Often one had the impression that it was only the Oba of Benin who was interested in fighting to secure the restitution of the Benin artefacts.

The indeterminate and indecisive attitude corresponded to what was described as a policy of '*quiet diplomacy*' that was followed by the NCMM for decades but has not brought to Nigeria since Independence a single artefact from any museum. When as a result of agitation by students in Cambridge the University started to consider the restitution of the cockerel, *Okukor*, the NCMM was quick to claim that its policy of quiet diplomacy was working. (16) The NCMM followed this policy of quiet diplomacy which meant one did not come out with a clear and vigorous statement of demands. Whilst the British and other Europeans loudly and clearly stated in public places their position of not willing to return Nigerian artefacts, the NCMM seemed to be making its demands quietly at cocktails. The one shouted at rooftops and the other whispered in reception rooms. The policy of quiet diplomacy went so far that Nigeria did not even want to raise the issue of restitution of Benin artefacts at the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on Restitution of Cultural Property, even when Nigeria had the chairmanship.

When we suggested that a more open and clear position such as Turkey and other States had adopted would be needed, the Director-General of the NCMM responded that he did not want to take a confrontational course. The Turkish option was not open to Nigeria. (17) Whilst Nigeria seemed ready to talk to European holders of Nigerian artefacts, it appeared not interested to talk to African countries and other States that have similar interests in the issue of restitution. Nigeria would help itself and the world if it made her position on some matters very clear, both for her supporters and her opponents.

The argument that Nigeria does not have a proper museum to receive her looted artefacts should not be exaggerated. Apart from the fact that the existence or absence of adequate museums is irrelevant to the question of ownership, those illegal holders of looted artefacts

have not said they would retribute the artefacts once such museums are in place. We should bear in mind the Greek experience with the British on this issue. It may be recalled that one of the standing arguments presented for decades by the British regarding the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens was the absence of an adequate museum in Athens. The Greeks built a first-class museum, the New Acropolis Museum, opened in 2009, and the reaction of Neil MacGregor, then Director of the British Museum, was that the location of the Parthenon Marbles was a question of the past and was never an important British contention! What mattered now was how the Greek and British governments can work together so that the Parthenon Marbles could be seen in China and Africa. (18)



New Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece.

The Benin Dialogue Group does not take kindly to any comment on its removal of restitution from its objectives although many readers and critics had assumed for years that this was their primary objective. (19) It seems the BDG wants to act without anybody paying careful attention to what it is doing or not doing. The authoritarian demand that we keep

quiet about one of the most important African artefacts will certainly not be accepted. We will continue fulfilling our duties as African intellectual and comment on important issues affecting the African peoples and our Continent.

The outright refusal of restitution by the British Secretary for Culture appears to be a very retrograde step when seen against the background of recent discussions. This backward position comes from the European State with the largest number of looted artefacts in its museums. British Museum alone has at least 12 million artefacts and is confronted with various demands for restitution. British Museum officials have been known to declare publicly that not all the items in that museums are looted or stolen. No wonder that the museum has been described as *'thieving exhibition'* and *'the largest depository of looted goods.'* (20)



Gold mask, 20 cm in height, weighing 1.36 kg of pure gold, seized by the British from Kumasi, Ghana, in 1873 and now in the Wallace Collection, London, United Kingdom. The golden head was part of the treasures of King Kofi Karkari of Asante (Ashanti) tha

Since there is very little inclination in many European States to obey United Nations/UNESCO resolutions, we assume that nobody brought to the attention of Jeremy Wright that a blank refusal to envisage the possibility of restitution of looted artefacts, runs against those resolutions requiring Member States to return looted artefacts to their countries of origin. UNESCO and United Nations General Assembly have since 1972 passed countless resolutions that are routinely ignored by Western States. (21)



Members of the notorious British Punitive Expedition to Benin in 1897 posing proudly with looted Benin artefacts

The refusal of restitution and offer of temporary loans indicates once more that many have not appreciated the real nature of the demand for restitution. Those seeking to recover their looted artefacts are not demanding the return of those artefacts mainly for aesthetic reasons but more so for the possibility to continue their history and their culture. Temporary loans do not serve that purpose. The symbolism that is represented by those artefacts is negated by any idea of loan from a foreign culture or power. Painful histories of military defeat are prolonged by temporary loans.

