Gathering in the Heart of Prague for WAC-9 amid Conflict and Pandemic

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Some Thoughts on Conferencing

As we all know, by the time this issue goes to press WAC-9 will have been held in Prague and was hosted as a hybrid event. Some 670 people attended the Congress, 350 in person and the remaining virtually. The efforts of the local organising committee—and especially Jan Turek as Secretary—are to be commended given the immense problems in arranging such an event. Jan was seen everywhere all the time—including leading groups in guided tours around Prague castle!—and he deserves our deeply grateful thanks for all his work.

This journal was able to bask in some reflected glory at the award of the first Joan Gero Book Award to its editor, Kathryn Weedman Arthur for her book titled the Lives of Stone Tools, although sadly it could not be presented to her in person. It was indeed a delight for those of us who were there to meet again in person.

The following thoughts, inspired by the experience of the Congress, concern the general principles regarding what a conference is for.

In terms of form, an academic conference consists of sessions—parallel or plenary—where individuals give talks on their work and others listen with varying degrees of politeness. There are also frequently opportunities for those in the audience to ask questions or make comments upon what has been said. WAC Congresses are no different, although often a lot larger than others for archaeologists and take place in a different part of the globe each time.

But other things also happen at conferences. There are social events which may take the form of receptions, coffee and tea breaks, lunches, and a formal dinner, and there will be spaces where attendees can meet and mingle—in corridors, on staircases, in toilets, or while looking at displays, in bars, and in the open air outside the conference venue. Some may recall
those two well-experienced conference attendees who, at WAC-2 in Venezuela, spent the entire conference sitting in the venue bar, on the basis (as they explained to those of us less experienced) that since everybody would at some point go into the bar, if there was anyone they wished to meet they could do so there; and anyone who wished to meet them could do the same. And those of us now experienced in conference attendance are well aware that the giving and receiving of formal papers is merely the excuse for bringing a community together: the real action at a conference is in the direct engagement with colleagues, in renewing old friendships and collaborations and establishing new ones. It is also in the opportunity to visit a place that is new to experience—and this in particular has been a strength of the WAC Congresses, which have taken members to such a diversity of locations as Venezuela, India, South Africa, the USA, Jordan and Japan as well as countries in Europe. None of this can be done via a system such as Zoom—it requires a personal presence in the same space as others.

It is in meeting others in our discipline face-to-face and in a context where all are equal that the value of the conference lies. And overarching all this—they are fun! The academic conference where we meet our colleagues is the place where we recharge our professional batteries, where we can retreat from the fight to maintain our discipline’s presence in too-often hostile academic and non-academic environments, and where we may even learn something unexpected from a chance encounter. We need to meet in person like this in new places where interesting opportunities await.

The high number of people who chose virtual attendance and the many sessions that were entirely virtual at the Congress is distressing. And we must break the culture of ‘meetings’ that involve no actual meeting, for our own good, the good of our discipline, and especially the good of our junior colleagues and successors. The problem for us if this persists is that a generation of scholars will grow up who believe that listening to formal presentations is all there is to conference attendance, which can be done via a digital link, and that the informal networking in social contexts is somehow an unnecessary and avoidable ‘add-on’. We hope that the low number of people who physically attended this Congress was due to the difficult times we are experiencing rather than becoming the norm.

**Difficult Times Continue**

The global and temporal breadth of topics presented and discussed at WAC-9 demonstrate our members commitment to affirming the value of cultural, heritage, environmental, and intellectual diversity, particularly in these difficult times.
One reason for the relatively low turnout at WAC-9 is the difficult times in which we live. While across the world, communities abandon lockdowns as a response to the Covid pandemic, the disease nonetheless stays with us, and it was reported that several attendees contracted the disease at the Congress. Of course, there are those areas still tied to a ‘no-Covid’ strategy who persist in imposing harsh restrictions on regimes where new variants break out, and on disadvantaged regions where the vaccination numbers remain low and where responses must be harsher (although less effective) than elsewhere.

