

Masks and Sculptures: The Repatriation of Stolen African Art: A Multi-Dimensional Process

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Abstract

The kidnapping of thousands of pieces of African art has been well documented and studied. There has been, over the years, a growing call, especially on the part of a few African countries, for the return of the stolen pieces to their rightful owners. The full implications of the loss of so many masks and sculptures for Africa has hardly been entertained, nor have there been sound recommendations for the conditions under which stolen artifacts should be returned and cared for in Africa. This essay seeks to remedy this void by addressing the following research questions and propose the idea of “Cultural Rehabilitation Centers” as a viable solution:

1. Why should African artifacts move back to Africa?
2. If returned, how should they be cared for?

From a methodological standpoint, this essay utilizes the Afrocentric Paradigm to ensure cultural grounding, as well as to bring a sense of agency to the reader. The research conducted for this study relies on a qualitative analysis of three primary sources of information, digital, visual, and written.

Key Words: Africa, Art, Artifacts, Repatriation, Afrocentricity, Diaspora, Cultural preservation

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Introduction

This essay aims to answer the following questions: Should the African artifacts stolen by European colonials move back to Africa? And, if returned, how should they be cared for? In order to answer the first question, that is, whether its stolen masks and sculptures should be returned to Africa, it is imperative to determine the social significance of masks and sculptures to gain a thorough understanding of the stakes, as well as of the impact of the loss for Africa and her people.

Quite simply, no discussion of masks and sculptures can ignore the African cultural context in which those artifacts have emerged. Indeed, masks and sculptures are extremely important parts of Africa's spiritual and social fabric. They are not decorative objects to be looked at and admired. To the contrary, their spiritual dimension is inescapable as they are ancestral spirits most often associated with particular initiation traditions (Meyer 1992). They tell stories, and carry meanings embedded within coded messages; they serve many purposes. Masks and sculptures have been around for thousands of years and are carved with intent and care to cater to a people's needs and aesthetic sensibilities. After reviewing literature dealing with the significance of African artifacts and the debate over the repatriation of those stolen pieces, this essay will outline the methodology and methods used to conduct this project. Then, the interpretation of the data collected will be shared, along with recommendations guided by Afrocentricity. A conclusion will follow.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a growing movement for the repatriation of African art that left Africa during the colonial period. Europeans have stolen thousands of African artifacts and locked them in museums, homes, private galleries,

and even the Vatican all over Europe, Australia, and America. A number of articles and essays have tackled the question of the origins of the European orchestrated stealing of African art during the colonial period. One such essay is, "Restituting Colonial Plunder: The Case for the Benin Bronzes and Ivories," in which the author, Kiwara-Wilson aptly argues that African artifacts have found themselves in European hands for years. Those items have been kidnapped and kept as hostages since the early 1800s when European intrusions into the African continent were amplifying, culminating with the actual partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 (Kiwara-Wilson 2013). It is important to note that these artifacts are the very soul of African people. They are not mere objects but are the representatives of ancestral spirits. What happens to a people, when their sacred objects are taken away from them? "Looting, Kiwara-Wilson further argues, was an economic tool, but it was also a means for the colonial power to assert dominance over the colonized people through erasing cultural identity and instilling a sense of inferiority among the subjugated" (Kiwara Wilson 2013, p.383). Although, providing useful information about the European looting of African art, this essay did not entertain the various, yet profound, implications of this plundering. Most specifically, it left out a critical aspect, that is, the spiritual weakening of Africa. It is important, in my view, to understand that when African art was stolen and taken to Europe, it caused Africa to experience spiritual depletion. Contrary to the European conception of art, African artifacts are not created for decorative purposes, and being an artist is more than a "job" among many. When studying African art, it is extremely important to analyze it within the proper world-view that generated it.

