This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast episode 'Africa's stolen objects: what happens after they return,' published on November 10, 2022.

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Dan Merino: Hello, I'm Dan Merino in San Francisco.

Gemma Ware: And I'm Gemma Ware in London. Welcome to The Conversation Weekly.

Gemma Ware: Dan, I want to kick off this episode by showing you something. It's a new website that's just been launched called Digital Benin. So go on, click on this link, I'm gonna show you.

Dan Merino: Okay, clicking. All right. I am looking at a page that says Catalog and a Digital Benin. Okay, so I've heard of the Benin Bronzes, and I'm assuming this is them. There's some awesome little sculptures here, a fan-looking thing, an old — looks like a sickle of some sort. Oh, this is cool, because I've seen one or two photos of the Benin Bronzes, but I've never actually looked at them all.

Gemma Ware: Yeah. This is the first time that people have been able to look at a digital catalog of all the Benin Bronzes in one place. And so these are objects that are made of bronze and ivory and wood, and the majority of them were actually stolen by British soldiers in the late 19th century during the invasion of the Kingdom of Benin in what is today Edo State in Nigeria.

Dan Merino: The reason I've heard about these recently, Gemma, is that some of them are being returned to Nigeria.

Gemma Ware: That's true, some of them are being returned, but it's actually in no way a majority of them. So in order to illustrate that, please click on that tab at the top of the site called Institutions.

Dan Merino: Okay, I see it. Um, alright, so surprise, surprise, British Museum, top of the list with 944 objects. Then we have, a museum in Germany with 518 — oh, and then the National Museum of Benin in Nigeria with 285. So yeah, seems like there's a lot of these out there. Most of them are not in Nigeria.

Gemma Ware: So you're right. The majority of them are not in Nigeria, but they are at the center of a growing movement called restitution, which is returning objects that were looted during the colonial era back to the places that they were looted from.

Dan Merino: Well, that sounds good. Like a good start.

Gemma Ware: Exactly, it is. And you know, a lot of people are celebrating this. So in this episode we wanted to focus on two things: The question of what happens to these objects when they get returned, but also whether or not transferring them to a museum in Nigeria or whichever country they came from is enough, because these objects were looted from specific communities where they hold real meaning, sometimes spiritual meaning and making sure those communities have access to them is a really big question that's at the heart of the restitution debate.

Dan Merino: Okay, so where are we starting, Gemma?

Gemma Ware: Okay, well, we're gonna start with a man called John Kelechi Ugwuanyi. Today, Kelechi teaches at the University of Nigeria and at the University of Bonn in Germany, where he's in their Global Heritage Lab.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: We look at colonial archive that is more than a hundred years ago, and we try to reconnect them with the descendant communities to understand what they think about them and how useful they are today.

Gemma Ware: Kelechi grew up in an Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria. He was surrounded by cultural objects and would make use of them on a daily basis.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: I grew up in the rural community, so I was connected to my cultural heritage. And my connection with my cultural heritage was completely utilitarian. That's where the materials are used within the cultural setting.

Gemma Ware: When he finished secondary school, Kelechi wanted to study economics at university, but he had trouble scheduling the entrance exam.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: And someone encouraged me to pick up a diploma program on tourism and museum studies. So I was like, what is museum? The idea of tourism actually got me impressed, and I was like, okay, so I'll be touring the world, that's fine!

Gemma Ware: As part of their course, the students were asked to visit museums and Kelechi decided to visit one in the city of Enugu, in southeastern Nigeria.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: I was in my elder sister's house. I told her I was going to visit the museum and she shouted at me, what am I going to do there? That's the place where things of pagan religion, obsolete things are kept, that I don't need, that I have no connection with such place, because we are Catholics, we're Christians. The interesting thing is that I never knew that there is something like museum before then. That was the first time, and I'm sure I was more than 19 or 20 years then. My experience at the museum triggered a lot of thinking because I saw Masquerades standing without moving, and they looked very inanimate to me. And I saw a lot of things that are common in my rural village in the community. So I, they didn't mean anything to

me. I mean, I didn't have that connection that, oh, this is my heritage, because they weren't in the context of usage.