Meanwhile—as if to confirm those who may believe end-times are coming—violent conflicts rage in several parts of the globe. We have highlighted the conflict in Ukraine in our April issue of this journal, and concerns about this war (or if you prefer, Special Military Operation) also affected attendance at WAC-9. The war is over 1000 miles (1600 km) from Prague—the same distance as from New York to Memphis Tennessee, or Paris to Warsaw, and more than twice the distance from London to Edinburgh—but from outside Europe may look uncomfortably close to the Czech Republic. Other serious conflicts meanwhile rage in such diverse areas as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Sudan, countries of West Africa, Syria, Congo, Central African Republic, Mali, and Ethiopia, among a host of others including on-going unresolved (but thankfully largely quiet) wars in Korea and Nagorno-Karabakh. Our hearts go out to our colleagues and friends who find themselves involved in any kind of violent confrontation anywhere in the world.

To add to the issues we face, many of us find our jobs threatened by closures and a lack of spending on cultural activities, including archaeological research. Many Universities have restricted faculty travel and financial support to conferences due to budget cuts and Covid, forcing us to attend virtually. University departments well known for research and teaching in archaeology face cuts in staffing and outright closure (often while those in charge are keen to take credit for the work of archaeologists). Increasingly archaeology is dismissed by those who ought to know better as an irrelevance and a costly luxury that impedes economic development. The valuable contribution of archaeology to economies, to communities, and to students who benefit from its combination of arts and scientific content, as well as theory and practice, is overlooked in favour of other subjects incorrectly judged to be more valuable as preparation for a life in employment. We who work in archaeology know better—it behoves us to be more vocal in our defence.

A frightening development in some countries is the increasing measures to restrict free speech and discussions concerning diversity at universities. In the USA, lawmakers in half of the states are imposing restrictions on faculty testifying in court cases and college curriculum regarding diversity
In Texas, the lieutenant governor promised to end tenure for all new hires at Texas public colleges and universities who teach about structural and racial inequities. In other parts of the globe, students wish for limitations on free speech and the application of sanctions (including loss of their position) to university staff who dare to challenge what student groups consider acceptable. There are also considerable numbers who not only accept but wish to impose the separation of genders at certain kinds of events and others who wish any discussion of sensitive or difficult topics to be banned, or for at least ‘trigger warnings’ to be issued in advance so those who may be offended can leave (see e.g. Hillman, 2022).

In respect of these challenges to cultural activity, two current issues have come to our attention:

**Viking Ship Museum, Oslo**

Six months ago, the famous Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, open for nearly 100 years, closed its doors to be rebuilt as the Museum of the Viking Age—to preserve and present Norway’s cultural heritage treasures to the world for the next century. Due to the precarious state of the museum’s collections, and pandemic-related delays and material costs, the estimated budget has increased. Now just two months before construction was set to begin, the project was placed on hold due to demands from the government to adhere to the original budget.

The Norwegian Directorate of Public Construction and Property (Statsbygg) and museum professionals from the University of Oslo have put together a report concluding that an increased budget and immediate construction according to the original project plan are required to ensure the security and preservation of the museum’s collections. Each day that goes by therefore risks the loss of valuable cultural heritage that Norway has a responsibility to preserve.

Halting construction over politically-charged financial disagreements has placed the future of the museum and its precious artefacts—most notably the three best-preserved Viking ships in the world—at an inestimable risk. Due to the collection’s delicate condition, if no resolution is made, it will be placed behind closed doors indefinitely.

Interested parties therefore demand that the original project move forward immediately to ensure the safeguarding and preservation of this heritage, which holds unprecedented international, educational, and historical significance. As well as making the collection available for the public once more.

They ask for help by a petition to demand immediate action and to ensure that the wonders of the Viking Ship Museum are not lost to the
world forever. It is available at https://www.change.org/p/redd-vikingskipene-save-the-viking-ships.

The Georgian National Museum

Staff at the National Museum of Georgia put at the top of their list of values the love of science, research, progress, and satisfaction with new discoveries and findings. Today, they say, these main values are under attack in Georgia, with human rights and freedom of thought compromised.

The current minister of culture, sports, and youth of Georgia, (appointed on 22.03.2021), and her appointed new leadership of the Georgian National Museum (appointed on 19.04.2021), have no education, experience, or competence in museology or science, but have been appointed on purely political grounds. Unfortunately, leading scientists of the Georgian National Museum were let go of their positions on the 24th of May 2022 without any prior notice, explanation, or reason. The only reasons given were those of ‘reorganization’ and ‘competence’.

