The Journal of African History (2025), **66**, e17, 1–9
doi:10.1017/S0021853725100637

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

HISTORY MATTERS

Echoes of History: Legacies of the Benin Bronzes and Restitution Within the Black Atlantic

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(Received 6 August 2025; revised 15 September 2025; accepted 15 September 2025)

Abstract

This article examines the politics of restitution within the Black Atlantic through the case of the Restitution Study Group's legal challenge to the Smithsonian Institution's return of Benin bronzes to Nigeria. While most scholarship frames restitution as a struggle between Western museums and postcolonial states, this article shifts the lens to intra-Black debates that complicate inherited frameworks of return, foregrounding the unresolved legacies of slavery and the claims of Black American and broader diasporic communities. At the same time, it situates these debates within the larger global landscape in which Western institutions and nation-states continue to define the terms and tempo of restitution. By challenging the assumption that restitution is solely a matter between source nations and former colonial powers, the Restitution Study Group brings attention to how African elites' historical participation in the transatlantic slave trade and the ongoing marginalization of diaspora communities shape contemporary claims. The article also places these interventions alongside disputes within Nigeria over custodianship between the federal government, Edo State, and the Benin royal court. By tracing these overlapping histories, ethical claims, and political stakes, the article argues that returns of looted artifacts are not simply acts of restitution, but processes of decolonial repair that reconfigure authority, belonging, and historical responsibility across diasporic and national contexts.

Keywords: Atlantic World; West Africa; Nigeria; United States; material culture; museums & memorials; diasporas; slavery

In October 2022, the Smithsonian Institution formally transferred ownership of twenty-nine Benin bronzes to Nigeria in a ceremony widely heralded as a milestone of decolonial justice. Yet only weeks later, the Restitution Study Group (RSG), a US-based nonprofit focused on slavery justice, filed a lawsuit seeking to halt further returns. RSG argued that repatriating the bronzes exclusively to Nigeria without consulting descendants of enslaved Africans erased the diasporic communities whose ancestors had been sold by the Benin Kingdom and other African elites into the transatlantic slave trade. For the group, Black Americans and the wider African diaspora have moral and political claims to the bronzes as part of a broader history of dispossession, violence, and cultural loss. This intervention, largely overlooked in prevailing heritage debates, exposes a deeper fault line in the politics of restitution: the unresolved wounds of slavery that reverberate across the Black Atlantic.

Much of the discourse surrounding the restitution of looted artifacts has focused on the relationship between African and Indigenous communities and the Western institutions that hold their

cultural heritage.[1] This article shifts the lens. Rather than centering European or North American museums, it explores an underexamined dimension of the restitution debate: the tensions, claims, and emotional resonances that arise within the Black world. It considers how unhealed wounds of transatlantic slavery continue to shape struggles over cultural belonging, recognition, and repair between diasporic communities and those on the African continent. While this analysis seeks to move beyond framing restitution solely as a transactional exchange between Western museums and pillaged source communities by foregrounding diasporic claims and debates within the Black world, it must also be situated within the broader global landscape of restitution. These larger struggles, often shaped by Western institutions and nation-states, provide the context in which diasporic interventions like RSG's both emerge and gain their urgency. As such, this article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that rethinks restitution not only as a legal or diplomatic issue, but as a field shaped by contested genealogies, diasporic ethics, and the uneven afterlives of empire.