Gemma Ware: After his diploma, Kelechi continued to study archeology and tourism, but it wasn't until he started a PhD that he got interested in actually researching museums.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: That experience kept shaping my thinking until I got to the level of PhD. When I began to think about this museum differently, where I began to look at the museum, the inanimate nature, the static nature of museums, and the rural community from where I came, where everything is active within the cultural setting.

Gemma Ware: Kelechi began thinking about who the museum in Enugu was actually for, and who was visiting it.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: My experience was that students from secondary schools, from primary schools are brought to the museums. But I can't connect to anyone who just left his house in Nigeria to visit the museum. Rather, you meet people, maybe tourists, maybe foreigners, maybe students especially. Even during my PhD field work in 2017, statistics I picked from the museum showed that is just students and foreigners and tourists coming around, and you can hardly see people living within the city or living around it just coming on their own. If there are such people, I think they belong to very minority group.

Dan Merino: So I gotta imagine that's a weird feeling to see objects that you are familiar with from your life, right? They're used in ceremonies or activities that are connected to you personally. And then to see them, like, behind glass in a sterile environment of a museum, that's gotta be a strange thing. Are there Benin Bronzes that are set to be returned to Nigeria, are they gonna be put behind big, thick glass in some fancy museum, in some city somewhere?

Gemma Ware: Well, that is actually a really big topic of debate right now. So the Benin Bronzes aren't gonna be in this particular museum that Kelechi's been talking about in Enugu. They're from Edo State, which is a bit further to the west in Nigeria. But there is a lot of discussion going on about exactly where they'll be returned to and how they're going to be displayed.

Dan Merino: Has this happened yet, are any of them arrived in Nigeria?

Gemma Ware: A few of them have, yeah. So there were a couple from the Met Museum in New York that were returned, and some from the Universities of Cambridge and Aberdeen in the UK. But none of them are actually on display yet. Kelechi did tell me, though, that the ceremony for their return was pretty telling about what might happen.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: When you look at the representation at the ceremony that happened in the process of returning this materials, you understand that it happens at the level of elites. For instance, during that of the Cambridge and Aberdeen return, the Oba of Benin was represented.

Gemma Ware: The Oba of Benin is the traditional ruler and custodian of the culture of the Edo people who previously ruled over the historical kingdom of Benin. We should say there's no relation to the present day country of Benin.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: Along with the representatives of the Nigerian government, the National Commission for Museums and monuments in Nigeria, but there is plan to build a new museum, the EMOWAA project in Benin, which is ongoing, and it is hoped that many of these materials will be returned there.

Gemma Ware: The EMOWAA project is the Edo Museum of West African Art, a US$4 million museum set to be built to top the ruins of the capital of the Kingdom of Benin in Benin City. The plan is for it to be a new home for some of the looted objects being returned to Nigeria.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: But the question is to what extent that the ordinary person in Benin will connect to this return. That's where I have problem with the whole process.

Gemma Ware: There's been some controversy over where the objects will actually return to and who will take ownership of them. The Oba says he's planning to build his own museum, the Benin Royal Museum, at the palace to hold some of the Bronzes.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: But remember also that Benin Kingdom was not just ruled by the Oba himself alone. There were these quarters headed by the Enogies.

Gemma Ware: The Benin Kingdom was made up of several quarters, so these are essentially local districts that are headed by Enogies, a kind of duke, who report back to the Oba.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: The Enogies headed their quarters and also had their individual palaces in these quarters. Apart from their palaces, there were shrines, great shrines, that are connected to these quarters. So the question is: Which one belongs to the palace, and which one belongs to these quarters? So, I think we need to extend this conversation down to this set of people and not just stage them at the level of national government and the Benin king, the Oba and the elites. They need to begin to go beyond these elites and get to the descendant, members of the descendant communities whose ancestors produced and used many of these within their cultural context so that we will have a complex knowledge and understanding about how they feel and connect to these materials.

