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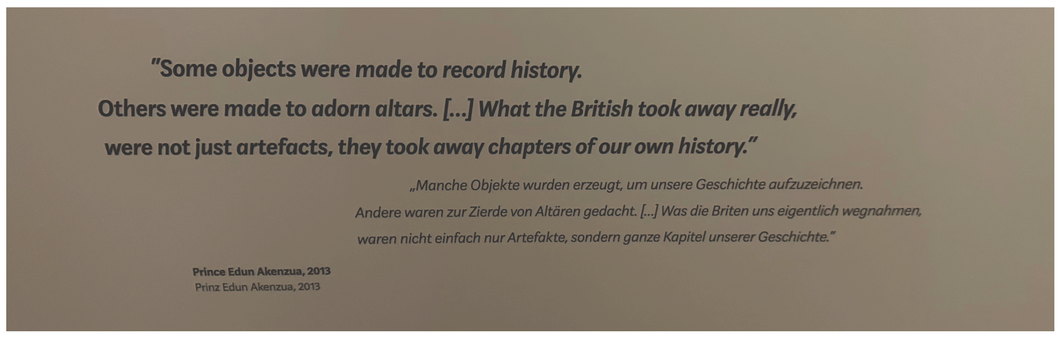
Heritage, Museums, Collections: Professionals' Sharing of Skills between Africa and Europe
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Long-Term Loans as a tool to decolonize the museum?

Abstract from from the author's thesis *"The role of Long-Term Loans in addressing challenges of Cultural Heritage Management. State of the Art and Future Potential"* for the Master degree in **Managing Art and Cultural Heritage in Global Markets (MAGMa)**, coordinated by the University of Glasgow

Introduction

The principles on return and restitution of cultural property (article 6.2 & 6.3 of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums) encourage museums "if legally free to do so" to take action and give back objects to the original owners. However, when deaccessioning is not possible due to **legal constraints**, long-term loans could be the most flexible way to meet their reunification with the original context and community of belonging.



Curatorial text, Weltmuseum Wien, 29th of April 2025, photo taken by the author

Long-term loans

- happen to exist when there is a transfer of possession, not ownership;
- contribute to the borrower's permanent collection and is "regarded as forming part of the collection for the period of the loan" (Jyrkkiö, 2010; p. 27);
- treated with the same care, use and attention as all objects in the borrower's collection (Ibid.);
- length of generally 3–5 years (Ibid.);
- contributing to addressing challenges in Cultural Heritage Management (e.g. technical constraints; ethical concerns; contentions where they can serve as actors for Cultural Diplomacy (CD).

OBJECTIVE

Understanding **to what extent** the stipulation of long-term loans for Movable Cultural Heritage (MCH) could be a tool for the resolution of the dispute of ownership for items intertwined with a colonial past.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of **semi-structured interviews** with museum professionals; **study visits** in permanent collections and temporary exhibitions & **Case Study analysis.**

Results

For items rightfully belonging to the claiming party, the results of the research found that there is an overall unconditional attitude to return them because "providing an object on loan is a way to sidestep the issue of rightful ownership" (Jyrkkiö, 2010; p. 10)

When **deaccessioning is not possible due to legal constraints**, long-term loans as a tool are promoted also to attempt a resolution of disputes regarding ownership. A successful agreement was stipulated at the beginning of 2024 when The British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London announced a collaboration with the Manhyia Palace Museum in Ghana to return seventeen cultural objects that were looted by British troops during the Anglo-Asante wars of 1873–74 and 1895–96 (Associated Press, 2024). This stipulation of a long-term loan **bypassed** the U.K. Act of Parliament, the British Museum Act 1963, which prohibits the museum from deaccessioning (Harris, 2025). Another way to repair justice that could be implemented, consists in the transfer of ownership to the rightful owners, following the example of Germany. In July 2022, more than 1,100 Benin Bronzes were transferred ownerships from German museums to Nigeria. While part of them were also physically repatriated, others remained in the country, stipulating **long-term loan agreements, as "cultural ambassadors for Nigeria"** (Marshall, 2022; Rogers et al., 2022).

"expanded loans"

A first step towards repatriation ?

Peers et al. (2024), advanced the idea of stipulating "expanded loans", where alongside the activities normally related to loan agreements (such as the display and research projects) the loans can be used in ceremonies, out-of-case visits/research sessions, and community provision of information" (p.2).
They further mention a pioneering expanded loan case in Canada, where temporary loans from Glenbow Museum to Siksikaitsitapi ceremonial keepers were first **extended**, then transformed into **permanent**, and later turned into **repatriations** in the 1990s.

Conclusion

The process of decolonization in museums is **deeply entangled** with historical and ongoing asymmetries of power, moral responsibilities, and the need to recognize and recompose cultural identities. It also requires reconciliation with histories of violence and practices of damnatio memoriae. While legal constraints can make direct restitution difficult, long-term loans **offer one possible path** toward decolonizing practices. However, such measures should only be pursued when deaccessioning is temporarily – or permanently – not possible.
These loans, when grounded in trust and reciprocity, can **foster threads** of cooperation and mutual understanding that are essential in the cultural sector.

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