In that regard, the essay "The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature Ritual and

Community” highlights the fact that in many African languages such as Dagara found in Burkina Faso, the word for “artist” or “art” is non-existent. The word that most closely approaches it is “Sacred” or “Healer” (Somé 1999) In the African context, the artist is in direct communication with the spirit world. Masks and other objects are sacred and used mostly for ritualistic purposes such as marriages, funerals, purification, births, or to restore order in the community. Hence, removing African artifacts from their place of origin not only desacralizes them, but disrupts and even interrupts altogether the ancestral spiritual traditions of a people (Njoku 2020, 92).

The author of the third essay reviewed “Restitution of Cultural Material to Africa” focuses on the relatively new campaigns led by countries such as Benin, Congo, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria to take back their stolen art (Agorsah 1977, 305). These nations are demanding that Europe return their artifacts. Given the power imbalances during the colonial period, African people did not have much say in what happened to their art. The author put forth the claim that, “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” (Agorsah 1977, 306).

Unlike the African scholars cited above, some Western scholars argue that if African art goes back to Africa, then neither African governments, nor African people, will have adequate spaces or materials to take proper care of those artifacts. Such an argument is quite ironic given that when Europeans invaded Africa and stole thousands of artifacts, they did not have any knowledge about how to take care of their preys. Thus, the European author, Picton,

argues in his essay “To See or Not to See! That Is the Question” that the African art pieces housed in museums should not be seen as stolen because art belongs to the world. To make matters worse, the author argues, while explaining the “history” of Benin that,

When Benin was reinvented in the years following the accession of Eweka II in 1914, the pre-1897 palace had been destroyed. There was no record of its layout, and no records kept as to where things were taken from. We cannot, in other words, put anything back where it once was. Second, Benin art is now scattered through the museums of the world. The three most comprehensive collections are Berlin, the British Museum, and Lagos (purchased back by the colonial government in the 1940s-50s), but many museums may have just a few, perhaps only one or two pieces. The very idea of a coordinated repatriation is hard to imagine. Third, many of the works of art cast in the years since 1914 have been stolen from the shrines of the royal palace, suggesting that Nigeria is not yet a safe place for its works of art. Fourth, if material were repatriated, where would it go? There is no facility currently in Nigeria that could provide a home for these several thousand works of art. (Picton 2024, 2)

This narrative is informed by white supremacy. Europeans feel the need, not only to undermine African people’s capability of taking care of their own artifacts, but they also feel entitled to keep them. What Africans are dealing with here is not only the removal of art from their continent, but also the emphasis on white superiority.

Methods/ Methodology

The Afrocentric Paradigm is guiding this research project. It was chosen as the most appropriate tool of analysis since its main objective is to bring African people back to their center (Mazama 2003). As a consequence of enslavement, colonization, and imperialism, African people have been decentered. Their losses have been many, including the loss of African artifacts. The Afrocentric Paradigm demands that the topic under hand be studied from the perspective of African people, be relevant to the historical and cultural realities of African people and advance African liberation. The method used to gather information relies on a qualitative analysis of three primary sources of information, digital such as documentaries and films, visual, and written.

The Social/Spiritual Function of African Art

For Africans, art is not for individual fulfillment. It is, on the very contrary, collective because it serves a whole community (Somé 1999). When it comes to material art in particular, the latter is not used to decorate or make someone's home look "more beautiful." Artifacts are used to perpetuate ancestral memory and connections, maintain order, as well as transmit many philosophical lessons (Meyer 1992). African art has spirit and is very much alive. In the African context, art, as well as those who produce it, that is, artists, is seen as sacred.

The Artist as Healer

The artist is known to possess divine powers. In fact, in many languages in Africa the word "artist" is non-existent. The word that most closely approaches it is "Sacred" or "Healer" (Somé 1998, 196). In the African context, artists are in direct connection with the spirit world. The artist helps maintain the spiritual health of the

village. Somé states that "more often than not, the artist is not observed while at work. When busy, he or she is occupied by Spirit. No one should disturb a person who is Spirit, or he may attract the Spirit's wrath" (Somé 1998, 96). Artists are messengers between the invisible world and the visible world. Thus, when a carver is carving a mask or sculpture, in fact, they are in communication with the spirits. Carvers follow ancestral codes that allow them to produce significant creations to serve the needs of their respective communities (Somé 1999, 197).