To stop and prevent this injustice and immense harm to Georgian National Museum they ask for your support. They ask us to help them save the Georgian National Museum, protect the devoted to science researchers and administrative staff, and stand on the side of progress, freedom, and education. To do so, they ask that emails of protest be sent to the Prime Minister of Georgia via nino_jakeli@yahoo.com.

New Initiatives

As if to emphasise the value of face-to-face meetings, we can announce two new initiatives relevant to this journal and its readers which emerged as a result of informal meetings over lunch at WAC-9.

We have been approached by the Editor of SAPIENS, a publication of the Wenner-Gren Foundation (https://wennergren.org/sapiens/), to offer an opportunity for the wider dissemination of the work of our contributors. SAPIENS, the Wenner-Gren Foundation’s digital magazine for the general public, proposes a partnership with Archaeologies and WAC, to provide training in writing for non-academic publics and opportunities for publishing articles to reach broad publics. They offer workshops to help train authors in writing for wider publics and the opportunity to publish accessible versions of their work. All contributors—actual and potential—will be invited to take advantage of this opportunity and we look forward to working with SAPIENS as the initiative develops.
Emek Shaveh (https://emekshaveh.org/en/about-us/) is an Israel-based NGO working to prevent the politicization of archaeology in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and especially in defending the cultural heritage rights of those by it. They believe that heritage sites can be used to promote understanding between members of different nations, cultures and groups, and should not be used as a means to claim ownership or historical rights over a given site. Accordingly, they are not interested in proving links between modern ethnic identities (e.g. Israeli, Palestinian, or European) and ancient peoples (e.g. Phoenician, Judean or Crusader). We look forward to following their work and co-operating with them.

This Issue

Focusing on perhaps one of the most well-known regions for archaeological research, pharaonic Egypt, Jose R. Pellini (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil) demonstrates the importance of recognizing how encounters and meanings associated with a specific place change through time in “Encounters, Affects and Intra-Actions”. Drawing on Bard’s feminist theory of diffraction, Pellini expertly reveals the limited scope of many archaeological studies in their naming and interpretation of activities at a specific location, such as Theban Tomb 123. Pellini forces us to rethink how archaeologists tend to perceive time of place and how our perceptions often craft and control interpretations that ignore complex historical processes that interact with a place. Read further to discover how Pellini draws us into a thought experiment with Schrodinger’s cat!

Contributing to open discussion concerning cultural variation in defining gender, Jessica Joyce Christie (East Carolina University, USA) critically examines 19th and 20th century interpretations of gendered space at pre-contact shrines in “Re-reading gendered space at k‘oa and household shrines on Hawai‘i Island and O‘ahu”. Through detailed analysis she demonstrates how early scholars shrouded their descriptions of Hawaiian culture with western binary. Explore how Christie inspired by Hawaiian ways of knowing elucidates understanding of pre-contact fishing and household shrines.

Jan Turek (Center for Theoretical Study, Czech Republic) provides us with new evidence from ceremonial monuments in Bohemia and Moravia of the Czech Republic for transformation in Beaker cosmology in “From Long Barrows to Ancestral Shrines”. Prior research acknowledges regional variation in the widespread Bell Beaker “package” (2900–2200 BC) across Europe and North Africa, largely defined as an assemblage of Bell beaker drinking vessels, archery accessories, and copper and gold metallurgy in male graves. Discover how Turek reimagines how these material cues
found in non-funerary contexts may demonstrate a cosmological and social changes.

Siyi Wang (Shanghai University, China) reveals the extraordinary diversity of Chinese alcohol vessels in “An archaeological perspective of alcoholic beverages in the Song Dynasty (960–1279)”. Vessels vary by their type of material, different practices for dispensing alcohol, and decorative patterns that strengthened secularity. How is diversity related to secularity and how does production and consumption diverge from contemporary practices in Europe, peruse this volume further to find out!

In “A comparative study of painted pottery culture of China and Ukraine”, Min Wang (Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Ukraine) inquires how two Neolithic cultures, Yangshao and Trypillia, separated by 5000 km produced pottery with similar iconography. Wang’s study focuses on analysing specific motifs and their location on a vessel and in turn their meaning. What does Wang suggest in lieu of independent invention?

We encourage everyone to submit your research articles to *Archaeologies* to help us assure continued quality content. We also hope to meet many of you at the next Congress, in person! Meanwhile, please enjoy reading Ndoro’s Peter Ucko Memorial Lecture, which he kindly provided for us.

