



Back to the Future: Restitution, Stolen Artifacts and Guarding Against a Willing Amnesia

By Molemo Moiloa



The past five years have seen a flurry of activity around issues of restitution of African material heritage, resulting in new reports, new books and even, new returns. Along with this sudden surge in activity there has been an escalation in debate around these questions, where positions once thought to be entrenched, racist, conservative, and considered mainstream, seem to have shifted dramatically. In the frenzy, it can begin to feel as if things are changing and that society is progressing. But we'd do well to pause for deeper dives and more systematic remembering of what has come before.

Two books, Bénédicte Savoy's *Africa's Struggle for its Art* and Barnaby Phillips' *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, do this in different ways, but bring to us the important opportunity to remember again. In calling on us to remember, Savoy and Phillips separately recenter the intentions, objectives, and justices that restitution seeks, the violences and obstructions already undertaken, and offer some strategies for ensuring greater success this time around. Savoy, an art historian, who along with Senegalese economist, Felwine Sarr, co-authored a report for the French government on returning African cultural artifacts, states in the new English language translation of her book (forthcoming 2022):

Nearly every conversation today about the restitution of cultural property to Africa already happened forty years ago. Nearly every relevant film had already been made and nearly every demand had already been formulated. Even the most recently viral videos on social media... by the Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza, had already been scripted in many minds by the mid-1970s. What do we learn from this?

Phillips is a former correspondent with the BBC and Al Jazeera and his *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* is a detailed telling of the story of the approximately 4,000 objects in bronze, wood, and ivory taken violently in the plundering, by British forces in 1897, of the Kingdom of Benin (in present day Nigeria). The story of the Benin Bronzes is an important one within the restitution discourse for various reasons, but perhaps most specifically because the terms of their taking were so clearly punitive and incredibly violent, and the claims for their return hold a relatively clear moral, geographical, and art historical grounding. Phillips looks to lay out in substantial detail the chronological telling of the context of their making, their theft, and their distribution across museums of the global north.

Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes is written first and foremost from the position of a personal vested interest in the story of the bronzes, and the impact that the violence and destruction that took place in their looting has had on a people, their culture and contemporary society. The book details the majesty and sophistication of the Benin Kingdom, using a range of oral histories, from those of the Benin royal family, their associates, as well as African academic writing on the subject.

The bulk of the sourcing comes, however, from extensive historical British records. Phillips tells of the increased British activity in the area and the inevitability of a clash with the kingdom by colonialists. It details the widespread violence and destruction of the city during the British expedition, but also the seemingly indifferent and disconnected claim to the totality of the kingdom's vast cache of exquisite and sophisticated court art pieces by the British: for the purposes of financial resourcing of the punitive expedition itself. Phillips then tracks the movement of these objects, through dynasties of families in Britain, and through museums of the world. He ends with a discussion of the attempts to have these returned to Nigeria, particularly since its independence in 1960, as part of a rebuilding of a society from the ashes of colonialism, and the Biafran War—the civil war that raged in Nigeria in the late 1960s and divided the country.

The book is sympathetic primarily to the voices and justified demands of Nigerians, and discusses in much detail the many turns of deceit and violence at the hands of the British in this long saga. It is, however, also written in a kind of specifically European tone of hazy “even-handedness” that spends overly-significant page space on issues such as the Nigerians' unwillingness to discuss the rumors of human sacrifice by the Benin Kingdom that the British used to partly justify their actions, and on his argument for the likely accidental setting alight of the entirety of kingdom by the British forces.

Both these issues become almost petty in the greater picture of total wanton destruction, violence and death not only at the moment of the expedition but also continuously after it—in physical occupation, and in spiritual and epistemic erasure. This marks the book as perhaps slightly out of step with some of the more contemporary literature emerging out of this moment within the broader restitution issue. This book possibly serves as a useful detailed description for a reader unfamiliar with the subject but offers little to the broader discourse on this issue.

Though Savoy's forthcoming book tracks histories that strongly overlap with that of Phillips,' it serves a far more urgent and direct call to remember these histories, and to lay bare the wilful amnesia and hidden obstruction that have previously completely derailed efforts at justice and repair. Savoy's report that she co authored with Sarr commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron about France's role in plundering African heritage, was arguably the spark that reignited

the now raging fire of restitution of African heritage. *Africa's Struggle For Its Art* is concerned primarily with the context of historical West Germany. Nonetheless, her deep working through the archives—initiated first for the commissioned report—reveal a vital understanding of the global story of struggles for African heritage restitution and its historical defeat.