Nok Art: The First-Known Pieces of West African Material Art

The first pieces of material art, especially in West Africa, were made with terracotta. The oldest known figurines came from the earth's clay. They are about 2,000 years old and were found in central Nigeria; they are called "Nok." These pieces are testimonies of Africa's detailed mastery of various crafts (Abraham 2013, 89). Molded by hand from the earth's clay, the Nok were said to be used for spiritual purposes such as medicinal usage and ancestral veneration. Meyer explains that "Africa's earliest history in written in terracotta: the oldest figurines were modelled in clay" (Meyer 1992, 15). In addition, other important African artifacts were made of metal. African people are notorious for working with metals and producing important pieces. The Yoruba people are well known for producing massive bronze statues and heads to replicate their ancestors, Oba (kings), and other important figures within their communities (Plankensteiner 2011).

Masks as Texts

Generally, there are three types of masks that one can find on the continent: the head mask, the helmet mask, and the headdress mask (Burt 2006). It is said that masks have existed for thousands of years on the African continent (Njoku, 2020). They

are carved from wood. Wood is a very important material in African culture, used for many purposes. Carvers in Africa are usually individuals who have been initiated into a secret society. They go deep into the forest and usually perform several rituals to ask the tree for permission before cutting it for its wood. They tend to use a certain type of wood when creating a mask. The woods that are most commonly used for masks include Iroko, Mahogany, or Ebony. These particular types of wood are known for their spiritual properties and subsequent ability to attract spiritual forces (Meyer 1992). In addition, depending on whether the mask is heavy or light, a particular wood will be carefully chosen.



(Figure 1. Punu Mask from Gabon. © Tamu Musumunu).

Even though African masks display great variety in their appearance, they nonetheless all play a critical role in maintaining social order and asserting their authority within their respective communities (Vendryes 2006). It is very important to point out that masks are not static, but they are texts that tell a story and speak to their people. Masks manifest themselves and are used during dances, ceremonies, burials, conflicts, marriages, wars, fertility rituals, healing purposes, creation myths reenactments, initiation

purposes, ancestor worship, and entertainment (Vendryes 2006). African masks help the community thrive, but they also are used for a variety of purposes too broad to categorize. In some cases, masks are brought out on extreme occasions. The Dogon people of Mali, for example, hold a ceremony every 60 years to mark the completion of an orbit called “Sigui” (Dieterlen 1971, 37). It is considered to be one of the most important ceremonies in a Dogon’s person life because it is about the story of how the Dogon people came into being. Dances are performed by the initiates, who are often men. The masks worn during this ceremony are called “The Great Mask,” and there are nine of them (Dieterlen 1971). They are carved every 60 years and are meant to symbolize the first Dogon ancestor who died while being a snake. This is why the masks appear to have elongated faces.

Sculptures’ Symbolism

Sculptures are another important part of Africa’s rich cultural heritage. Similar to masks, sculptures have been around for thousands of years and carry many symbolisms. Most of these artifacts are crafted in wood and some in metals such as bronze, copper and brass. The great majority of sculptures represent female or male ancestors of a particular family or the ancestors of a specific African community (Meyer 1992, 111). In fact, Meyer insists that “the prime function of these statues is not to please the eye. Their deepest purpose is religious, based on ancestral or mythical cults” (Meyer 1992, 111). In addition, some of the figures can represent spirits associated with forces of nature or even secondary deities within a particular spiritual system. Unlike masks that are associated with different dances, sculptures are quite static, representing a majestic presence (Meyer 1992). They are usually found on altars for the purposes of rain; women’s fertility; the protection of warriors; in market places, and

in sacred rooms linked to initiation. In fact, many sculptures were held in sacred spaces and outsiders were not allowed to see them. They could only be shown to initiates. In some cases, figures were covered up with special fabrics and kept hidden unless they were utilized for ritualistic purposes. The Senufo people of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast, for example, have a sculpture that is purposely carved for cults linked to agricultural work (Meyer 1992). These sculptures make their appearance during ceremonies tied to agriculture or fertility. This sculpture is called the “Deble” and represents a young female who has elongated features with a heart-shaped head. In addition, she has long-hanging breasts which in Senufo culture is a sign of life. The “Deble,” thus, symbolizes fertility, the coming of rain, and the future (Meyer 1992, 115).