Kathy and John

**Peter Ucko Memorial Lecture August 7, 2022**

**Archaeology Heritage Conservation…… and Africa**

*Webber Ndoro*

**Introduction**

On the African continent archaeology has had a long association with heritage management and how heritage itself is defined and practised? Most heritage legislations, policies and administrative structures were largely built emanating from archaeological endeavours. In most of Africa colonial ways of archaeological research, heritage management and heritage definition and thinking are deeply entrenched. It is very clear that the discourse of heritage has been shaped and practised by archaeological endeavours. Colonial buildings dominate most countries’ heritage databases and archaeology/palaeontology and their objects also dominate in the museums and art galleries. This is particularly so with the so-called “Authorised Heritage
discourse”. This has largely militated against non-western ideas and definitions of heritage and multivocality and dissonances in the legally and government administered heritage. This has also limited the audience of what heritage offers. Experts dominate and communities are generally in the periphery. Most archaeologists in Africa continue to wallow in the delusions of archaeology as a neutral science uncontaminated by political ideologies. Despite the subject having been introduced to ensure colonial dominance during the colonial days. It has largely tried to remain academic. This is the same mantle which we find being followed by the World Heritage system. This catholicity of science which favours western concepts of what should be defined as acceptable/official? heritage. It has to be acknowledged that there are variations in what archaeologists think is important to research and what is the reasonable interpretations they make. Unfortunately, the colonial and western roots of archaeology have had a fundamental influence in how archaeology is still being conducted even though political colonialism ended more than 60 years ago in most of Africa.

As a student of archaeology, I was basically taught that the current populations in Africa have no long history in their current locations. The archaeological sites were named after some exotic places for example K2, Leopards Kopje, Maxton etc., nothing to do with the local names. I was taught that this is how the science of archaeology works. It becomes hard to associate the archaeological typologies with current populations or any one from oral histories of African communities. Archaeology therefore dis-inherited most communities in Southern Africa. What amused me most was how the Colosseum was built by the Romans, and the Pyramids by the Egyptians but the Great Zimbabwe was built by the ancestors of the Shona. Even today, this is what is written in the academic books and papers. It might appear a minor difference but in disinheritting communities it does a lot. It also means we don’t know who the ancestors of the Shona were.

The origins of heritage as archaeology or colonial architecture have also shaped the evolution of cultural heritage management in Africa, which excluded communities. In general, archaeological sites have been conceived as scientific specimens to be turned into protected areas. Community engagement has been limited, and in many cases, people have been moved away from archaeological or heritage places in the name of creating protected areas and sites; the idea being Saving Africa from the Africans (Nelson, 2003) This has also caught up with World Heritage listing the practice of archaeology and nature conservation in Africa where communities are considered a danger to the conservation and protection of heritage (Andrews and Buggy, 2008; Ndobochni, 2016). Only experts from the west or those trained by them have knowledge to protect heritage and enjoy it. In other words, the conservation and management of heritage
focus on the physical remains, expressions, and cosmologies of past societies as imagined by experts? rather than those of contemporary communities. However, both intangible and tangible heritage are interwoven experience in communities in which rituals, traditions and values are being experienced in the same space, places and objects or works of art. Thus, the way the heritage management has been managed tends to limit or alienate local communities’ participation in most cases. The legal systems too conceptualise and promote the concept of what is to be protected based on the western concept of heritage. This is exacerbated by the international conventions, which were formulated with the global north as the only source of wisdom and science (Winter, 2012).

It is the same with World Heritage Sites and Africa more than 60% of the sites from Africa are of colonial architecture or archaeological. Generally perceived to have nothing to do with current communities. Of those which do like Kasubi (Uganda) then the concepts advised by UNESCO on its OUV (Outstanding Universal Value) and that of communities are at odds. For UNESCO and its experts ICCROM included in the OUV is the huge grass thatch structure. For the Kabaka, this is a burial place no matter what you use to cover it, hence in the 1970 it had a tin roof. The tin roof had to be removed and restored with thatch for it to be nominated in 1999 (the thatcher and the grass were brought all the way from South Africa). However, in 2009 the thatch was burnt which means a loss to the OUV. Following the devastating fire in 2010, which destroyed the site, it was put on the World Heritage list in Danger. This time experts and financial support from Japan was required to do the restoration. In my view, the local communities know all these dangers and hence they had resorted to the tin roof.