Using primarily the meticulous archiving by West German bureaucrats in museums, foreign affairs bureaus, and embassies, Savoy pieces together the early and relatively substantial attempts at opening dialogue on access to African heritage by Africans. Savoy puts Africans front and center of the dialogue and push for justice—as initiators of engagements on access to African history. She tracks in return, the systematic undermining of these efforts, with obstructive stonewalling and delay tactics that completely dismissed any attempt at even the most modest requests for engagement. Savoy argues also, for the extent to which the arguments against restitution have their roots in long standing racism, in heritage staff whose careers begin through Nazi association and administration, and in attempts by European art historians, museum personnel and curators, and West Germans in particular, to claim place and prestige amongst themselves.

By tracking these arguments and the kinds of internal planning and plotting among museum officials, Savoy also identifies very clearly the shaky foundations of many arguments against restitution still spouted today. Not only are many of these racist, but also Savoy demonstrates the degree to which many of these arguments are based on out-and-out lies. For example, in the 1970s one German museum director, Friederich Kußmaul, cited by Savoy, spouted entirely fictional statistics and made hearsay-based accusations of thefts from African museums—a line Phillips, for example, repeats in *Loot* as regards hearsay about thefts from the Benin Museum in 1980, and a story easy to corroborate through UNESCO illicit trafficking databases.

Savoy lifts the veil on the construction of an idea of the museum as an institution: as a benevolent custodian of universal heritage, distanced from politicking, lies or corruption and history. Rather, museums have been ruthless in their efforts to retain their hoard and discredit in pernicious ways their African peers. These efforts have been incredibly successful, wearing away at African energies and investments in good faith engagement. They undermined their own structures, such as UNESCO, and left cultural experts and the cultural intelligencia of newly independent African countries empty handed just as Africa's young nations began to shift away from believing in the potentials of culture that characterised the early days of the Dakar World Festival of Black Arts in 1966 or FESTAC in 1977.

At certain points, Savoy's historic rendering has an eerie sense of déjà vu, and a kind of sinking feeling of realising that the late 1970s looked much like our contemporary moment in terms of efforts toward and a zeitgeist in favor of restitution. Her book serves as a warning that we have been here before and that last time we lost the battle. But it also serves as a kind of arsenal, to not fall for previous tricks, to expose old lies and to build upon what was already built by so many African and allies over decades.

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In 1909, Sir Ralph Denham Rayment Moor, British Consul General of the British Southern Nigerian Protectorate, took his life by ingesting cyanide. Eleven years earlier, following Britain's "punitive" attack on Benin City's Royal Court, Moor helped transfer loot taken from Benin City into Queen Victoria's private collection and to the British Foreign Office. Pilfered materials taken by Moor and many others include the now famous brass reliefs depicting the history of the Benin Kingdom—known collectively as the Benin Bronzes.

This is in addition to commemorative brass heads and tableaux; carved ivory tusks; decorative and bodily ornaments; healing, divining, and ceremonial objects; and helmets, altars, spoons, mirrors,

and much else. Moor also kept things for himself, including the Queen Mother ivory hip-mask. After Moor's suicide, British ethnologist Charles Seligman, famous for promoting the racist "Hamitic hypothesis" undergirding much early eugenicist thought, purchased this same mask, one of six known examples.

With his wife Brenda Seligman, an anthropologist in her own right, Charles amassed a giant collection of "ethnographic objects." In 1958, Brenda sold the Queen Mother mask for £20,000 to Nelson Rockefeller, who featured it in his now-defunct Museum of Primitive Art before gifting it in 1972 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That's where I visited it this week in New York City—and as Dan Hicks pointed out in a recent [tweet](#), if you are reading this in the global North, there's a good chance that an item taken from the Benin Court is in the collection of a regional, university, or national museum near you, too.

For Hicks, author of [The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution](#), this provenance history of the Queen Mother mask—and every single other history of the acquisition and transfer of objects from Benin City to museums across the "developed" world—is a history that begins and ends in violence. Indeed, the category of ethnographic museums emerged in the nineteenth century precisely out of the demonic alliance between anthropological inquiry and colonial pillage.

In 1919, a German ethnologist observed that "the spoils of war [*Kriegsbeute*] made during the conquest of Benin ... were the biggest surprise that the field of ethnology had ever received." These so-called spoils buttressed these museums' *raison d'être*: to collect and display non-Western cultures as evidence of "European victory over 'primitive', archaeological African cultures."

The formation of ethnographic museums, including the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, where Hicks currently works, "have compounded killings, cultural destructions and thefts with the propaganda of race science [and] with the *normalisation of the display of human cultures* in material form" (my italics). For Hicks, the continued display of these stolen objects in poorly lit basement rooms, sophisticated modern vitrines, and private collections is an "enduring brutality ... refreshed every day that an anthropology museum ... opens its doors."

After this book, there can be no more false justifications for holding Benin Bronzes in museums outside of Africa, nor further claims that changing times mean new approaches are sufficient for recontextualizing art objects. This book inaugurates its own paradigm shift in museum practices, collection, and ethics. While there are preceding arguments for returning Western museums' holdings in African art (most notably Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, or Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain*), the *comprehensiveness* of Hicks's argument is extraordinary.