(Figure 2. Baoulé woman from Ivory Coast. © Tamu Musumunu).

The Ubiquity of Totems

When studying artifacts, in particular masks and sculptures, it is important to understand the role of totems. The latter offer eternal protection and guidance to the group to which they are related (Ford 1999). Totems are a critical aspect to African culture and cosmology. A totem could be an animal, a fictional creature, or an object that

serves as the protector or guardian of a particular ethnic group (Asante and Mazama 2009, 666). Totems are respected and revered in African societies throughout the continent. Each group claims that they are either the descendants of these creatures or that one of their descendants had a pact with them. Totemic relations may appear complex; however, they are quite simple. The people protect and venerate the totem and, in return, the totem protects and guides the people (Ford 1999, 78). The most common totems in Africa include: dogs, lions, eagles, fish, horses, monkeys, gazelles or leopards. As a result, cultural groups are generally not allowed to harm, kill, or eat their totems or else they will face serious consequences. The identity of most cultural groups is structured around totems. At times, this identity is expressed through masks. This is why many masks in Africa are often display animal features. For example, the Guro people also known as “Kweni” in current day Ivory Coast have the antelope as a totem (Meyer 1992, 47). Therefore, many of their masks represent the antelope and carry its features. These particular masks are usually brought out during funerals for chiefs and can only be seen and carried by the men of the village. It is believed that these masks embody totemic energy.

The Repatriation of African Masks

An atrocious development occurred on the African continent when more than 100 million African people were taken from the continent and exported to strange lands (Njoku 2020, 89). Those women, men, and children had a culture, they had stories, heroes/heroines, and sayings (Amadou 1979). These people were warriors, hunters, agriculturalists, priestesses and priests, mothers and fathers, queens, kings and carvers. These people had a heritage, a rich one in fact, having been the progenitors of humanity and of human civilization. These people had masks, sculptures, and other

important ritualistic objects. It is only fair to say that the European slave trade disrupted African people's lives in major ways. In fact, not only African bodies were being deported to strange lands, but also the precious masks, sculptures, and other ancestral objects of the people were leaving Africa in large numbers. African people on the continent did not just suffer from the kidnapping of their relatives, but also from the abduction of their sacred objects that Europeans still keep hostage today in their homes, museums, and galleries. As bodies were taken to the Americas, masks and sculptures were kidnapped and taken to Europe. Europeans were appropriating our physical strength in the Americas while appropriating our spirits in Europe. Thus, this migration of souls and bodies was a calamity without a name. Europeans raided hundreds of African villages and stole a huge part of Africa's cultural heritage (Picton 2010, 3). Today, museums all over Europe make millions of euros and pounds off the stolen African artifacts. Additionally, thousands of auctions of African art occur world-wide, in particularly, in the US and Europe. Some of the artifacts are sold for millions of dollars. For instance, as of May 2022 it can be estimated that Belgium's Royal Museum imprisons 180,000 Central African objects; Germany's Ethnological Museum has more than 75,000 African pieces; France's Quai de Branly Museum holds nearly 70,000; the British Museum possesses 73,000; and the Netherlands' National Museum of World Cultures confines 66,000 African artifacts (Gbadamosi 2022, 1). Given the massive scale of the predation and the high social and spiritual roles of African artifacts, it seems fair to argue that it is vital for African people to retrieve these stolen artifacts. Without such a return, it is hard to imagine that the African Renaissance that Cheikh Anta Diop called for could truly occur (Diop 1947). Our masks and sculptures are alive; they are spirits, our very essence as African people. In some places, children are given the names

of their community's masks because this is perceived as a blessing. When African people start recovering our masks and sculptures, it will help reestablish a sense of Maât, the ancient Egyptian term for cosmic order (Asante and Mazama 2009, 398). There is hope on the African continent because some countries such as Benin, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Burkina Faso have started the movement of the repatriation of Africa's stolen artifacts. They have demanded that European countries such as England, France, and Belgium return their ancestors' creations.