In 2020 the Kasubi was burnt again!

The restoration of Kasubi tombs (Uganda) provides a good example in which modernist conservation approach neglected the actual values of the place as seen by the users and producers of that heritage. To the Buganda communities, the spirit of Buganda was not and will never be burnt, yet to experts, the physical structures destroyed by the fires signalled the destruction of the site. The issue is how do we ensure that local knowledge is infused to the scientific thrust coming from western-based education and concepts.

The Practice

Heritage, in its broadest sense, is that which we inherit and decide to look after for our current and possibly future use. The nature of heritage differs from people to people, between places and over time. Its context is both
natural and cultural (Lowenthal, 2005). It can be argued that we see nature through our cultural lens hence the only difference is in interpretations. Our past very much affects our choices of what we perceive as heritage. Heritage in many parts of the world is affected by many factors including more recently climate change, migration, pandemics, and political conflicts. This is over and above the traditional issues related to the deep roots of colonisation in Africa and impact of rapid changes in Africa aimed at catapulting the continent from underdevelopment. All these cause formidable challenges to the management of heritage on the continent.

The practice of management, interpretation and presentations has always been dominated by the dictates of the Venice Charter and the resultant international principles and standards for conservation and restoration practice which have dominated the world today. Not forgetting that the Venice Chapter was largely a result of the second World War destruction of cultural property in Europe.

Even though there were attempts to domesticate issues on the Venice Charter like authenticity, as happened in Asia with the Nara declaration. The expert meeting on Authenticity and Integrity in the African Context for Africa (Zimbabwe 2000) did not yield tangible results which could affect the process of nomination to World Heritage or to management of heritage in any significant way.

The conclusion of the Nara declaration has been the interpretation of cultural heritage in the Asian context as a continuous on-going cultural practice (including intangible aspects) and this has led to a number of heritage places even being nominated for world heritage listing. In African international laws however, the laws applicable to heritage in Africa have much to do with colonial baggage given the fact that all of them emanate from the colonial legal bases. Most countries in Africa are struggling to change the entrenched colonial practises in the field of heritage. This includes the heritage laws which were based on the colonial administration. For example, even in a country like Zimbabwe which had a protracted war of liberation no sites of this struggle are protected by the legislation which was enacted in 1972 and remains unchanged. It privileges the archaeological sites and colonial buildings. The heritage of the indigenous communities is rarely protected by the authorised administration and management. Virtually all colonial heritage legal frameworks transferred the ownership of heritage from being community owned to a resource that is state-owned (NeGri, 2008).

Furthermore, heritage is defined as something that is monumental and mostly about the built environment. By separating built areas from non-built areas and marginalizing places of worship, categories of heritage such as landscapes, burial grounds and grazing lands became unofficial heritage (Smith, 2006). In cases where rock shelters were painted and were also
used as burial places, the inception of the politics of domination and related agendas saw their conversion into state-owned rock art sites and not as living heritage valued by communities (Jopela, 2017; Taruvinga & Ndoro, 2003). Therefore, as far as values are concerned, heritage resources were often converted into archaeological sites valuable more for aesthetic, educational (for colonial elites), research, tourism and economic values, and less as places of spiritual significance. Objects from heritage places were deposited in museums away from associated cultural landscapes. Places such as the Rock Engravings of Brandburg in Namibia and Great Zimbabwe were by virtue of legislation turned into monuments, only accessible to experts and other westerners interested in tourism. Spiritual values of the colonized peoples were also marginalized (Taruvinga & Ndoro, 2003).

With the achievement of political independence, there was no attempt to disrupt the system of conservation inaugurated during colonization (Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008). Colonial heritage legislation remained in full force, with its provisions being religiously implemented both by colonial archaeologists and by the new generation of native ‘experts’. In some countries, native experts who took up positions in monuments administration and research left by expatriates continued like their predecessors. In some parts of Africa, they never left! The consequence continues to be that the so-called scientific values and expert voices are given more power than the long-marginalized community values and perceptions. Furthermore, because there was no land reform, communities continued to be alienated from their heritage and ancestral lands mostly as a result of anti-trespassing laws (Pwiti and Ndoro, 1999).