In chapter after chapter, shifting agilely between historical perspectives and conceptual frameworks, he revisits the siege on Benin and its afterlives in museums across the globe. From Hicks's detailed appendix, we learn that these stolen objects can be found in approximately 161 different museums and galleries worldwide, from the British Museum to the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, with only 11 on the African continent.

For part of the book, Hicks engages in a kind of conventional historiography, tracing how the Benin Punitive Expedition was justified, planned, and funded by a range of individuals and institutions in chartered joint-stock companies, the military, the British government, and the press. The 1897 British "expedition" to Benin City in present-day Nigeria was defended by the British as a necessary "punitive" response to the killing of at least four white men.

These men had been murdered trying to make their way to the City of Benin, doing so despite the strict injunction given previously by the Oba that they not attempt entry or else they would face death. Hicks traces how the British regularly fabricated reasons for this kind of retributive violence (often even in the name of abolitionism) to mask what was actually a concatenation of overlapping “small wars” and punitive expeditions reaching back into the middle of the 19th century.

An accretion of details halfway into the book—the maneuvers and lines of attack, the catalogues of officers, Hausa soldiers and carriers, the weight and numbers and types of guns and other weaponry (“Dane guns (muzzle-loading smooth-bore flintlock muskets), pistols, machetes, cutlasses, spears, bows and arrows, knives”)—makes the book sag a little in the middle.

While this will grab the attention of those readers interested in plumbing colonialism’s ultraviolent depths and its flagrant disregard for the legal limits of what was permissible in war (we learn of bullets filed down “to convert them into expanding bullets [to] cause a more extensive wound when hitting a human target,” for instance), for those most interested in Hicks’s arguments about the ethnographic museum today, I recommend skipping ahead to the last chapters.

For after all, Hicks’s details recount a history that has been woefully told and retold in different incarnations: a narrative of extraction, ultraviolence, racism. *The Brutish Museums’* most forceful contribution lies ultimately in Hicks’s assessment and condemnation of the present state of affairs of museum curatorship, especially within anthropological museums and associated institutions.

The complicity of museum curators and staff in efforts to justify the looting is not unique to the early collectors and anthropologists. Hicks deplores the rhetorical ruses of contemporary curators and museum officials who gloss over the problem at the heart of museums’ acquisitions by arguing instead that museums have become “international,” “borderless,” and “universal” spaces showcasing “world culture.” These claims that a kind of international inclusivity can be brought about under the banner of the “universal museum,” and that this is sufficient to remedy the violences inherent in the collections themselves, sidestep the fact that that such frameworks do nothing to dislodge the colonial geographic logic of metropole and periphery that brought the museums into existence in the first place.

Hicks also picks a fight with art history’s love affair with Object Studies, a field which treats an object’s meaning as determined mainly by its context and reception. As he points out, this often allows us to detach an object from the (often violent) human histories that brought those newer meanings into being. The misuse of Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” as a way to organize museum collections comes under similar attack, since curators have used it to emphasize colonial cultural encounters as exchanges and “entanglements” rather than as relations of subordination and pillage under duress.

Today, Hicks avows: “A time of taking is giving way to a time of returns.” As Greer Valley has [pointed out](#), there have been endless debates; action is the only possible way forward. Some museums and galleries have heeded the call to repatriate stolen material culture, and museums such as Senegal’s Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar and the soon-to-be-built Edo Museum of Western African Art in Benin City (designed by architect David Adjaye) indicate that shifts are occurring at the level of action as well as idea.

In order for repatriation to be accelerated and standardized, museums particularly need to be more transparent about their holdings. Hicks notes that “it is ... currently unclear how many skulls and other human remains taken from Benin survive in museums and private collections—although at least five human teeth found their way from Benin City in 1897 to London, and are now lying at the British Museum in a divination kit, strung on a necklace, and contained within a brass mask.” It’s

not apparent to me why museums aren't able to give an appropriate account of both what objects they have and how they have come to have them. In recent debates in the US about human remains held at the University of Pennsylvania's Archeology and Anthropology Museum, the Smithsonian, Harvard University, and elsewhere, similar obstacles are regularly raised about these problems of counting collections. But catalogs need to be clear and made public, and museums must hold themselves accountable in both material and ethical senses. This, they all know now, means the first necessary step is to return what is not theirs. How they then reinvent themselves as spaces of accountability will be the next task of the curator.

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Berlin. Saturday, May 9th 2019.