History matters in this context because the debates surrounding restitution are not only about physical objects, but about how historical harms such as slavery, colonialism, and cultural erasure continue to reverberate in the present. The narratives, grievances, and claims mobilized by both continental and diasporic actors are deeply rooted in divergent understandings of the past and its moral implications. To understand the stakes of restitution today, we must attend to the ways history is remembered, invoked, and contested across the Black Atlantic. One institution that sits at the center of this contemporary reckoning is the Smithsonian. As the largest museum complex in the United States, it has long held a significant collection of Benin bronzes acquired through imperial networks of looting and exchange. Its recent attempts to return a portion of these objects to Nigeria, alongside the backlash it has faced, offer a window into the complexities of postcolonial redress. The RSG's lawsuit against the Smithsonian serves as a critical lens through which to analyze these tensions. Their challenge crystallizes how different inheritances of slavery shape Black Atlantic ethics of return: for some, repatriation to Nigeria symbolizes ancestral homecoming and cultural reclamation; for others, it risks erasing the historical complicity of African elites in the slave trade and marginalizing the descendants of the enslaved. These debates reflect not only divergent positions on restitution but also deeper questions about historical responsibility, diasporic belonging, and the meanings ascribed to cultural heritage.

At their core, debates on restitution embody nuanced interplays of perspectives. Some perceive the preservation of looted artifacts within Western museums as an act of safeguarding cultural heritage, shielding these treasures from the erosive forces of time and conflict. Yet, for others, particularly those whose cultural legacies have been pillaged and displaced, the restitution of these artifacts emerges as a critical step towards addressing historical wounds and reclaiming ancestral narratives. Central to the discourse surrounding artifact restitution is the acknowledgment of power dynamics. Rather than framing restitution solely as a binary conflict between African and African American communities, this article examines how overlapping histories and ethical claims complicate inherited frameworks of return. By centering the RSG's intervention, it highlights how intra-Black Atlantic debates reveal the uneven afterlives of empire and the need for careful dialogue grounded in both historical awareness and contemporary accountability.

The Smithsonian, the Benin Bronzes, and the Politics of Return

The Benin bronzes, sacred metal sculptures and plaques from the Kingdom of Benin (modern day Nigeria), date back to the thirteenth century and testify to the artistic ingenuity, spiritual and cultural devotion, and historical significance of the Edo people and their traditions. Prior to their forcible

[1]See Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); and Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministry of Culture, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

removal during an 1897 British invasion, their subjects, ranging from regal figures to mythical beings, adorned the royal palace, sacred sites, and ancestral altars, serving as both artistic marvels and spiritual conduits. After their removal, the bronzes were dispersed and placed in Western museums and private collections around the world, where their presence has sparked long-standing calls for restitution. For the people of Benin and Nigeria, the repatriation of the Benin bronzes transcends mere restitution; it embodies a profound act of cultural reclamation and identity reaffirmation. These artifacts symbolize the heart of Edo cultural heritage, embodying the collective memory and identity of a people whose legacy was marred by the violence of colonialism. The return of the bronzes carries with it the promise of healing historical wounds and restoring dignity to a community whose narrative was once silenced by the forces of imperialism.

The Smithsonian Museum of African Art amassed its collection of Benin bronzes during the colonial era, through purchases, donations, and acquisitions shaped by imperial power imbalances. In recent years, a groundswell of demands for the repatriation of the Benin bronzes to Nigeria, their rightful place of origin, has emerged.[2] This movement has been fueled by a deepening awareness of the injustices perpetrated by colonialism and an acknowledgment of the profound cultural and spiritual significance these artifacts hold for the people of Benin and Nigeria. Advocates, including activists, scholars, and cultural leaders, have tirelessly campaigned for the return of these looted artifacts to their communities.[3] The Smithsonian's response to these calls for restitution has been met with a complex and sometimes hesitant reaction.[4] While the institution initially took small steps toward acknowledging the problematic history surrounding its acquisitions, such as engaging in discussions with Nigerian authorities regarding potential repatriation, progress was slow and uneven for many years. Numerous legal and logistical hurdles, coupled with concerns about setting precedent by returning cultural artifacts, complicated efforts to repatriate the Benin bronzes. Yet in October 2022, the museum agreed to repatriate eight of its twenty-nine bronzes to Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, unsurprisingly to mixed reaction.[5]

In April 2022, the Smithsonian Institution implemented a groundbreaking Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy, representing a critical institutional reckoning with its historical role in the extraction and retention of cultural heritage. The policy authorizes returns based on moral and epistemic harm, an explicit break from the traditional "retain-and-explain" approach. The National Museum of African Art became the first to act under this policy, returning twenty-nine Benin bronzes to Nigeria. Yet this return required navigating complex bureaucratic and symbolic terrain: institutional actors had to secure approvals from multiple committees and stakeholders while mitigating

[2]Karen K. Ho, "Nigeria Renews Call for Return of Benin Bronzes Following British Museum Thefts," *ARTnews*, 24 Aug. 2023, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/nigeria-renews-call-for-return-of-benin-bronzes-following-british-museum-thefts-1234677578/.