The Stakes of the Return of Stolen African Artifacts

Debates about the need for stolen African artifacts to be recovered tend to focus primarily on the economic aspect, with a focus on what African countries would gain materially if they, instead of European countries, could exhibit those artifacts in African museums on African soil. One such example is the National Museum Black Civilizations, in Dakar, Senegal. That particular institution specializes in the movement for the repatriation of African art. It was built in 2018 and holds a collection of 18,000 masks and sculptures originating from the DRC to Mali (Katz 2018, 1). Exchanges between Katz and the direction of the museum clearly pointed to the emphasis placed on the financial reward expected from the return of African artifacts. Rarely, if ever, were other aspects, such as the spiritual one, mentioned. It is disappointing and limiting to approach African "art" from a Eurocentric standpoint, where art has become commodified. "Imprisoned in a show-case or nailed to the wall like an owl over a barn door, the mask is a dead object. It was an essential basis for a fabric or raffia costume, inseparable from music, rhythms, chanting, sacrifice and the full ritual which accompanied it and brought it to life.

Immobile and solitary, deprived of the elements which frequently raised it to a different level of meaning, its significance is lost” (Meyer 1992, 73).

Moreover, it is not enough for African masks and sculptures to come back home given the emotional and spiritual state of African people, ravaged by hundreds of years of anti-African propaganda. As a consequence, many Africans reject masks and statues because they have internalized the Christian or Muslim demonization of African art. These alien religions infiltrated the African continent before, during, and after the colonial period. Therefore, I wish to propose the idea of “Cultural Rehabilitation Centers,” that would not only reacquaint people with the sacred purpose of African ancestral objects but also help them decolonize their minds and souls by helping them reach and return to their center-Africa. Part of this process would necessarily entail questioning the concept of the “Museum.”

The Concept of the “Museum: Is it African?”

Museums are European inventions, and they make sense within the European worldview. In Africa, museums emerged around the 19th century, as they were first introduced by Portuguese and British colonizers (Néгри 2006, 42). In these colonial museums, Europeans listed numbers, facts, such as were the first Europeans to reach the African continent. However, in the 1940s, the French and Belgians used museums to display the different African people that they had colonized (Néгри 2006, 43). This display, of course, was done through their colonial gaze. Later, however, when certain African nations, such as Ghana and Nigeria, gained political “independence,” the leaders of those countries used museums to fight against colonization by featuring their independence and the history of their many people. However, those post-independence

museums were still organized the same way as European museums, with objects locked up. For instance, masks were hanged on walls and treated as mere decorative objects.

Cultural Rehabilitation Centers: A Better African Option

Instead of museums, it is suggested here that Cultural Rehabilitation Centers would be more appropriate to organize the return of African art. Such centers would defy the laws of European museums by proposing an alternative that does justice to African people and their worldview. For example, a Cultural Rehabilitation Center would be a lively place where masks and sculptures would be brought out during appropriate rituals, dances, and other ceremonies. They would not simply be placed on walls and shelves to be looked at; instead, they would come to life. It is important to remember that Afrocentricity demands that we consider African masks and sculptures from our own cultural standpoint. Therefore, displaying those artifacts in museums would be a mere imitation of Europeans and a failure to exercise our own agency.

Conclusion

In this paper, the different functions of masks and sculptures in African societies were identified, unmistakably pointing to the highest social and spiritual significance of such artifacts. The massive removal of these artifacts greatly disrupted the African social and spiritual order. Given that African masks and sculptures embody a huge part of African civilization, their return to the continent is imperative for the liberation of African people (Njoku 2020, 158). Thus, appropriate steps must be taken for their proper care and reconnection with their original creators. The idea of cultural rehabilitation centers was thus offered to facilitate this process.

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