In many cultures, the objects looted by a foreign power and thus desecrated would have to undergo a process of cleansing. How often can such artefacts undergo cleansing without losing totally their value in the eyes of members of the culture that produced them? And how do you explain all this to future generations without depriving that culture of any credibility or authenticity?



Kohinoor Diamond India. Seized by the British army in 1850 and donated to Queen Victoria, this 105-carat diamond is part of the crown of Queen Elizabeth I and can be seen in Tower of London.

Instead of issuing veiled threats and innuendos, it might be helpful for all if someone could answer the questions we posed in our articles, especially concerning the finances of the loan arrangements, the duration of the loan and the exclusionary legislation by Nigeria which would provide immunity for the loan objects and prevent the bringing of legal actions against the loan or the objects loaned. (22)

We could also be informed whether the ownership question has been dealt with or simply postponed till towards the end of the negotiations. A postponement would imply that the whole negotiations may finally breakdown on this point. As we know, the British Museum has always insisted that Greece must first recognize British ownership of the Parthenon Marbles before any discussions on a loan could start. Have the British adopted a different approach to Nigeria on this issue? We cannot imagine the British Museum adopting a different and favourable approach towards Nigeria, even though both Britain and Nigeria are in the Commonwealth. Greece and United Kingdom are also both members of the European Union, albeit Britain has one foot outside the door, on its way out. In matters of artefacts, common membership in international organizations has not helped. Britain, Greece and Nigeria are all members of the United Nations.

In the meanwhile, we have to accept that declarations by the director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer and the Minister for Culture, Jeremy Wright, represent the current policy of the British Government and the British Museum regarding restitution of artefacts, including the Parthenon Marbles, Greece and the Benin artefacts, Nigeria/Benin.

Greeks have been requesting the return of the Parthenon Marbles longer than Nigerians. Folarin Syhllon, Nigeria's leading authority on such issues has written: *'African countries seeking the return of cultural objects must have the endurance of the long-distance runner as typified by the persistence of Greece for the return of the Parthenon Sculptures It is not for nothing that the Greeks gave us the marathon race. They are practicing it in this affair. The point being made is that the former colonial powers and other wealthy European countries, particularly their museum professionals are loath to part with anything even if they remain locked up in stores and warehouses. The museum professionals first canvassed retention through the idea of the so-called 'universal museum', when that started unravelling, they are now talking about travelling exhibitions that will never get to Africa. (23).*



Oba Ozolua with attendants, Benin, Nigeria, now in World Museum, formerly Ethnology Museum, Vienna, Austria

We fully share the view that in artefacts matters one may have to show great endurance. If Nigerians follow this advice, they would not let themselves be put under any pressure to accept measures such as temporary loans. They should refuse such measures and insist on full restitution. If after all that has happened and all the discussions on the issue, the rulers of the British Isles and their European friends do not see that in 2019 restitution is the only acceptable solution to the Benin artefacts, stolen in the notorious Punitive Expedition of 1897, we should not make matters easy for them by accepting a solution that will certainly prejudice future African restitution demands.

Lord Renfrew was reported by the *Artnewspaper* as follows: *'The Nigerian government must guarantee that the loans will be returned after a fixed term of "perhaps three years", says Colin Renfrew of the university's McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, who attended the meeting'. (24)*

Should the loan arrangement be finally implemented, the Europeans would have won a major victory the implications of which are probably not clear to all. The colonial act of looting African artefacts, often with violence, would have received a confirmation from one

of the leading African States. Subsequent restitution demands by Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya and Egypt will be met with the clear message that they cannot receive a better deal than Nigeria and that this will be unfair to Nigeria. The British and the other Europeans have kept African artefacts for more than a hundred years. If they want to make loans of the same objects, why can they not make loans of hundred years to an African country such as Nigeria? Do Nigerians and other Africans need their artefacts for a shorter period than the Europeans? Will the 200million Nigerians be able to see the Benin artefacts within 3years? What about the peoples of Mauritania, 4 million, Senegal, 16, Gambia, 2, Mali, 20, Côte d'Ivoire, 24, Ghana, 26, Togo, 8, Benin Republic, 10, and Cameroon, 23? If we add 200million Nigerians. we have in West Africa alone, 329 million Africans who should see the Benin artefacts that have achieved the status of continental symbols in 3 years. One should also add the peoples of North Africa, East Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa to appreciate how what a loan of Benin artefacts instead of restitution to Nigeria implies. The term of 3 years clearly seems to indicate that the question of ownership has already been decided in favour of the European illegal holders. Indeed, when we raise questions about European assumptions of ownership, we are more likely to be attacked by those who should be vigorously defending Benin/Nigeria's rights.