The sun's appearance has given us a brief respite from the spring's winds. Me, a Kenyan, walks into the 'exhibition' of Egyptian artefacts and beings in a European museum! The chief attraction is the bust of Queen Nefertiti (which means the beautiful one has come). Nefertiti was the queen of Egypt and wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten during the 14th century B.C. Today, the beauty of her bust 'rests' in Berlin. Such an Ozymandiac tragedy! A great German friend of mine has paid for my ticket, it was his idea that we come here. The Island of Museums is an imposing cultural feature in the geography of Berlin, even Europe. It has six museums, but today I go Egyptian. The Neues Museum houses the archaeological collections of the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection. Berlin City itself has more than 170 museums. The number is higher when you consider the entire German nation which has the Museum of Chocolates and the Museum of Film among others! I cross the Spree River that marks this museum island, past the throngs of tourists. Asian tourists, are quite visible. They seem to be arriving by the busload. In the precincts, I see a man and a girl with Eritrean or Ethiopian features who appears to be young enough to be his daughter. They are the only African visitors that I will meet today. The girl seems incensed by the man's affinity for selfies. She looks around trying to distance herself from the man and also in order to gain approval from the teeming humanity.

The image of Queen Nefertiti on a huge banner, by the imposing doors, flags in *besuchers* ever so lightly. The museum edifice is a relic of the second European nihilist war, marketed as second world war to insinuate euro-exceptionalism. I climb up the flight of stairs. There are bullet marks everywhere on the huge columns in the veranda. Parts of the walls have been restored. Others are left charred and black to memorialize the abyss that man is wont to do. This is exactly just like some of the happenings in there. There is a man whose origins I cannot decipher, certainly he is not a typical European, he inspects the validity of our tickets. We then walk past the security barrier at the door. The first man I meet is a security guard with Cushitic physical features, maybe Somali and he tells me to proceed right for an auto-guide radio and drop my windbreaker jacket in the *garderobe*. I hear alarms ring in my mind. His dark skin contrasts the whiteness of the visitors in the museums. He looks like an oddity here. For now, that black man can pass.

After this, I proceed to the regal and imposing foyer. It immediately reminds me of my insignificance in history. Boy, how small I matter in a museum. Parts of the 18th-century building that were not

destroyed by European tribal wars are still standing, majestic in their architecture and colourful paintings. The building is a testament to German pre-war neo-classical architecture.

In the basement erupts the steady action. There are various artefacts. They are merely auxiliary to the lives of the mummies. I meet other nationalities, Africans, Asians, Arabs Indians, not as researchers, visitors or activists but as security workers. The guards are trained to be conscious of what each visitor does. [Killmonger in a British museum](#) in "The Black Panther" is echoed in some way deep down here. I get the impression that the angle of any phone camera, and even the swinging of hands is constantly under scrutiny. Any slight deviation invites swift human attention,

"English or German?" English.

"Sir that is not allowed here."

The museum is designed for a scientific cultural process. But it is implemented in a carefully orchestrated security operation. Unlike the German Technical Museum, the presences of restrictions are tangible here.

Do not touch that! Dear visitor, please don't photograph this. You are not allowed to photograph beyond this point. You are speaking too loudly, please tone it down...

Several rail guards dot this museum. The uniformed guards are not armed. The new Germany has police always in close proximity to the civilian. After all there is a European golden hut weighing half a kilogramme in the museum's third floor. No one leaves Gold unattended. The medieval-era gold hat is touted as a toast of the museum, not Queen Nefertiti's bust. The gold has direct and deep German history, unlike the Egyptian mummies. The [Berlin Gold Hat](#) is said to have served astrological functions during the bronze age in Europe.

Finally, I get to the relocated tombstones. And history hits me hard in the face. There are Egyptian mummies bracing the European summers and, winters. This is an interruption of a critical cultural process of a mummy's afterlife. The mummies have been raised high for a pinning cultural gaze. The mummies fetishized by the white gaze!

Nah. Not my thang baby. Not my thing.

Let the mummies rest in peace, in the soils of Africa. The open-ended postmodernist treatment of difference must be treated with scepticism. Should one accept things to be infinitely relativist? So that, the presence of cultural beings (not heritages) are not imprisoned in a museum but relocated to their domains of existence in the sands of Africa? What about the Man-eaters of Tsavo from Kenya in an American museum in Chicago?

Blackness is a rarity in official mainstream Berlin, coming from a Kenyan! So, you can understand my Kenyan shock at the generosity of black in a museum space. *Schwartzfahren* is German for travelling in a train without a ticket, it loosely translates into *blackriding*. A museum! But why are Africans, Asians and the visibility of the other highlighted in the menial labours of the museum such as keeping coats and working security gigs all over the museum? The multicultural nature of junior workers in the museum arena reinforces the idea of Eurocentric appropriation of others' practices, decontextualising their significance, and then monetising their presence. Especially when one considers how difficult, it is for these economic minorities to enter fortress Europe. Let white Germans adorn the museum instead of risking displaying Africans in a Europolitan spectacle. The rest of the world should not be inserted in Europe and her archives, merely for special effects. If blacks are restricted from entering Europe, then a museum should be the last space to install a black presence. If the conceptual and administrative tasks in the museum are preserved for

Germans then Germans should go the entire length and work out everything, to avoid such embarrassing facades.