There is need to develop concepts and theoretical perspectives which take into consideration the other regions of the world, in our case to consider Africa. So that African heritage can be shared and celebrated by the world—not just as an addendum to colonial heritage. The current thrust as envisioned by the authorised and the legally protected heritage ensures continuity in the protection of the colonial heritage (Winter, 2012). A change will provide for developing a heritage management practice, which balances universal principles with the culturally specific perspectives of the independent nations of Africa. In Africa the nature-culture divide does not exist at the local level. This offers a more holistic management to the heritage. It also offers a more useful heritage which builds societies and provides opportunities for growth socially and economic. It offers possibilities of embracing sustainable development and not stagnation and hence uplifting of African societies and communities.

In our efforts to define what we are managing, we need to recognize the difference between mere “cultural history” and “cultural heritage” and this lies in the significance of heritage resources for societies in shaping their
cultural identity and the feeling of safety connected with it. Heritage is emotional, an “experience”, rather than being a question of rational investigation for knowledge increase as it is the case for historiography (archaeology, science, history etc.). Thus, heritage should be seen as a continuous living practice in the present. As Smith (2022) demonstrates, heritage has always had the political power to recognize or misrecognize identities.

Conflict

With the current focus of the world on the conflict in Ukraine, social media has vividly brought to our attention the horrific impacts such events have on heritage. Be it as collateral or intentional, heritage is destroyed in most conflicts. In some cases, this is done as a deliberate attempt to obliterate someone’s identity as this is based on the heritage of the community or country. Throughout history the continent of Africa has witnessed major conflicts and wars. The nature of conflict on the continent has both indigenous and exogenous origins. Past colonial wars of occupation and the subsequent occupations generated conflicts and wars of its own. The modern states in Africa were by and large a result of wars of one kind or the other. Most of the state creations by colonial powers were designed to serve their own interest and are a result of the partition of Africa at the Berlin conference in 1884. The occupation of Africa by the colonial powers led to resistance wars with some of these being very brutal with negative impacts. Examples are many including the Herero massacre in Namibia, the Mau Mau wars in Kenya, Maji Maji resistance in Tanzania and the Chimurenga wars in Zimbabwe. However, the wars and movements of independence also generated conflicts of their own and a heritage worthy of celebrating too. The modern states created during the colonial days are also the root cause of some of the conflicts today in Africa, particularly having arbitrarily divided communities of similar origins and commonality. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was a result of these colonial state creations. The world conflicts during the Cold War too generated its own destruction of heritage and created new ones. For example, the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale (Angola) was where the Cold War became hot on the soils of Africa in 1988.

The history of conflict and wars and its impact on African cultural heritage resources has been varied. The continent was ravaged by conflicts even before the political independence. This led to the destruction of many cultural resources, it also created heritage worthy of celebrating or commemorating, for example the genocide sites of Rwanda. Most of the major conflicts have attracted and also been fuelled by countries from outside the continent, for example the war in Angola (USA, Cuba and Russia), Mali
(France) and Libya (USA, Italy, France Turkey etc.). Recently the key drivers of instability have been internationally influenced extremist groups taking advantage of the fragile governance institutions on the continent—the Arab Spring and its aftermath especially in North Africa, the Malian crisis and the recurrence of unrest in countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. The rise of extreme religious movements like Al Qaeda, ISIS and their affiliates has taken advantage of the fragile states of Africa to cause destruction in the continent. All of these conflicts have had an impact on the heritage of Africa and in some instances generated their own places of commemoration and remembrance.

Protecting cultural heritage in times of conflict should not be only linked with the protection of material cultural heritage. When conflicts start, cultural heritage experts focus on protecting movable or immovable cultural property from damage. This task is obviously quite important for preserving collective identity, but cultural heritage concept is much more than objects and sites, it has intangible aspects and has everything to do with society’s identity, wellbeing and its socioeconomic sustainability (Ndoro, 2021). The protection of cultural heritage has mainly been directed to the heritage object or place and not to the people for whom it has meaning. You cannot just protect the objects and sites when the custodians and practitioners of the cultural heritage are under threat. You cannot have the monuments and yet the community is wiped out. Thus, we need to understand that in most of Africa the cultural heritage resources are not separated from the communities. The example of Mali where the international community concentrated largely on the architecture and manuscripts might be the easy part, but the long-term protection of the heritage and people of Mali is the creation of peace and stability in the country. Cultural heritage may offer a way to peace and stability (Brown et al., 2019). There is need to ensure that cultural heritage stewardship is integrated into conflict management. When the conflict is internationalised, it tends not to involve the local communities, only the major powers begin to try and find a solution, but solutions could be home grown (Brioschi, 2017).