Dan Merino: This all sounds really complicated and political, and there's kind of power struggles and posturing, but at the, underneath it all, I just like wonder: Are the everyday

people— are they gonna have access? Are, like, how do they feel about all this? Because they don't hear about that opinion in this discussion.

Gemma Ware: Yeah, exactly. And you know, Kelechi has been arguing for the involvement of these communities where these objects were looted from in the decision-making process. Around what happens to objects like the Bronzes.

Dan Merino: So what would this actually look like if we were to have the communities to whom these artifacts are very important in a cultural, historical sense, involved in the process of restitution? Like, how does that play out?

Gemma Ware: Museums across Africa are grappling with this question. But it's not just about objects that have been repatriated from museums in Europe or North America; it's also about objects that are being held in collections in capital cities across Africa. And it's because these objects are still really far from the communities where they come from.

Farai Chabata: Some of the objects literally moved into museum storages and galleries without their stories. So one of our jobs is to make connections between collections and communities.

Gemma Ware: This is Farai Chabata. He's a visiting lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe and a senior curator of ethnography at the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.

Farai Chabata: I am based in the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare, where we take care of maybe about 10,000 priceless cultural objects, both in the museum and in other sister institutions.

Gemma Ware: When Farai began working with the museum in the early 2000's, he noticed that many of the stories around cultural artifacts weren't being told from the perspectives of the communities they'd been taken from.

Farai Chabata: For most of the reconstruction of the history of Zimbabwe, there was an overreliance on just the written records that were left by missionaries, explorers, hunters, and even some of the colonial administrators, like the native commissioners. So I always felt that there were stories that were not told by communities, by the local people.

Gemma Ware: Instead, the original purpose of Zimbabwe's Museums was to tell the stories of objects from the colonizers' perspectives, and by doing so, to celebrate the British Empire. This was the case for the Museum of Human Sciences where Farai works today, which was founded in 1903 when Zimbabwe was a British colony called Southern Rhodesia.

Farai Chabata: It was actually named the Queen Victoria Museum, and of course, the name always carried these connotations to celebrate the British Empire. When the museums were

founded before Independence, there were, in my opinion, two main objectives: Number one, to understand the colony, the people; and then the other one was the objectification of culture to then present cultures in museums for settler tourist amusement. And even the objects; if you look at the acquisition registers, there's very scant information of the provenance. So what you then see is a museum which was not actually serving the community in terms of, in its inclusive form. These were very exclusive elitist museums that largely saved a colonial, white minority.

Gemma Ware: The colonial administration actually placed cultural objects in museums as a way to strip them of their cultural and spiritual significance.

Farai Chabata: One of the things that happened is during the resistance to colonization of the 1890s, 1896 - 1897, the spirit mediums, the spiritual, the religious leaders were very inspirational, influential in mobilizing and coordinated spirited resistance. So what immediately happened when Zimbabwe was officially declared Southern Rhodesia as a colony in 1898, the missionaries — who were also influential in duping King Lobengula to sign the Rudd Concession that led to colonizing — the missionaries then pushed for the passing of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899, which was passed in theory to discourage sorcery and witch hunt. But an act which I, which we, discovered from when we profiled our collection, that it was used to confiscate our objects of spiritual significance and bring them to the museum. And you would find that some of the objects actually had text of the Witchcraft Suppression Act attached to them, as a legal justification for their confiscation.

Gemma Ware: Today, Zimbabwe's museums are changing the way they work and the communities they serve.

Farai Chabata: The museum's role is changing. In fact, the mandate is evolving because one of the things that now define the work that we do is community participation, various levels of engagement with museums.

Gemma Ware: And they're doing this in a number of ways…

Farai Chabata: …including, but not limited to heritage outreach programs where museum objects are taken out to even places that you would describe as disadvantaged or marginalized, who may not have the chance to come to the museum and to see the objects. So the museum is taken out to them, the mobile museum.

Gemma Ware: Another way is to support the development of local community museums.

Farai Chabata: There have also been ongoing efforts to establish community museums such as the BaTonga Museum in Binga. There is another one for the Nambya in Hwange.