Nothing is as problematic as an African working in a European museum. What comes to mind then? I am not saying that they should not work in museums, no. I am only asking this, what about Ota Benga, a Mbuti, the Congolese pygmy, who found himself in the same cage with Dohong the orangutan in the Bronx Museum in 1906? Sarah Baartman, who suffered from steatopygia and who was the subject of European fantasies? What about the six pygmies who visited the Natural History Museum, London in 1906? The Mbuti pygmies whose skeletons are still in Britain? And to work unconsciously as a guard in a space of desecration of African existence is the height of paradox. What about the Zulus who sang and courted each other in a London stage in 1853? We, the blacks, have quite a history in European museums. Africans have been on the show business in Europe for far too long. To see another black body embedded problematically in a German museum brings back the difficult past. I feel like telling them to go away.

But what do I know? Some of these African brothers have climbed over barbed wires, crawled through triple concertina wire fence to get to Europe. Some have talked their way through the criminalised immigration to Europe. Some have just socially moved upwards from washing toilets to washing plates in hotels and presently to guarding their ancestors in museums! And the German museum has the perfect job for these upwardly mobile peoples in the search for political correctness.

Life is a hustle; I am also not saying that black is complete and definite. No! But from Spanish southern enclaves in the African waters, via Belgium and France to the islands of Britain, black has had a depressive tinge and history in establishments of memory and being. The African movement to Europe has been criminalised.

Nonetheless, the Somali brother was friendly. We even performed a quick nod. That crucial gesture which acknowledges that life exists out here, and this life is no smooth matatu ride.

The social capital not accessible to Africans due to the securitized cultural and knowledge resources in Europe defines the rest of the slowly-ebbing Eurocentric century. It was interesting to me see what I thought to have been a typical Turkana *ekicholong*, only to be told that it was an ancient Egyptian tool. And serving almost the same purpose as an *Ekicholong*. Ancient Egypt was not entirely obliterated among Africans and their migrations southwards. Some of the practices of the ancient Egypt are still evident in a variety of African traditions even today. For example, the Congolese cubist mask, and totemic coiffures of Senegalese girls in colonial Africa. There is such a thing as an honourable exit. This is the time. Repatriation with an apology for the atrocities and errors on ancestors is in order, at least if there is going to be no retributive approaches on this. Ancestors are spiritual beings not scientific specimen!

Kisumu Museum. Thursday 20th December 2018.

The sun is hot. I am here with my friends, including a German. He has come to visit me in Kenya. I take him to Kisumu Museum. Google maps show that we are close to the museum, but somehow, we keep missing the inconspicuous entrance. We finally ask for direction from one of the boda-boda guys and he directs us to the right entry point. Google was not so far off the mark. The grass is overgrown and the museum's hidden signpost does not help either. The feeder road into the museum is practically non-existent. We rock ourselves in. There is no proper signage to the ticket sales office. The retail shop in the museum ground sells oddities, things such as Coca-Cola. This is Africa, so I can overlook that, can I not? Heck! the museum is also an events ground for wedding activities. There are no Kisumu Souvenirs, no curios and other standard tourist take-aways. I do not know

whether we need to replicate that here, if we have to build a museum that is also inward-looking. Even though we do not have to exclude any group, we can foreground that this museum exists in a space replete with its own rich history. This history seems to be largely lacking in the museum. This museum does not even say that Kisumu was surrounded by archaeological sites, in its general approach to its craft.

Let me slow down, before I get ahead of myself. We pay for our affordable tickets. The lady selling us the tickets is engrossed in her cell phone. Our presence here is located in her footnotes. She speaks to us with her hand on a cell phone. On the red-painted floor, are airtime cards, which have been scratched and discarded. I cannot tell who owned them. We pay up for our tickets, we request for a guided tour. We wait for a couple of minutes as the cell-phone lady shouts above our heads for an available guide. Finally, they locate a young man, who seems like he is fresh out of high school. I got nothing with age, so long as one is competent in what they do. He starts taking us around the museum ground.