Do Europeans need the Benin artefacts to show that they have also achieved a high level of sophistication in the past? Why are contemporary Europeans withholding what Africans could use to counter the negative impressions created by racist and colonial ideas of the past? Do they still share the prejudices of their predecessors? They are proving to be intransigent about their possession of artefacts looted by their forebears even though they assert to have abandoned colonialism in all its manifestations.

We note that there is no evidence that Nigeria has held consultations with Ethiopia, Egypt or Ghana, States that are also members of the African Union as Nigeria and stand to be affected by decisions in Nigeria's discussions with the European States and museums. Benin artefacts have achieved status of symbols of African achievements. Indeed, the hip-mask of Queen-Mother Idia was the symbol of FESTAC77, a pan-African festival of arts. Britain refused to return that symbol to Nigeria for the festival. Some may not see that as an insult to the whole Continent, but many Africans were shocked by the British actions

and attitude. Are we going to be insulted again? Should the rest of Africa not be properly informed?

It has been suggested that there is no point in discussing whether loans, temporary or long-term or restitution would be the best for Nigeria. In the end, nothing would be done since Europeans would find an excuse for not doing any deal: they would argue that Nigeria has not fulfilled some condition, or is not willing, for example, to pay the insurance costs proposed. This may well be the speculation of a pessimistic critic or an African well aware of the various stratagems employed in the colonial days to deprive Africans of their rights and freedom. Contrary to the impression Europeans may gain from a certain African elite, there is not much trust and confidence in the words and acts of Western Europeans who are generally considered to be only interested in their gains and advantages. Colonial experience is not easily forgotten and when people hear about the continue disputes surrounding looted African artefacts, they wonder whether African States are really independent.



Commemorative heads, Benin, Nigeria, now in World Museum, Vienna.

Another explanation of the unwillingness of Britain to return the famous artefacts has been provided by a British scholar:

'The question of the meaning of the 'Benin bronzes' or 'Elgin Marbles' in London – 1900 or 2000 – is inseparable from the issue of British attitudes towards Africa and the Orient as sites, once for direct military and political colonisation, and now for their post-imperial economic exploitation and indirect manipulation. To return them would imply the belief, on the part of the British authorities, that the peoples of those parts of the world were now capable of competently looking after artefacts that were removed ostensibly on the grounds that the

local inhabitants were unfit, because of the 'degeneration' of their societies, to act as their curators. Their return would also imply admission of their illegal possession by the British. Both implications remain largely unthinkable because post-imperial racism continues to be a highly significant aspect of British foreign policy. Though British society may be relatively 'multicultural' now, its ruling elite, like that of the US, is still predominantly white, middle-class and male.' Jonathan Harris. (25)

Given the history of defeat and humiliation (26) inflicted on African peoples by the greedy and aggressive acts of European imperialism, it seems to me that the only proper way to reduce the anger and resentment ensuing from such activities or from their histories would be a full restitution of the Benin artefacts. This will also demonstrate that our contemporary Europeans do not condone or accept the methods of the past and are committed to better future relations between Africa and Europe, putting behind several decades of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Hans Cotter, well-known New York Times Art critic, has rightly stated

'By contrast, the reaction to Mr. Macron's proposal to restore art pilfered from Africa has varied widely, and no consensus on action has been reached. Here Western institutions are on quaking ground with, it must seem, everything but good karma to lose. No doubt many are reluctant to even consider the idea of restitution. But if justice prevails, they'll have to. Otherwise, colonialism rolls on and on'. (27)

Europeans cannot assert that they reject slavery and colonialism and still hold on to the visible objects of imperialist oppression, namely, the artefacts looted through violent aggression. (28)

Future generations will be asking the same question that many are now asking: how is it possible to borrow temporarily for three years our own Benin artefacts from the very persons that stole them in 1897 or from their descendants?