[3]See Meilan Solly, "The Smithsonian's Return of the Benin Bronzes Comes After Years of Relationship-Building," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 11 Mar. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/the-smithsonians-return-of-the-benin-bronzes-comes-after-years-of-relationship-building-180979716; Peggy McGlone, "Smithsonian Will Overhaul Collecting Policy in Light of Colonial-Era Loot," *Washington Post*, 5 Jan. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/smithsonian-collecting-policy-overhaul/2022/01/05/36998dd8-6819-11ec-b0a7-13dd3af4f70f_story.html; "Restitution Study Group Files Suit to Stop Smithsonian's Benin Bronze Returns," *Cultural Property News*, 21 Nov. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://culturalpropertynews.org/restitution-study-group-files-suit-to-stop-smithsonians-benin-bronze-returns/.

[4]Nora McGreevy, "Why the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art Removed Its Benin Bronzes From View," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 10 Nov. 2021, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/national-museum-of-african-art-removes-benin-bronzes-from-display-affirms-commitment-to-repatriation-180979037/; Nina Kravinsky, "As African Art Thrives, Museums Grapple with Legacy of Colonialism," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 19 Nov. 2019, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/african-art-thrives-museums-grapple-legacy-colonialism-180973535/.

[5]*Washington Post*, "Smithsonian Gives Back 29 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria: 'We Are Not the Owners,'" 11 Oct. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/10/11/smithsonian-benin-bronzes-nigeria/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concerns about precedent-setting.[6] This suggests that even within institutions nominally committed to ethical returns, restitution remains a laborious process requiring internal diplomacy, careful framing, and, often, elite consensus. The Smithsonian's policy shift thus reflects not only moral transformation but also a strategic effort to retain control over the terms and tempo of decolonial change. As we will see, this policy would later come under direct challenge by the Restitution Study Group, whose lawsuit questioned whether such returns risked reinscribing exclusionary logics by ignoring descendants of the enslaved.

Nevertheless, the issue of restitution remains a central point of contention within the Smithsonian and the broader museum landscape. As awareness of the colonial legacies embedded within museum collections grows, there is mounting pressure on institutions like the Smithsonian to continue to confront their past and take concrete actions toward restitution and reconciliation of their vast array of remaining looted collections. The ongoing struggle for the repatriation of the Benin bronzes globally serves as a microcosm of a larger movement for decolonization and justice in the realm of cultural heritage. This movement challenges entrenched power dynamics and advocates for the rights of marginalized communities to reclaim their cultural patrimony, signaling a broader shift toward acknowledging and redressing historical injustices. This broader movement for decolonization has taken many forms, from institutional reforms to grassroots advocacy. The Restitution Study Group's activism aligns with these efforts but also pushes them in new directions, highlighting the entangled histories of slavery and colonialism that continue to shape debates over cultural heritage. By intervening in the Smithsonian's restitution process, the group foregrounds a diasporic perspective that complicates prevailing narratives of return and introduces new questions about ownership, justice, and historical accountability.