At the stand, we visit the various types of fish in the little aquarium boxes. Some of the fishes are definitely too big for their boxes. I am no biologist, but I could see that. The fish have both local and biological names. The museum's stand on fish is underwhelming. I expect a lot more varieties, now that several species of fish are on the verge of extinction. It is a pity that the Nile Perch which was introduced in the 1950s by the British colonialists in Nam Lolwe (Lake Victoria) is primarily responsible for the near extinction of hundreds of native species. Nile perch was never a native to the lake and her ecosystem and as a result, the Nile perch has had such a devastating impact and even altered the eating habits of fish around the lake. Many people might not know *Okoko, Duri, Seu, Ningu, Suma, Fulu, Osoga* and other species that the Nile Perch has nearly obliterated. What our guide does not curate is that two million overseas customers ate Nam Lolwe fish every day in the mid-2000s during the boom of fishing! The amount of the fish that was exported was higher than the amount eaten locally, and the consequent protein deficiency for eastern Africans living around the lake. The predominant fish export was the Nile perch.

He does not say that riparian countries, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania exported approximately 45,000 tons of perch fillets annually with a corresponding value of 170 million Euro in 2003. He probably does not know that when colonialists introduced the Nile perch, Nam Lolwe was abundant with native fish species that were dismissed 'trash fish'. The British wanted to increase the range of 'fine sporting and edible white meat with no bones' in the lake. The communities resisted the adoption of this fish in their culinary cultures. Or that the colonial project would have been incomplete without the accompanying environmental mismanagement. He does not say that the colonial government did an all-out campaign to instil the culture of eating fish, especially *Mbuta* to all East Africans. The Nile Perch was the ultimate solution to the colonisation of the East African lake cultures.

The Ber Dala refers to Mzee Odero's home. While I acknowledged that culture is dynamic, I did not see the need of referring to *Jaduong* (Esteemed elder in Dholuo) Odero's home as Mzee (old man in Kiswahili) Odero. The difference between Mzee and *Jaduong* is fundamental. *Jaduong* is the native title that is appropriate in the homestead designed and implemented in the museum at the heart of Kisumu. Mzee would find better context in a contemporary home not exhibited in the museum.

Difficult Questions. Feeble answers.

Therefore, I found myself questioning the portrayal of the African in two random museums. In both instances, a lack of attention to details. The German Museum does not see the need to do away with Africans as workers in the museum or to find other alternatives of framing the black presence in a German museum. It is very difficult for an African to get a work permit to work in Germany. The

tokenistic employment of the African in the German museum reinforces the idea of African occupying entertainment slots in European circuits. The African security workers in the German museum appeared to me almost like part of the objects of amusement for the German visitors in the museum.

The Kisumu museum has little interest in the animals that it houses. It even has lesser interest in the history of its location. If the crocodile occupies a pool way too small for its comfort then the people that the museum speaks for and from, occupy even a lesser space in the museum. The museum seemed to me more of an underfunded aquarium. Signs of decay are everywhere. The language of silence is spoken loudly in this museum. There is no curation of the place of Kisumu in regional and national politics.

There is need to curate the cultures and histories of the museum's catchment area. There is need to showcase Luanda Magere. There is need to showcase the history of Koitalel arap Samoei. There is need to show more about the culinary practices of the people. There is need to not only to rewrite but to popularly assert its complexities and multiplicities. What museum will curate the technologies of Africa before the arrival of the Europeans? What museum will curate a typical day in the life, of say a Luo, Teso, Abasuba, Bukusu, Mnyore, Abagusii in pre-colonial Africa? Perhaps the museum bit more than its mouth could hold. The Kisumu Museum has sat pretty for far too long and perhaps there is a valid case for more specialised museums in Kenya, and other eastern African countries.

One more thing, at the *Ber Dala* stand, our young guide was not aware of the implications of referring to traditional alcohol drinks as illicit brew. I felt the weight of this cultural violence that he was committing on the traditions of the Luo. Never mind that he is a Luo. The museum could do better than this. There is need to have someone. If the museum finds it important that alcohol is an important theme in the museum, then at the very least it could get the traditional implements of this practise and exhibit it alongside the *Ber Dala* compound.

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By Molemo Moiloa



My paternal grandfather, James Liyai, was born in 1907, and worked as a cook in the houses of colonial administrators who were based in Western Kenya. By the time I was born, Kenya was an independent nation, most of the administrators had gone, and my grandfather had retired from this job. Even though I never witnessed it, I knew that he could bake cakes and even knew how to make rice pudding. Until his death in 2008, he was especially picky about the food that he was served - the type of food, its quality, and presentation.

I never thought about how this experience shaped our lives. I wasn't close to my grandfather; I rarely saw him, and even when I did visit him upcountry there was always a distance between us created by a past that I was not familiar with, and my Nairobiness. My grandfather spoke to us in Lwisukha, he read the Kiswahili newspaper *Taifa Leo* regularly, but there were times, when agitated, he blurted insults in English. This was jarring.

My grandfather named his son, who was born during World War II, Hitler. When this son started school, his teachers insisted on a name change but this name stuck in the family. I imagine that this was my grandfather's resistance to whatever he had experienced in those colonial houses.

