In my research on Buganda art disseminated throughout the Global North, I excavated museums in the United Kingdom and expanded my scope worldwide (Nabakooza 2020). In early 2020, I was following up virtually on museum visits, with concerns similar to those of Amanda Maples’s First Word essay “African Restitution in a North American Context,” in which she calls for the “repatriation, restitution, return, and reparations” of African art in American museum collections (Maples 2020). Last November, upon the 150th anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote: “It needs to be said that recent scholarship has cast shade on the robber-baron and colonialist provenance of many Met treasures—a problem shared by other formerly piratical museums worldwide” (Schjeldahl 2020). As curator of a smaller museum than the Metropolitan Museum of Art, described by Schjeldahl (2020) as “a battle ship,” Maples (2020) explained that she is nimble in her ability to challenge the complicity of American museums in collecting African art with dubious provenances. She describes how the release of The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage report in November 2018 caused reverberations that reached American museums, sparking several conferences that she attended (Maples 2020; Sarr and Savoy 2018).

Savoy and Sarr’s seminal report focuses specifically on art from sub-Saharan Africa, the region in which the Buganda Kingdom resides, within the equatorial nation of Uganda in East Central Africa. As comprehensive as the Sarr-Savoy report is, and as Maples points out, much work remains to account for African art outside of the continent and currently there is no active centralized inventory of all African art in museums or on the market. Similarly, in his recent publication The British Museum, Dan Hicks, curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford contends that: “We need to open up and excavate our institutions, dig up our ongoing pasts, with all the archaeological tools that can be brought to hand” (2020: xiii). His call to action resonates with my own provenance research conducted last year, during which I identified a sacred bundle and a royal drum at the Pitt Rivers Museum (2012a, 2012b) which should be restituted to the Buganda in the Buganda Kingdom of Uganda. The sacred bundle (1916.26.26) contains human remains of the Kabaka (King of Buganda) and together with the royal war drum (1898.14.1.1) are regarded by the Buganda as “relatives, ancestors, or spirits, and Kings” (Kafumbe 2018: 41). The Kabaka is the head of all the Buganda clans and shares kinship, spiritual, and political relationships with all the Baganda (Kafumbe 2018: 2). Burial of the Kabaka is sacred and it is unacceptable to his descendants that his remains would leave Buganda, let alone be subject to research in the storage room of a British museum.

The Sarr-Savoy report notes that many African countries have demanded the return of objects for decades since Independence and Maples emphasized the need for museums to be transparent about their collections of African art, quoting Daoud Karungi, director of the Kampala Biennial, that “what was taken away should be brought back to our country” (Sarr and Savoy 2018: 17; Maples 2020: 13). In July 1962, just before Independence, Abubakar Mayanja, a law graduate of Cambridge University and Uganda’s minister of education, successfully negotiated the return of objects similar to this sacred bundle and royal drum (Thomas 2016). This early and successfully negotiated pre-Independence case is not common, but certainly backs up the need to return objects discovered during my research and illustrates the longstanding restitution calls.

However, my provenance research began not at the Pitt Rivers, but at the British Museum because of a written description of Sir Apollo Kagwa, Katikirro (prime minister) of Buganda and diplomatic guest of the British government. On June 14, 1902, Sir Apollo Kagwa and his secretary Hamu Mukasa visited the British Museum and they both noted that:

“We saw there different articles from our Country; some had been brought by Sir H.H. Johnston, who had given a great many things, and others by other Englishmen: The Rev. I. Roscoe had given away many, the Rev. R.P. Ashe had given a great many; and others who had given things from our country of Uganda (Mukasa 1975: 48–49).”

I found Buganda objects under similar circumstances in museums throughout Europe and the United States. For example, Zachary Kingdom, curator of African Collections at the National Museums Liverpool, shared letters with me that were sent between the director of the Liverpool Museum and Margaret Trowell, a British curator at Uganda Museum who founded the oldest school of art in East Africa (Miller 1975: 70). Like Roscoe, Trowell had questionable methods in obtaining Buganda objects. For instance, she shared an anecdote in her memoir where she misrepresented herself as a witch to an unnamed woman she described as Nilotic, to purchase a Buganda object she believed to have spiritual significance (1957: 74–76).

During a panel I attended at the French Embassy, Felwine Sarr (2019) explained that African civil society must have a right to interrogate the legitimacy of looted objects, such as the bundle under discussion, and accordingly, the Baganda have used knowledge in many forms as a weapon to resist colonialism (Roberts 2016: 806; Summers 2019: S127–S143). I, for example, was born into the Ente clan (specifically, the sacred cow born without a tail) on my father’s side. Our clan has been active in anticolonial resistance to the British in Uganda (Earle 2018: 389) with the understanding that cultural knowledge and material culture are closely kept and transmitted within Buganda clans (Kafumbe 2018: 10). I here point out that the catalogue entry for the royal drum in the Pitt Rivers Museum (2012b) was described as “booby,” implying that it was looted from Kabaka Mwanga after he went to war with the British and was sent into exile. The drum was also described in the catalogue as a “status object.” I believe the British were aware of the symbolic power of the Kabaka and removed material culture (and sometimes the Kabaka himself through forced exile) to destabilize the Buganda Kingdom and the identity of the Baganda throughout the colonial period. As this illustrates, such methods burden many colonial collections.