Gemma Ware: Objects from the museum in Harare were repatriated to the museum in Binga where the BaTonga are from and where the objects were taken from. The objects still belong to the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, which is responsible for managing them, but also for supporting the local museums financially.

Farai Chabata: This is the kind of museum, in my view, which, if people sees Benin, it is an identity that has no colonial tainting. So community museums, you know, they are actually here to bring a sense of belonging for the objects, which is more descend and closer to people who attach so much meaning to these objects as a collective community.

Gemma Ware: So I mean, looking ahead, do you think there's still a place for national museums, or should everything be in local museums, in smaller institutions that are within the communities where they came from?

Farai Chabata: I think a bit of both can still be part of the reality that we will still face for the foreseeable future, because the work that needs to be done, it'll devolve to local communities. It is not an overnight job, but it's something that will happen for quite some time.

Gemma Ware: This question about where and how objects should be held and used is particularly important for objects being returned from abroad, like the Benin Bronzes. Here's Kelechi again.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: Some people would like to re-ritualize some of these objects into their cultural settings, and in that case, what the national museums should do is to become a repository for information concerning them, and through which visitors can actually move and locate these things in their culture setting to experience them. The museum shouldn't hold the objects. Rather, they could have some photographs, films, stories about them while directing people to go experience these activities in their context. So if that's what the communities want, I think it should be done.

Gemma Ware: Kelechi's got a name for this proposed way of treating these objects.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: I call it the "in-use model," where these materials are returned to their cultural settings. Of course, most people have moved away from these practices, but there are people who still practice them, especially in Igboland, even in Benin.

Gemma Ware: So imagine your in-use model — how would that be used for the Benin Bronzes, for example?

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: Yeah, remember that in — a lot of activities happen in Oba's Palace, for instance, and those activities relate to many of these objects. In fact, those objects to an extent represent some activities or life events that have happened in Benin Kingdom. So it will be a

different kind of experience where you people don't just troop in because they just want to go and see these things and go, but people go to the palace to have that connection that usually happened in the past between the people and the Oba in the cultural processes.

Gemma Ware: And this is what you call the utility and function of objects, is that right?

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: Exactly. So some of these objects are invoked during some activities and not just that they're kept there, but some of them are brought back and kept for some rites and rituals, some festivals and all of that. So like, some of the deities that were looted, I'm sure that that deity must probably have a rite or a ceremony performed for it from time to time, and some of the objects are used. And like I said, what museums should do in this case is point people, point tourists to these activities and when they happen, and people go to experience them in their in-use context.

Gemma Ware: Societies that have been robbed of their cultural objects can still find an important use for them once they're returned, says Kelechi.

John Kelechi Ugwuanyi: People know that this belongs to their ancestors, and they revere them. So in that case, they'll be happy to lay hand on this object and reritualize them into the cultural setting.

Dan Merino: This sounds almost antithetical to a sterile museum where an object is sitting behind some glass, and there's bright lights, and you stand behind a little rope and you go, wow, that's cool. So how are people trying to incorporate this idea of use and purpose of an object into the way they are displayed — but display even seems like the wrong word here?

Gemma Ware: Yeah, it's, this issue of the use and the function of objects is really dependent on what the object was meant to be used for in the first place. And you know, some objects may have had a completely different function to others, and that is at the heart of conversations about how they're gonna be treated going forward.

Aribiah David Attoe: Certain artifacts are treated as artworks, and so you go to most museums in Europe and probably America, you'll find some of these artifacts displayed in the museums or art galleries as, like, artworks that people can come and gawk at. So it didn't seem to me that those sorts of artifacts can be considered art.

Gemma Ware: This is Aribiah David Attoe. He's a lecturer of ethics and African philosophy at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. Aribiah echoed Kelechi's point about objects in museums being stripped of their sacred meaning. He says it's a particular problem if they're presented as works of art.

Aribiah David Attoe: The sacredness attached to some of these objects, the religious baggage or the religious context attached to these objects did not allow such objects to be called art. And so I wrote, I and my colleague, we wrote a paper dismissing those sorts of suggestions and proposing that perhaps we should give these objects their rightful place as religious objects, as sacred objects, not just art works that can be displayed in certain museums, whether in Africa or in Europe, or anywhere, because they serve the particular purpose.