The Restitution Study Group and Debates on Ownership of the Benin Bronzes

Founded in 2000 by Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, the Restitution Study Group is a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to slavery justice through litigation, public education, and genealogical research. While now most widely recognized for its role in the legal battle with the Smithsonian over the Benin bronzes, RSG's work extends far beyond this single case, encompassing a broad array of legislative, policy, and public education initiatives aimed at advancing restitution and reparative justice. For example, in March 2025, RSG supported Illinois House Resolution 0211—which formally recognizes the slave trade origins of the Benin bronzes and calls for joint stewardship between Nigeria and descendants of enslaved Africans—and its representatives would additionally serve on a Repatriation Committee that would be established through the bill.[7] The group's most high-profile effort, however, has been its legal challenge to the Smithsonian Institution. Filed in December 2022, the lawsuit sought to halt the repatriation of twenty-nine of the Smithsonian's Benin bronzes to Nigeria.

Farmer-Paellmann, herself tracing her ancestry to Africans trafficked through the port of Ouidah, argued that the bronzes constitute not only royal regalia looted in 1897 but also material evidence of the Atlantic slave trade. In her view, their repatriation to Nigeria without consultation with the descendants of the enslaved constitutes a second dispossession. RSG's request for a temporary restraining order in October 2022 was ultimately denied after the court found insufficient evidence of ancestral linkage to the bronzes. Nevertheless, Farmer-Paellmann has continued to pursue litigation. The group seeks to prevent the repatriation of an additional twenty artifacts and to reverse the transfer of all items it deems illegally transferred, including nine bronzes that remain on view at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art under a loan agreement. In defense of its actions, the

[6]Dawn Rogala et al., "Innovation and Adaptation at the Smithsonian Institution in Response to Changing Times and Increased Need," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 46, no. 3 (2023): 253–71.

[7]Illinois General Assembly, "HR0211," LRB104 12755 LAW 23907, 104th General Assembly (2025-26), accessed 14. Sep. 2025, https://ilga.gov/Legislation/BillStatus/FullText?GAID=18&DocNum=211&DocTypeID=HR&LegId=163293&SessionID=114.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Smithsonian maintains that the transference of ownership has already been legally and irrevocably executed.

One of RSG's central claims is that the descendants of enslaved Africans hold a "co-ownership interest" in the Benin bronzes and that uncritical repatriation to Nigeria or the Benin royal court risks unjustly enriching those who profited from slavery. In open letters and legal filings, the group has argued that the Kingdom of Benin, through the Nigerian state, has never publicly acknowledged or apologized for its role in enslaving Africans. In a 2023 interview, she advanced the claim that many Benin bronzes were created from melted manillas, horseshoe-shaped copper or brass ingots manufactured in Europe, especially Germany, and exchanged for enslaved Africans as part of the transatlantic slave trade.[8] "These bronzes are the embodiment of our enslaved ancestors," Farmer-Paellmann stated. She continued, "50 manillas used to make the bronzes were paid per woman and 57 per man. It's us and we should be included in anything that happens," she argued, pointing to the bronzes' embeddedness in both African artistry and Atlantic slavery.[9]

Building on this claim, Farmer-Paellmann and RSG seek not only to halt repatriation but to assert co-ownership of bronzes by descendants of enslaved Africans. Their legal argument hinges on both this idea of material proximity as well as moral claims. This approach—part legal activism, part historical intervention—positions African American descendants not merely as sympathetic observers of cultural restitution, but as stakeholders with claims to access, narrative authority, and shared custodianship. RSG's efforts also highlight the representational politics of museums themselves. As Farmer-Paellmann observed in the same interview, most institutions displaying the bronzes omit any mention of their connection to slavery, reinforcing historical amnesia and marginalizing the lived legacies of diaspora. The group's demand is therefore not just for geographic retention, but for narrative correction, a call to reframe how these artifacts are publicly contextualized and to challenge institutions that continue to valorize objects while obscuring their violent provenance. Rather than transferring the bronzes wholesale to Nigerian authorities, RSG has urged museums to hold them in trust for the benefit of the descendants of the enslaved, framing the objects as "the wealth and legacy of slave descendants, not the slave traders."[10]