**Restitution**

Museums in many parts of Africa are intrinsically tied to colonisation. They were, as a concept and practice, introduced during colonial periods, and they benefitted immensely from the colonial actions that included both forced and voluntary acquisition of the heritage of ‘the others’ (Abungu, 2018). The museums in Europe also benefitted immensely because of the colonisation of Africa. It is true that most of the cultural objects from the continent are housed in European museums. For many centuries African
governments and experts from the continent have clamoured for the return of these properties. The current discussion on restitution is deeply embedded in these past relationships of conquests and colonisation, whose repercussions are still felt to the present (Abungu, 2008).

Many great museums in Europe and North America were not only passive beneficiaries of the looted heritage, often acquired by force through military expeditions, but some have also been documented to have planned and executed punitive expeditions together with the military in search of cultural goods. Often carried out in the name of scientific collecting and research, these expeditions have today been shown as having been pure looting expeditions. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than Sarr and Savoy’s report (2018) on the restitution of African cultural heritage.

The Sarr-Savoy November 2018 Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics – was commissioned by President Marcon to operationalize the return of cultural artefacts to African countries. The report sees the restitution as part of a wider effort to redress the effects of colonialism and also opening a serious discussion on colonial legacies on the African continent. The report largely focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa and ignores North Africa. The report delivered to the French president, Emmanuel Macron, recommended that all objects that were removed from sub-Saharan Africa without the consent of their countries of origin and sent to mainland France be permanently returned, provided the country of origin asked for them.

The plunder of cultural human remains, objects, art, and artefacts from Africa has always created tensions and conflicts between African countries and museums from the west.

In the past objects returned from former colonisers include returns to Democratic Republic of Congo by Belgium, to Indonesia from the Netherlands, and to the Republic of Benin by France. As Shyllon puts it, this is the tip of an iceberg given the scale of the plunder, which took place on the continent (Shyllon, 2014). There are many objects out there that were eventually returned, including Ethiopia’s Lion of Judah statue, the Zimbabwe bird statues, and the Vigangos from Kenya (Abungu, 2019). Despite the pronouncements by European leaders like Macron, the museum professionals are reluctant to part ways with the looted objects from Africa. They make the choice of which objects can be returned, for example with the Benin objects returned from France. Macron suggested that the coming five years conditions be put in place for the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage.

However, the return of objects or ancestral remains is usually not the end, but the beginning of a process. Restitution is not simply about undoing past injustices; it also creates new situations and sets new dynamics in motion. Colonialism shaped the global power structures, which are at play...
today. These impact the ability of African countries to cohere and put pressure to ensure return of cultural property and the conditions under which this happens.

One of the most celebrated cases is the plundering of the kingdom of Benin by the British during which the famous bronze sculptures were removed. These became prestigious trophies in the British museums. As early as during the colonial times, Africans began to clammer for the return of looted cultural properties. However, the slow return in most cases has been in the form of symbolic gestures. Even after Macron’s statements, the return has been seen more as a magnanimous gesture by the western countries and African countries having very little say on what is to be returned and when. One such success story has been the return of the objects from Abomey to Benin. This was a direct effect from President Macron. Twenty-six works of art which were looted by French colonial soldiers were returned to Benin. However, the 26 pieces represent only a fraction of more than 5000 works of art known to have been taken from the kingdom of Dahomey, during the colonial times. These 26 objects have been temporarily housed at the Old Presidential Palace, while a more permanent museum is envisioned to be built in Abomey. Several European museums and governments have also indicated the idea of returning works of art to Africa. The German government announced that it aimed to start returning Benin Bronzes, copper alloy relief sculptures from the Kingdom of Benin, to Nigeria.

However, in Belgium with one of the biggest African collections with approximately 180,000 ethnographic objects, the idea was more to rename the Royal Museum for Central Africa to be The Africa Museum instead of returning the objects. It was built to showcase King Leopold II’s exploits in central Africa. However, with the pressure mounting including from African activists abroad, there seems to be some changes. Since late 2021, the Belgian government has committed to putting in place relevant laws that will ensure smooth return of some of the materials to the DRC.