Gemma Ware: So what you are saying basically is that these sacred objects are actually being mistreated if they're being treated as art. Is that your argument?

Aribiah David Attoe: Yes, yes. My community, I come from a community called Cross River in Nigeria, there is a particular tribe called the Efik Tribe. So they have these particular, what we call masquerades. They are said to represent certain spirits, so to say. And in ancient times they had certain religious, even social importance. They had, so for instance, the Ekpe Masquerade, which I used in the article, was used as some sort of policing device, right?

Gemma Ware: But Aribiah goes even further and says that even the display of objects today by communities in public rituals can ignore their very sacredness.

Aribiah David Attoe: Today, these masquerades, you have certain masquerade dancers, so, and then everyone comes out and watches them dance and stuff like that. It's kind of like a tourist attraction of some sort today. But prior to, to contemporary times, these masquerades had certain very important spiritual relevance, right? But that has been eroded by modernity and stuff like that. So it doesn't seem right to me that some of these religious ceremonies are the sort of things that we should treat as artworks.

Gemma Ware: Can you give me an example of what you mean here? Like an object that's being treated as art in a museum, but really shouldn't be?

Aribiah David Attoe: Okay. Classic example would be the Benin art. There was, like, a massacre of people and this, the city was burnt down, and then these items were looted. So from the historical context alone, these things should not be even displayed as at artworks, shouldn't even be displayed at all because of the historical baggage. But that aside, the original intention of those objects were not necessarily as artworks, but as a way of documenting the history of the people. The King's Mask was a very spiritual, a very specific item. It wasn't like something the Benin people displayed for anyone to come look at, some sort of artwork. So that is a classic example of the way in which certain artifacts are mistreated as artworks in, in galleries, especially in Europe.

Gemma Ware: Aribiah suggests that it's only when objects were actually intended for artistic purposes, that it's okay to display them in museums or art galleries today.

Aribiah David Attoe: There are certain objects within even traditional African societies that were meant for artistic purposes. Those sorts of objects can be displayed, I would think, because the use for which, uh, they were made for artistic expression and all that, right? That can be presented in the museum or a gallery or anything like that, because it was meant to be an artwork.

Gemma Ware: There's a question there isn't there about how objects change over time and their use changes over time. So does that need to be thought through quite carefully — if an object is a couple of hundred years old, does it change in the way today, like in the 21st century, it's being interpreted by that culture and that place as well?

Aribiah David Attoe: The underlying assumption in that question is that certain African societies have changed so drastically from pre-colonial times that we really can't have that same society. That might be true, but then again, certain aspects of that culture still remains. In fact, significant aspects of that culture still remains. So for instance, in the example we've been using, which is the example of the Benin Kingdom, despite colonialism and modernity, they still practice their religions in similar ways as it was practiced in precolonial times. And if that applies across board, at least to most or a significant number of African societies, then I would say some of these objects still retain their purpose or their usefulness in those traditional societies. So it is not that traditional African societies have totally died off in such a way that these objects become obsolete. These traditional societies still exist, and it's still important for these objects to be returned and to remain part of that cultural milieu.

Gemma Ware: When the objects in question are human remains, Aribiah says the problem takes on a whole other dimension. Like for example, what happened to the tombs of the Pharaohs in Egypt.

Aribiah David Attoe: In Egyptology, for instance, the objects in their tombs were for a specific purpose, and then because we want to satiate curiosity, we go and then desecrate these tombs and mistreat these bodies and sometimes even display these bodies in museums or whatever. My question is, what justifies that sort of action? Is it the passage of time that makes tomb raiding a justifiable act? The Queen of England was recently interred. Do we wait 2000 years or a thousand years, or 500 years before we are allowed to ethically go into her tomb and desecrate her tune? Just because we want to satiate our knowledge and make archeological findings and things like that? You know, what justifies that sort of mistreatment? It cannot just be the passage of time. I don't think that's strong enough because then how do you measure that? Do you say 1000 years or 1,500 years and then everybody waits for 1,500 years before they can go desecrate a person's tomb? I don't think that is ethically justifiable, in my opinion.