Recent scientific research has strengthened the evidentiary basis for the material claims. A 2023 *PLOS ONE* study used geochemical and lead isotope analysis to link early modern European manillas, specifically the Portuguese "tacoais" type manufactured in the German Rhineland, to the Benin bronzes.[11] By comparing manillas recovered from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century shipwrecks and terrestrial sites to hundreds of Benin artifacts, researchers found striking isotopic similarities, indicating a shared metallurgical origin. These findings confirm that manillas traded for enslaved Africans were often melted and recast as royal regalia in Benin City. In doing so, it challenges assumptions about the sacred autonomy of the bronzes and positions them as material archives of the Atlantic slave trade, a dual inheritance that reinforces RSG's call for recognition and co-ownership by African diasporic descendants.

Genetic research cautions against overly precise claims of ethnic ancestry within Africa, where the continent's population structure is highly complex and historically shaped by migration, admixture, and linguistic diversity. In fact, recent studies underscore the limitations of using genomic data to verify descent from specific ethnolinguistic groups such as the Edo, given the extensive substructure

[8]Kate Fitz Gibbon, "Benin Bronzes Lawsuit Against Smithsonian: An Interview with Deadria Farmer-Paellmann and Bruce Afran," *Cultural Property News*, 5 May 2023, accessed 29 July 2025, https://culturalpropertynews.org/benin-bronzes-lawsuit-against-smithsonian-deadria-farmer-paellmann-bruce-afran-interview/.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Restitution Study Group, "Benin Bronzes: Who Has the Moral Right to Decide?," *History Reclaimed*, 16 Aug. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/restitution-study-group.

[11]Tobias B. Skowronek et al., "German Brass for Benin Bronzes: Geochemical Analysis Insights into the Early Atlantic Trade," *PLOS ONE* 18, no. 4 (2023): e0283415, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0283415.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even within major language families like Niger-Congo.[12] Still, while RSG's claims may not align neatly with these genomic findings, they nonetheless mobilize ancestry as a mode of affective identification and political belonging, asserting a lineage of dispossession and repair that transcends biological essentialism.

Notably, RSG had already incorporated the manilla-based provenance argument into their legal claim prior to the publication of the PLOS ONE study. As outlined in their October 2022 class action lawsuit against the Smithsonian, RSG asserted that the Benin bronzes were materially linked to the transatlantic slave trade through their creation from manillas. This claim, according to Farmer-Paellmann, was based in part on the Smithsonian's own publication, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*, which notes that manillas were "melted for use in art objects."[13] While RSG did not conduct scientific testing, its argument relied on such documentary evidence to assert a material and historical link between the bronzes and the slave trade. This timeline demonstrates that Farmer-Paellmann's argument was not retrofitted in response to new scientific data, but rather illustrates how diaspora-led legal activism can anticipate, and even shape, emerging scholarly and institutional understandings of cultural heritage. The subsequent publication of the PLOS ONE study thus served less as a prompt and more as empirical affirmation of claims already embedded within activist and archival discourse.

The resolute opposition of the RSG to the efforts of repatriation reveals a divergent perspective that lays bare the intricate tapestry of identity and belonging within the African diaspora. By asserting the connection of the Benin bronzes to the descendants of enslaved individuals in America, Farmer-Paellmann and the RSG have ignited a maelstrom of debate about whose narratives and experiences should hold precedence in the discourse on cultural heritage restitution. This tension lays bare the unresolved pain and historical grievances that continue to ferment within the complex web of relations between Africans and African Americans. Furthermore, the legal battles waged by the RSG against esteemed institutions like the Smithsonian Museum serve as critical reminders of the fraught nature of these debates. While Farmer-Paellmann's endeavors seek justice and accountability, they risk exacerbating existing schisms within the Black community. By framing the issue as a binary struggle between African Americans and Africans, there looms the ominous specter of further alienation and marginalization of certain voices within the broader discourse on cultural heritage restitution.