The call to action to restitute African art collections is heightened by the global coronavirus pandemic. As museums face budgetary concerns, I wonder how marginalized collections will be accounted for, preserved, and restituted. In an article for the New York Times, Paul Theroux (2020) recalled how the current crisis reminded him of curfew set in Uganda during a violent coup in 1966 while he was at Makerere University. This similar period of disturbance coincides with my great certainty of the current asymmetry between stakeholders and museums, as shown by numerous others, including Kostas Arvanitis and Louise Tytaccott (2014: 139). Looking to The Thinkers, a 20-foot-tall metal sculpture at Dar es Salaam University, Tanzania by George Kagaba Kakooza, and the Kenyan artist Wangeci Mutu’s four monumental
sculptures for The Seated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that illustrate the undeniable “dignity and the peacefulness” of our elders (Wangeci Mutu, email with author, May 1, 2020), I call for the restitution of Buganda collections in museums worldwide to the Buganda Kingdom of Uganda. I am aware of Verity’s proposal for a conference in a year to discuss the restitution of African art from American museums. I hope to contribute to the return of African art to the continent.

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AFROPOLITANIST RETURN AND CIRCULATION

Laetitia Valendom, Fulbright Scholar, MA African Studies, Stanford University, 2018

In June 2020, Congolese-born activist Mwazulu Diyaibanza and five others attempted to remove a nineteenth-century Chadian funeral post from the Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac. Diyaibanza would go on to enact this type of protest in two more European museums before the end of the year. He and his fellow protestors proclaimed a collective European and North American complicity and were tried by French courts for group theft of an object of cultural heritage. As the reader likely knows, the cultural heritage here in question was France’s, whose appeal for the items in part mirrors Amanda M. Maples’s Afropolitanist considerations in her First Word. These items have indeed been resocialized, but should at the very least be accessible to their communities of origin as they speak to different geographies in multiple languages (Maples 2020).

The year 2020 and its deluge of surprises left us with small consolations: much of the African continent emerged from the COVID epidemic relatively unscathed. However, the virus’ ramifications have already begun affecting sub-Saharan African countries, spurring legitimate concerns about vaccine equity. These dynamics undoubtedly mirror the stakes and discourse that affect sub-Saharan African countries and cultural institutions and only strengthen the case for financial support. Dr. Memel Kassi notes the disparity in the circulation of artwork among the United States, Europe, and the African continent in her contribution to this discussion, and I join her in a call for financial commitments from North American institutions. A model for comanagement, in the form of a fixed-term rental deposit, complements Maples’s call for North American museums to properly investigate provenance and inform the placement of these works of art. However, this task cannot be completed unilaterally. Much of the cataloguing and provenance research, the investigations into cultural heritage and exercises that advance institutional capabilities in North American and European institutions, remains inaccessible to the majority of museum professionals on the African continent. Adopting a significant “role in a politics of cultural action” is an exercise that in and of itself demands boundless adaptability. Efforts such as the controversial Humboldt Museum’s “Humboldt Lab Tanzania,” with support from TURN (The Fund for Artistic Cooperation between Germany and African Countries), engaged scholars in the sites of origin of selected pieces and the store rooms for the very sites where the artifacts are held. Such initiatives, though still insufficient, are essential to active cultural reengagement around these very artifacts. I also echo Christine Mullen Kreamer’s reflection on the distinctions between process and outcome, and the manners in which both can be useful material exercises for developing new dynamics of equity between North American and African institutions. Given these histories of exclusion and the concerns around ensuring that artifact return follows and instills “sustainable development,” the hazards—legal, geopolitical, financial, emotional—demand novel modes of reasoning across institutions and geographies. Following Kreamer’s question and reiterating Strother’s own, we must ask how North American institutions can work toward outcomes that will replicate the very imbalanced hierarchies of power that have produced the current complications around assessing the merits of return.

North American institutional partnerships cannot be limited to North American peers. As Maples measuredly points out, the burden of devising best practice guidelines cannot be shouldered by one institution alone. The same logic extends continentally. Travel and knowledge-sharing must be made active and transparent and cannot exclude the very professionals who will themselves ensure conservation and curation for the objects that will be repatriated or circulated.

We must not forget, ultimately, that properly accounting for the placement of African artwork is a mutually beneficial gesture in addition to an ethical obligation, one that will result in stronger relationships between African and North American museums. African institutions will hopefully only gain in prominence, agency, and influence in the future, bringing Amadou Mahtar M’Bow’s 2000 appeal to fruition. Construction will soon begin for the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) on the very site of the former Benin Palace. It is set to house the Benin Bronzes (on loan) after a fifty-year dream of restitution, embodying an Afropolitan repatriation of agency (Maples 2020). We are best served by cultivating a future where the most prominent bastions of African cultural heritage can be safely and conscientiously cherished from both sides of the Atlantic.

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