Gemma Ware: Part of the current debate about restitution centers on human remains that are being held by museums and collections in Europe or North America. In October, the National

History Museum in London and the University of Cambridge agreed to cooperate with Zimbabwe about returning human remains taken during the colonial era that they found in their collections. I asked Aribiah what he thought should happen to those remains when they're returned.

Aribiah David Attoe: I think the best we can do is to try to trace the history of those remains — where were they originally from? Can we bury them again in some sort of ceremony? Because remember, especially within the context of Africa, for instance, where a person is buried is very important. Right, because you, once you die, you are considered an ancestor, and you are tied to your community in certain ways. So if your body is removed and taken into another land, it's a severance of communal ties, even beyond death. Also, if you are going to return all these artifacts, the best way to do it is to try to find the historical context in which those bodies, for instance, those remains, their historical context, where they came from, and then try as much as possible to engage with the community and see how best to, at least religiously speaking, bury those remains again, with the appropriate rituals and stuff like that.

Gemma Ware: Are there any wider philosophical questions that this kind of line of research has opened for you about the treatment of the past and where the boundary between art and a sacred object lies?

Aribiah David Attoe: So I think the major point of inquiry that this opens up for me personally is — so, because obviously we gain some knowledge through archeology, right? We know about some of the history of Egypt, for instance, by virtue of archeological findings and things like that, and that is supposed to be valuable knowledge. Right? So where do we draw the line between allowing sacred objects to remain, allowing human remains to be interred the way they were, and then losing out on the sort of valuable knowledge you would have gotten, or getting that valuable knowledge and then mistreating all these objects? Where do we draw the line? How do we draw that line? I think that, for me, is the main, like, question that arises from this sort of research.

Gemma Ware: Okay. And do you, have you come up with a, where you would draw the line?

Aribiah David Attoe: No, I have not come up with an answer to that question.

Gemma Ware: So what's really struck me talking to the people I have in this episode is what restitution means. And it's not just talking about an object being returned from the British Museum here in London to, say, Benin City. It's also about making sure the communities where those objects are from really get access to them.

Dan Merino: And there's a second even deeper layer looking at: Whether communities and peoples that aren't around anymore have some sort of claim on how an object is to be used or presented, because where do we draw that line?

Gemma Ware: Yeah, exactly, and to me it just feels like there's lots of different types of restitution. And it poses lots of questions for archeologists, museum curators and people going to look at the objects in museums wherever they may be in the world.

Gemma Ware: Before we go, we've got a message from our colleague, Vinita Srivastava in Toronto about the new season of her podcast "Don't Call Me Resilient."

Vinita Strivastava: Hey, everyone! Vinita here to let you know about a whole new season of Don't Call Me Resilient, where we tackle systemic racism head on and figure out ways to deal with it. This season we'll be delving into everything from tokenism at work to how long Covid is hitting women of color especially hard, and from how climate change is wreaking havoc on the most vulnerable to how most journalists have a lot to learn about telling Indigenous stories. In each one of these upcoming episodes, our guests bring their expertise to challenge us to do better. So we'll also be looking at solutions and sharing reasons to be hopeful.

DCMR Guest: Change is inevitable, and it has to happen. Like, we're having to have these difficult conversations. I think, and I believe that we will make a difference. Oh, I'm, I'm 99.8% sure on that one, not gonna say a hundred percent.

Vinita Strivastava: That's coming up on season four of "Don't call me Resilient." Plus we've got a whole new look for the pod rolling out.

Gemma Ware: That's it for this week's episode. Thank you to our colleague, Charl Blignaut in Johannesburg, who was a big help making this story.

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Gemma Ware: This episode of The Conversation Weekly was produced by Mend Mariwany and Katie Flood, and written by Mend Mariwany and me. Sound designers by Eloise Stevens. And our theme music by Nita Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. I'm Gemma Ware, the show's executive producer.

Dan Merino: And I'm Dan Merino. Thanks for listening.