Watching the British period drama *Downton Abbey*, I recognised that my grandfather's experiences in the houses he worked in couldn't even have come close to those of the servants portrayed in that television series. How was life like for an African servant in a colonised country who worked for people who were not anywhere as wealthy? Did his employers view him as human?

So this year, when I went to the Karen Blixen Museum, I wanted to see the kitchen.

An estimated 700 workers lived and worked on this “farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills”. They worked here along with their spouses and children, and they should have been grateful because they were allocated some space to live in within the 4,500-acre farm land. No matter that they were probably there because they had been displaced from that very land. Some of these workers had left their homes to work on farms like this one because of the colonial government [had imposed](#) a Hut and Poll Tax in 1901 that was increased in 1915 and 1920. They had to pay. The Kipande, an identity card and passbook, was introduced in 1915, prohibiting Africans from moving freely. They were stuck there.

They were called natives, squatters, houseboys and kitchen *totos*. They were required to call Karen Blixen, the new owner of their land, *memsahib* or *msabu*. These workers were considered fortunate because the *memsahib* built a school for their children to attend while their parents worked.

Meanwhile, Blixen and other white settlers often left for hunting expeditions and long trips, with servants doing all the heavy lifting, confident that the workers left behind were tending to their properties.

After Blixen left Kenya in 1931, the vast parcel of land was turned into a residential area, with the Karen Country Club as an anchor intended to entice the wealthy (European) Nairobi residents to move there. The house that Blixen lived in is now a museum that gives a glimpse into daily life in colonial Kenya. The museum [is a popular](#) tourist destination.

However, less attention is given to the other aspects of this story and time period.

On its website, the National Museums of Kenya states: “NMK is a multi-disciplinary institution whose role is to collect, preserve, study, document and present Kenya’s past and present cultural and natural heritage. This is for the purposes of enhancing knowledge, appreciation, respect...”

If the museum is a place we visit to learn, to enhance knowledge and to appreciate our various histories, what does the set-up and the tour of the Karen Blixen Museum say about what is valued?

The museum was established after Blixen’s book *Out of Africa* was made into a movie with the same title. In the 1980s, Kamande wa Gature, Blixen’s former employee, was called in to assist in reconstructing the house interior as it had been when Blixen lived there. Some of the items displayed in the house were recreated for the 1985 film set and later donated to the museum. When you visit the museum, you are assigned guides who brief you with the backstory - Blixen’s past prior to coming to Kenya, her life and loves in Kenya, and her entanglements, both social and business-related.

The workers on Blixen’s farm tended to the house, to the coffee farm, to other crop plantations, and to the livestock on the farm. We know that the workers built, they planted, they cooked, they cleaned, they cared for her pets, and even protected her. Here, aside from the posed painted portraits and her photos in a peaceful and rested state, there are few markers of the presence of these people; there are only painted portraits and photographs of a group of house staff - Farah Aden, Abdulahi, Farah’s nephew, Ireri the Elder, Kamande wa Gature, Njeeri from Dagoretti. The gift shop at the museum sells postcards and bookmarks with these people’s faces on them as souvenirs.

When the guide tells us that Blixen’s family purchased the farm from Imperial British East Africa Company, it is as if the land was just there, available to be purchased and occupied. It is as if the people living there miraculously transformed themselves into squatters and availed themselves to be cooks, porters, gun bearers and houseboys. Whereas detailed background information leading up to

Blixen's travel to Kenya is provided, it appears that even now this place's living memory is predicated on Blixen's arrival in 1917. How did the land owners become squatters? What was cleared from this site to make space for coffee trees?

The museum guide mentions that the bathroom had two exits so that a worker could empty the chamber pot, drain the dirty bath water and clean the bathroom without entering through the house. In the kitchen, utensils are arranged as they would have appeared on a regular day. The dining table is laid out with cutlery and crockery as they would have been when Blixen lived there. A menu showing what was served for a famous guest is displayed as evidence. Some floors have animal hides as carpets. What were the work routines? Did the workers get time off? What did they earn?

In 2011, I attended a friend's baby shower in Nairobi. Among the things discussed was the task of finding a nanny for the child. I lost my temper when a guest suggested that a Luhya woman was best suited for this role. Others echoed this sentiment. All my explaining about the wrongness of this statement didn't seem to get through. I stopped because I was ruining the party. I was being too sensitive. It was just a suggestion.

In 2014, my father took me and my sister to see a house in Milimani, Kakamega, where our grandfather had once worked. We couldn't access the property but could see the old house from the road. My father told us that some of his uncles and cousins also started working there as kitchen *totos* and *mshika kamba*. A kitchen *toto* was basically the errand boy of the house, who worked as the cook's servant, doing tasks that are better done by small hands, as well as easing the burden of the adults. And from my parent's telling, a *mshika kamba* (literally, holder of the rope) was a child who helped to hold animals, to lift things or to hold the big sufuria for the person stirring the pot. I thought about the stereotypes that we are still shaking off close to a century later - that we Luhyas make good cooks and good domestic workers.