In the ongoing struggle for cultural reclamation and historical reckoning, RSG's intervention has emerged as a bold and controversial challenge to dominant frameworks of restitution. Their advocacy confronts not only the violence of colonial looting but also the enduring exclusions of contemporary repatriation efforts.[14] Such interventions, particularly in calling for transparency in provenance records and the involvement of diasporic voices, raise important questions about whose histories are authorized in heritage debates, and by whom. Rather than centering national governments alone, RSG insists that diasporic publics must also be recognized as stakeholders in the future of looted heritage. To comprehend the urgency of RSG's claims, one must understand the historical context of the bronzes' entanglement in slavery and empire. The looting of Benin City was not merely an

[12]See Sarah A. Tishkoff et al., "The Genetic Structure and History of Africans and African Americans," *Science* 324, no. 5930 (2009): 1035–44; and Ananyo Choudhury et al., "High-Depth African Genomes Inform Human Migration and Health," *Nature* 586, no. 7831 (2020): 741–48.

[13]Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1987). Deadria Farmer-Paellmann and Restitution Study Group, *Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief*, Civil Case No. 1:22-cv-03048 (CRC), filed 7 October 2022 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, alleging anticipatory breach of trust and seeking injunction to prevent transfer of 29 Benin Bronzes by the Smithsonian to Nigeria.

[14]The following news sources detail Restitution Study Group and Farmer-Paellman's restitution challenge efforts: Francesca Aton, "Smithsonian Sued Over Benin Bronzes Return to Nigeria," *ARTnews*, 6 Dec. 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/smithsonian-sued-over-benin-bronzes-return-to-nigeria-1234649314/; Taylor Dafoe, "A New York Nonprofit Has Filed a Lawsuit to Block the Smithsonian From Repatriating Its Benin Bronzes to Nigeria," *ArtNet*, 1 Dec. 2022, accessed 21 July 2023, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/benin-bronze-lawsuit-restitution-study-group-smithsonian-2221312.

act of wartime conquest but a calculated dismantling of African sovereignty and cultural autonomy. By asserting a shared diasporic claim to the bronzes, RSG unsettles conventional binaries between source and destination, raising deeper questions about reparative justice, moral ownership, and the long afterlives of dispossession.

Contested Custodianship and the Global Politics of Return

The questions raised by RSG's challenge regarding who holds legitimate custodianship of looted heritage and whose voices are centered in restitution are not unique to the Smithsonian case; they reverberate across other high-profile repatriation efforts worldwide. Recent high-profile restitutions of Benin bronzes across the United Kingdom reveal the growing, yet uneven, global momentum toward repatriation and the contested terrain upon which such returns are negotiated. In 2022, the Horniman Museum became the first UK government-funded institution to formally transfer legal ownership of its Benin collection to Nigeria. Its decision followed extensive consultations not only with Nigerian museum officials but also with members of the UK-based Nigerian diaspora. The Horniman's "Reset Agenda" and commitment to moral accountability stood in stark contrast to more cautious institutions, making it a widely cited model for ethical repatriation. Yet even this seemingly uncontroversial return was challenged by RSG, which called on the UK Charity Commission to reject the transfer. Arguing that descendants of enslaved Africans have co-ownership rights to these objects, RSG positioned itself in direct opposition to what it described as the unjust enrichment of those who participated in the transatlantic slave trade, including the Kingdom of Benin.[15]

The controversy surrounding the Okukor cockerel statue at Jesus College (University of Cambridge), provides a powerful case study of the deferral tactics embedded within elite institutions when confronted with calls for restitution. In 2015, student activists from the Jesus College African Caribbean Society called for the removal and repatriation of the statue, citing its origins in colonial violence and its symbolic connection to the 1897 British invasion of Benin. Their demands formed part of a broader campaign to decolonize the university's spaces and address its ties to imperial histories. In response, the college removed the statue from public view, initially relocating it to the university's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. As Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield argue, the decision to rehouse the statue in the museum rather than return it to Nigeria enabled the college to sidestep direct action while still appearing responsive to student demands.[16] By shifting the object to a museum space, a venue already embedded in colonial logics of ordering and display, the college effectively translated a demand for decolonial action into a managed discourse of archival dialogue. This maneuver exemplifies what Ann Stoler calls colonial aphasia: an institutional inability to comprehend what is spoken, particularly when what is spoken is a confrontation with the institution's complicity in ongoing structural racism.[17] Such efforts demonstrate how restitution is shaped not by a singular policy but by a constellation of ethical, institutional, legal, and personal commitments that reflect the complexity of postcolonial reckoning.[18] Still, serious debates remain about what happens *after* return.