In all these efforts UNESCO has not clearly articulated its position even with 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Thus it can be concluded that its responses have proved to be inadequate in so far as restitution of cultural heritage property in Africa is concerned. In fact the Convention does not even mention restitution in its text. One of the most referred arguments against restitution has been that museums in Africa do not have the infrastructure to give optimum conservation conditions (Van Beurden, 2022, Lael, 2020). The issue is that the colonial powers never built these infrastructures even during their time. What happened was that cultural objects found their way to their museums. In addition some queried the concept of museum and insist it must change to meet the needs of
the African peoples and the conditions being cited are irrelevant as these items were not taken because there were no such facilities. It was pure theft and as such African’s owners of the heritage have a right to do whatever they want with their heritage. In that case, home for the heritage can be in the sacred forests, water bodies, or people’s homes depending on their original symbolisms (Abungu, 2019, 2020).

**Covid-19 and Beyond….**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way heritage activities are conducted today in Africa. During the peak of the pandemic, most heritage places had to close down or operate at a considerably reduced capacity. As a result, revenues were lost. Given the fact that most heritage places including museums are largely funded by government, reduced support for museums was also witnessed. This was due to the fact that governments now focused on health issues. Given the restrictions on movement and social contacts some heritage places resorted to online and digital options.

Equally important is to realise that the ideal and the traditional role of heritage is an arena where we come together to experience, learn about our past and the dignity of other cultures. But at times heritage particularly our museums and galleries have also played a role in supporting narratives that have led to the pain and suffering of others. We have left out the histories and narratives of so many. We have upheld sexist, racist, colonial, and many other unethical and inequitable practices. However, if we believe that we stand for human rights we must all work towards positive change. We must fight to transform ourselves and our societies into anti-racist communities and countries. We must categorically reject any kind of intolerance or hate on the basis of colour, class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, etc.

I believe heritage can be an effective vehicle for social change and have a duty to engage with social agendas of our communities and not remain silent. The heritage experience today can create spaces for people unlike what they have been in the past. For starters, God gave us social media!

Heritage should be spaces in which critical thinking is encouraged and meaning is delivered through experience. These experiences must involve the questioning and exploration of ideas, even those which can make us intellectually uncomfortable. That means looking at ourselves honestly and fixing a whole lot about the way we work as we make authentic commitments towards equity, inclusion, access, and anti-racism.

Heritage provides fundamental places of learning and we must understand that people can and do learn about themselves, the world, and
its complex social and political concepts. Heritage provides an excellent environment for people to attempt to resolve their cognitive dissonances.

There have also been positive developments on the continent with new museums built after colonisation. The biggest and perhaps more recent is the Museum of Black Civilisation in Dakar Senegal. Significantly built with the help of the Chinese government, the museum, the grandest and most modern on the continent, aims to celebrate black civilizations’ contributions across the world. The new museum on African cultures all over the world focuses on reclaiming black people’s pride and their plundered heritage. The museum also showcases some of the returned objects taken from Africa. There have been other new museums built, for example the liberation museum in Angola and the Samora Machel museum in Botswana. The last two, showcase some of the fierce battles to end colonisation on the continent. There is also the African Museum being built in Algiers, Algeria with the support of the African Union and who’s among proposed roles could also be the hosting of some of the objects restituted from the west.

There are also important issues to consider given the predominance of cultural sites in Africa focused on archaeological or European heritage. Even the official “outstanding universal value” of a site like Great Zimbabwe refers to the Queen of Sheba and the role of the site as a mediaeval capital. This is despite the archaeological evidence to the contrary. Here World Heritage practices could learn from recent discussions arising from the Black Lives Matter movement on heritage and museum developments. Heritage sites in Africa celebrate colonial history; rarely do we find places dedicated to African achievements and liberation struggles (these are considered too political). The Rhodes Must Fall movement has clearly demonstrated the need to balance colonial history and African heritage. Although World Heritage experts may dismiss these movements as political machinations far removed from the realities of the hard conservation science and architectural analysis, this would seem to give credence to the idea that African heritage begins and ends with the colonialism on the continent.

Unless the archaeologists in Africa realise the need for a wider audience and engage others from a position of equality and not subalternity, it will continue to lose relevance and remain a subject of the colonisers.

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