One imagines how much work goes into maintaining Karen Blixen's house, which is now a museum that is open every day, including public holidays and weekends. What is the effect on museum workers who clean, polish, and fixing these artefacts daily? What does repeating the story in the particular format of "the natives, the squatters, the houseboys..." for the benefit of the tourist do to the narrator?

When will we remember them as people, as women, men and children?

In the book *Out of Africa*, Blixen [talks about](#) reducing her white staff, likely due to financial constraints. It is not stated that at the time an apartheid system was enforced throughout the Kenya colony. [In this system](#), European labour was most highly valued and received the highest pay while the pay scale for Africans was the lowest. Even among Africans, the pay was further segmented based on ethnic identity. Thus, it was good business to have workers from different ethnic groups assigned to different tasks, thus enforcing ethnic stereotypes.

Blixen provides a detailed account of seven-year-old Kabero, who was employed as a kitchen *toto*, and who accidentally shot two agemates while playing with a gun. One of the children, Wamae, died. Kabero, before running away because of his crime, returned to pay the one rupee he owed his master for an old pair of shorts. What is the terror that made a seven-year-old child prioritise paying for a pair of old shorts before running away? I wonder about the horror of a place that claims to tell the story of "Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage" while continuously minimising and even erasing the 700 African workers and their families from it.

After Blixen's departure in 1931, the farm was sold. What happened to all the workers and their families, left without an income and a home, when a farm was sold off in colonial Kenya? Is there a place for them in this museum tour? Do they deserve their own museum? Do we even need a museum to tell us about them?

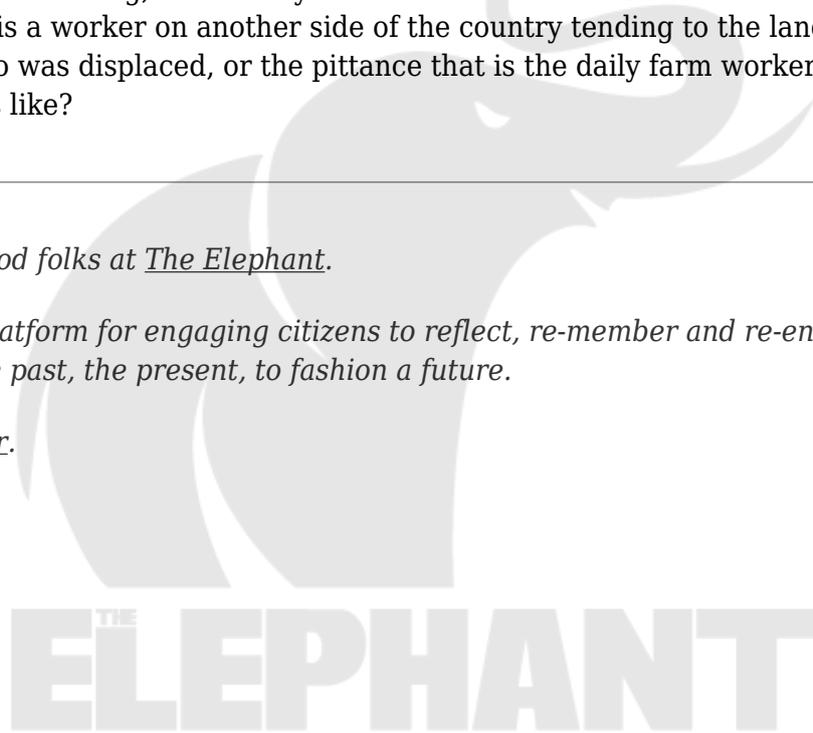
Nostalgia for that era lives beyond this museum. A short distance away is the Hemingways Hotel, which has a wall inscribed with writings from explorers and writers like David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, Elspeth Huxley, Ernest Hemingway, and one black exception, Jomo Kenyatta. Another wall has posters from the movies like *White Mischief*, *Born Free*, *I Dreamed of Africa* and *Out of Africa*. All these have in common the central white protagonist experiencing Africa with Africans as a backdrop in their adventures. Why are we still doing this in 2019? Is it possible to remember, preserve and tell the history of Kenya without repeating the violent language of that past? Is it necessary to keep propping up these images for the tourists?

And then - how different is this nostalgia for the colonial invader from the urban Kenyan's 2019 dream to have something similar to that farm in Africa? A place where they wake up and see crops growing and livestock thriving, where they count off acres and workers. An aura of self-sufficiency, knowing that there is a worker on another side of the country tending to the land - never mind how it was acquired, who was displaced, or the pittance that is the daily farm worker's wages. Isn't this what progress looks like?

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