The aftermath of Jesus College's eventual return of the Okukor cockerel to Nigeria in 2021 and the activities of the Benin Dialogue Group illustrate how restitution efforts ignite both transnational and intra-national debates. While celebrated internationally, these returns have exposed deep fissures within Nigeria over who should hold custodianship of the bronzes. The Benin Dialogue Group, a consortium of European museums formed in 2007, has long favored long-term loans over

[15]Restitution Study Group, "Benin Bronzes."

[16]Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield, "A 'Safe Space' to Debate Colonial Legacy: The University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Campaign to Return a Looted Benin Altarpiece to Nigeria," *Museum Worlds* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–22.

[17]Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 132–35.

[18]See Returning Heritage, "Case Studies," accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.returningheritage.com/case-studies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637 Published online by Cambridge University Press

full repatriation, reflecting persistent power differentials in global heritage governance that allow Western institutions to dictate the terms and timelines of return. Within Nigeria, these dynamics are compounded by tensions between the federal government and its institutions like the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), the Edo State government, and the *oba* (king in the Edo language) and the Benin royal court. Former President Muhammadu Buhari's March 2023 presidential decree, which vested ownership and management of all repatriated Benin bronzes in the oba, deepened these internal rifts. In bypassing federal institutions and instead affirming the oba's personal authority over the bronzes, granting him rights of inspection, display, and control over their movement, for some the decision reaffirmed ancestral sovereignty and was seen as a necessary symbolic correction to a lineage disrupted by colonial violence, while for others, this decree risked reducing cultural patrimony to a royal inheritance. It also raised urgent questions about the legal and institutional frameworks governing cultural heritage within a postcolonial nation-state. It, for example, created uncertainty around the rightful negotiating partner for European museums that had recently signed restitution agreements with the NCMM. Debates over whether returned bronzes would be housed in the palace museum proposed by the oba or in the under-construction Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) also reflect deeper questions about custodianship, cultural governance, and the political uses of heritage. Like in the case of the RSG challenges, these tensions—between diaspora and homeland, between private morality and institutional policy, between traditional authority and national statecraft—reveal that the politics of restitution extend far beyond legal title or provenance.

These competing visions reflect longstanding frictions between the federal government, Edo State authorities, and the Benin royal court, each of whom lays claim to shaping the post-restitution heritage infrastructure. While some institutions, like the Smithsonian, assert that it is not their role to intervene in Nigeria's internal decisions, others have expressed concern about whether returned artifacts will remain publicly accessible or risk entering private royal custody. Even among institutions that ostensibly support repatriation, restitution is often reimagined as capacity-building or collaboration rather than full return. The Benin Dialogue Group, once founded to facilitate return, gradually removed restitution from its formal agenda, focusing instead on rotating loans and museum partnerships. Legal scholar Folarin Shyllon has critiqued this narrowing of the group's scope, noting that its early meetings foregrounded the goal of restitution, only for it to be quietly dropped by the 2018 Leiden meeting, a shift he calls a significant backward step.[19] At the same time, Shyllon cautions against all-or-nothing approaches that reject negotiation outright, highlighting the royal court of Benin's consistent engagement with the group in pursuit of ancestral returns. The group's evolving posture reflects broader tensions in the heritage field between incrementalist pragmatism and calls for full repatriation, revealing how even collaborative frameworks may re-entrench asymmetries in the name of diplomacy.

