African Collections Futures at the University of Cambridge

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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Collections Connections Communities

Using our collections to answer the big questions of our time

Introduction

- African Collections Futures works across the 8 museums, botanic garden, University Library, and related departments at the University of Cambridge.
- Phase 1: 15 months of research to produce a report.
- An advisory group of Cambridge, Oxford, South Africa and Kenya-based colleagues supported work on the report.
- African Collections Futures report published December 2024.
- Report explores materials across 4 major categories:
  a) Artefacts made by African people
  b) Specimens from the natural world
  c) Materials that depict African people or Africa
  d) Objects made with material from Africa
- Report concludes with recommendations for ways forward including hiring, research, community engagement and more.
- Report is an *introduction* to African collections at Cambridge – with signposts for further research, collaboration, and community engagement.
- Report launched in three formats, including a version specially designed for reading on mobile phones.

Findings of the Report

- Cambridge's African collections mostly colonial in dates collected, geographical areas, ideologies behind collecting.
- The racism that underpinned empire is prevalent across the collections.
- African contributions to the collections in the form of creative, intellectual and physical labour are largely missing.
- Public digital access to the collections varies widely, with greater digitisation and many more photographs in the cultural collections than natural history collections.
- Documentation gaps and cataloguing backlogs mean there is much more material than could be covered in this report.
- There are currently no funded opportunities to research the African collections at Cambridge.
- While there are several strong examples of collaborations with African institutions in the cultural collections (e.g., with Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt), relationships with African universities and museums are limited in the natural history collections.
- Cambridge African diaspora engagement with the collection is quite limited, and usually around related exhibitions or as one-off activities.
- There are several well-documented examples of artefacts that were looted, including those related to ongoing or complete repatriation requests at other institutions.



African Collections Futures Report in Numbers



Rana occipitalis. Collected March–June 1933, Mamfe British Cameroons (today, Cameroon). Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, University of Cambridge. UMZC R.17821-R.17840. Nathan Pitt © University of Cambridge.

- **350,000** artefacts made in Africa – most made by African people
- **200,000** animal, plant, fossil and mineral specimens
- **30,000** photographs at MAA with 'Africa' as location
- **116** looted Benin artefacts - repatriation is already in motion
- **100+** hard copies of summary report given to colleagues in Uganda, Kenya, Portugal, Czech Republic, USA, UK
- **2** complete African repatriations: Uganda 1962, Nigeria 2021

African artefacts at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA)

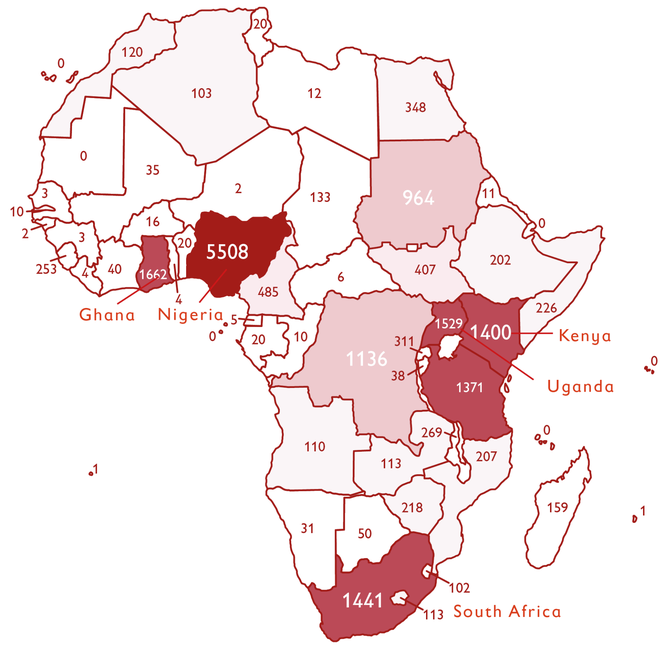


Figure 4: Map of Africa with numbers of anthropology catalogue records at Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, November 2024[24]

Uganda Return – June 2024

- There have only been a handful of formal repatriation requests of African artefacts or ancestral remains at Cambridge.
- In June 2024, MAA sent 33 artefacts, and six balongo (the sacred remains of six people – the Keepers of their shrine in photo below) to the Uganda Museum on a renewable 3-year loan.
- The Ugandan government has approached this as the entry-point to a repatriation, and there are no return tickets to transport the artefacts or balongo back to Cambridge.
- An exhibition is scheduled at the Uganda Museum, mid-2026.





- My new research project, *Afterlives of Return*, will produce a digital archive of this return, exploring the period after artefacts return home (whether temporarily or permanently), and develop an interdisciplinary network to collaboratively document and interrogate the outcomes of the Uganda return.

In Focus: Mujaguzo

A **Mujaguzo** (royal drum) belonging to the Kabaka of the Buganda Kingdom was acquired by a missionary-anthropologist in around 1907 in unclear circumstances. Displayed at MAA over the decades since then, it was returned on loan to Uganda in June 2024. Where it will live in the future – in the Uganda Museum, the Kabaka's palace, a Buganda Kingdom Museum – remains unknown.



L – R: Photograph in Uganda pre-collection c.1907 (LS.139257.TC1); MAA studio photograph – c2020s; Uganda Museum, 11 June 2024. MAA ROS 1920.316.

African Collections Futures in Community

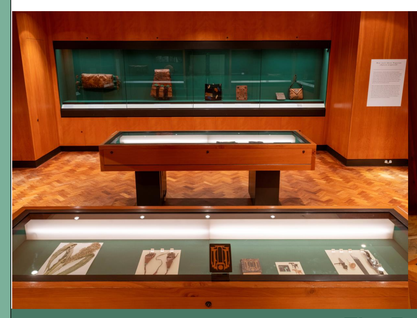
Connecting with African diaspora community members (including those living and working in Cambridge as well as students) has been central to ACF as awareness of what is in the museums remains relatively low, while these institutions can be intimidating spaces.



- Activities include presentations at Cambridge Africa Network's 2024 Black History Month event (left).
- In general, African-heritage people in Cambridge want to explore the collections but don't have a way in – my work is to help create ways in.

Bound Together: Leather from Northern Nigeria

- Based on research for the ACF report, *Bound Together* traces the origins of leathers from tanners and leatherworkers in Northern Nigeria, to the exported goatskins that were a prized commodity among bookbinders in the UK and the USA from the late 1800s.
- Most of the Nigerian objects featured have been in museum storage for 100 years and never been seen by the public.
- This display is a collaboration between several Cambridge museums, with staff working together to bring objects usually separated by categories like 'art' and 'ethnography' together.
- The display revolves around 3 key themes:
  – Nigerian leathers, featuring bags, boots and books from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and an exploration of how they were produced
  – Designer bookbindings made in Britain with Nigerian goatskins including those by several of the most influential 20th century bookbinders in the UK.
  – Contemporary Nigerian goatskins including Nigerian-leather bound books currently on sale in the UK, and a designer leather handbag from Nigeria.
- Free at The Fitzwilliam Museum: **19/Aug/2025 – 8/Feb/2026**





The Futures

Moving forward, African Collections Futures is focused on:
- Increasing awareness of the report
- Working towards institutionalization of the findings
- Supporting activities around repatriation and restitution
- Collaborating with various groups – African diaspora, artists, academics – developing new work with these collections

New ways of working and more African voices are essential to developing a decolonial approach to these collections.

Contact information

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For more on the report, the display, and all things African Collections Futures, visit the website via the QR code below:
ccc.cam.ac.uk/initiatives/african-futures/

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