



MIASA
Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa

University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

International workshop on:

**ISSUES OF RESTITUTION AND REPATRIATION OF LOOTED AND ILLEGALLY
ACQUIRED AFRICAN OBJECTS IN EUROPEAN MUSEUMS**

13-14 December 2018

Statement by workshop participants

Drawing on earlier exchanges on the African continent, scholars, museum practitioners, heritage custodians and policy-makers, gathering at MIASA at the University of Ghana, discussed a number of shortcomings and inadequacies in the current debate on restitution and provenance issues.

We acknowledged and engaged with previous and current African initiatives and perspectives. The *international* debate needs to quickly gain a much-needed African dimension. Most discussions now centering on Paris, Berlin or Brussels lack clear African inputs and perspectives from scholars and practitioners, often failing to reflect the concerns of African researchers on stakeholder participation, as well as the challenges/needs and potentials of African museums. Additionally, only a few African governments and relevant organisations have taken positions, or at least started discussions about their attitude towards the debate.

The lack of trust of African restitution advocates towards European museums and governments is unlikely to reduce until there is: a) a quick return of those highly valued objects, as requested by African governments and communities, where illegal acquisition is undisputed with a clearly established provenance history; b) more joint (African-European) efforts to establish the provenance of other key objects. Transparency and accessibility are also key to establishing trust. Providing inventories of objects and the opening of museum storage rooms to African experts must become established principles. In addition, there should be access to archives in European museums or other state institutions.

While it is necessary to prioritize the objects to be returned, a long process of re-evaluating or establishing the provenance of objects is unacceptable and cannot be an excuse for slowing down the process of restitution. Undisputed, illegally acquired objects must be subject to unconditional restitution from and by state museums in Europe.

The governance of restitution processes, with clarity of principles and procedures, is equally required. The African Union and Regional Economic Communities are invited to develop a position and to start negotiations about such principles. The instances of some successful – albeit slow and painful - precedents in restitution to Africa could be turned into positive examples or provide elements for deducting more general guidelines. These guidelines could include: a) early negotiation

of terms of reference between the relevant partners (museums, governmental bodies, communities); b) clarification of any competing claims on the objects themselves, but also of legitimacy and representativeness; c) approximate timelines for additional research on the objects' provenance (if deemed necessary); d) validation of the authenticity of restituted objects; e) joint development of an exhibition policy including within the community AND country of origin (at times countries of origin when pre-colonial entities are 'transborder communities') AND at European museums that transfer objects to Africa.

There is also an observable lack of homogeneity on the European side. The Macron initiative (following requests from Africa) is laudable and has provided openings and in turn influenced debates in Germany and Belgium. Yet this is not the case for most other member countries of the European Union, North America and elsewhere. The EU itself has not yet taken a visible position. It is also expected that individuals and private institutions with looted and illegally acquired objects of African origin will begin to show willingness to return these objects.

Interdisciplinary and transregional research as well as transregional and transnational museum cooperation are promising avenues for overcoming the decades-old deadlock in the restitution of illegally acquired/looted objects from Africa. We also expect that while this process is unfolding, it is the joint responsibility of European and African authorities to take urgent steps to scale-up African museum institutions to ensure that, once returned, these looted objects are properly housed in secure institutions that meet the best possible standards of museological practice.

We are aware that various initiatives are underway on the African continent that champion the cause of restitution, and we give our full support to such African-led initiatives.

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