In this evolving terrain, the debate over where and how to house the Benin bronzes reveals the limits of repatriation as a singular moral or legal act. It is instead a deeply political process, entangled with questions of postcolonial governance, legitimacy, and the very meaning of cultural stewardship. This fragmentation raises questions not only about rightful ownership but about the governance of memory and postcolonial authority in Nigeria today. The result has been stalled restitutions and heightened uncertainty among European institutions. Cambridge University postponed its 2023 ceremony to transfer 116 bronzes amid confusion about custodianship, and critics questioned whether returned objects placed in the oba's palace would remain publicly accessible. Meanwhile, advocates and contemporary artists like Osaze Amadasun and Chidi Nwaubani propose alternatives that balance traditional authority with public accountability, including decentralized museum models and

[19]Folarin Shyllon, "Unraveling History: Return of African Cultural Objects Repatriated and Looted in Colonial Times," in *Cultural Heritage Issues: The Legacy of Conquest, Colonization and Commerce*, eds. James A. R. Nafziger and Ann M. Nicgorski (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 159–68.

digital restitution projects.[20] Their interventions signal an emergent generation of Nigerian thinkers reimagining heritage not only as a national concern but as a plural, participatory process that includes diaspora, tech innovation, and intra-national equity. These debates illuminate that restitution is not merely about ownership but about the bureaucratic and cultural structures that sustain national sovereignty in a postcolonial world.

Concluding Remarks

These global and local disputes reveal the contested terrain of restitution not as a single act, but as an ongoing struggle for justice, recognition, and narrative control. RSG's lawsuit over the Benin bronzes challenges dominant legal and ethical frameworks governing cultural restitution by inserting the history of transatlantic slavery into the terrain of imperial redress. Their claim does not rest solely on ancestral identification with the Benin Kingdom, but on a broader assertion that descendants of the enslaved, those whose ancestors were sold by the Benin Kingdom, have a moral and political stake in decisions about the fate of looted heritage. In doing so, they destabilize the assumption that restitution is a bilateral matter between postcolonial nation-states and former colonial powers, insisting instead on the transnational and diasporic dimensions of African dispossession. Like debates within Nigeria over whether returned bronzes should be held by the Nigerian federal government, Edo State government, or the oba's Benin royal court, RSG's intervention underscores that restitution is never a neutral act; it reconfigures power, authority, and historical responsibility in ways that often generate new conflicts.

By foregrounding this history, the RSG case highlights the epistemic and procedural exclusions that often structure institutional restitution processes, even as they are embedded within broader global debates over return. As this article has shown, their intervention reveals the entanglement of legal authority, moral urgency, and institutional opacity in heritage adjudication across multiple scales, from Western museums and postcolonial states to diasporic communities seeking recognition. The group's position has been met with considerable criticism, not only for its perceived challenge to competing ownership claims, but also for unsettling the dominant narrative of restitution as an uncomplicated form of decolonial justice. Yet the backlash itself illustrates the unresolved tensions between symbolic repair and material justice, and between ancestral affiliation and broader ethical imaginaries of redress. Rather than dismiss the RSG's position as anomalous, this article has argued for reading it as a disruptive and illuminating challenge to the normative frameworks that govern restitution debates globally. As scholars of restitution have shown, the question of who speaks for the past is never neutral but shaped by long histories of violence and exclusion. The RSG's claim compels us to ask whether restitution can accommodate not only the return of objects, but also the reparation of fractured lineages, displaced histories, and contested memories. It is, at its core, a demand to expand the moral grammar of restitution to account for slavery's enduring afterlives.

[20]Noah Anthony Enahoro, "Nigeria Debates the Fate of Returning Benin Bronzes," *New Lines Magazine*, 2 Apr. 2024, accessed 29 July 2025, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/nigeria-debates-the-fate-of-returning-benin-bronzes/.

Cite this article: Cresa Pugh, "Echoes of History: Legacies of the Benin Bronzes and Restitution Within the Black Atlantic," *The Journal of African History* 66, e17 (2025): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853725100637.