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THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

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VELVET CRATES AND TERMITE SHELVES: REFLECTIONS ON RESTITUTION IN AFRICA

An open letter to the Honourable Director of the Museum of Civilised Conscience, somewhere in Europe

Dear Director,

We acknowledge receipt of the sculpture – whether a rain god, fertility totem, or as you described it, a "decorative artefact." It arrived with care: wrapped in velvet, accompanied by a brochure that celebrated your institution's efforts.

Thank you for this meaningful gesture. We understand that it was not without difficulty – that it required introspection and institutional reckoning.

And yet, Africa received no phone call. There was no consultation, no shared curation – only a press release. The object made its way from your display case to our fragile shelves. Cameras captured the moment. The world applauded. You perhaps found a measure of closure. We, once again, found ourselves in our familiar role: present, dignified, but largely unprepared.

Since President Macron's 2017 Ouagadougou declaration that "African heritage cannot remain a prisoner of European museums," we've seen increasing efforts toward repatriation. The 2018 Savoy-Sarr Report gave this commitment form and language. In 2022, Berlin followed suit with a joint declaration and a symbolic return of Benin Bronzes – while many more remain in storage.

Still, we must be honest: this was not justice as we understand it. It was an important beginning, but one defined largely by your institutions, your frameworks, your narratives. A well-staged gesture of goodwill – but not a shared reckoning.

We cannot pretend we have no part in this complex story. Yes, objects were taken. But some were sold. Some were surrendered without protest. And once gone, many were forgotten. We neglected our museums, underfunded our curators, and allowed silence to settle over the loss.

Perhaps this is not just a question of European guilt or African dignity – but of mutual responsibility. You find relief in action. We are left with a symbol of return and a reminder of what we must now rebuild.

Thank you for the crate. Unfortunately, we have no electricity.

The sculpture now rests beside a cracked wall in our provincial museum. Humidity and termites pose an immediate threat. Guards haven't been paid in months. Our curator works from home – not for flexibility, but for lack of transport. The artefact is home, but home is unready.

These are the realities your cameras often miss: water-damaged archives, fading documents, artefacts left to decay. In Buea, Cameroon, the museum that houses colonial records from the German era leaks with every storm. Rain has soaked 19th-century ledgers. Fungi and rats battle for dominance in our only pre-independence archive.

This was not done by outsiders. This is our own neglect, and we must acknowledge it.

Where are our governments? Our Presidents and Ministers of Culture? They post about cultural pride, yet are often absent when action is required. The return of these artefacts was driven by African civil society, by dedicated individuals like Sylvie Njobati, and committed researchers and scholars – not by those in power.

Now that the returns are happening, where is the infrastructure to receive them? Where are the public education campaigns, the storage investments, the policies? Without these, the artefacts risk returning to a kind of silence – different from before, but just as profound.

Let's be truthful: this is not only a story of colonial theft. It's a story of delayed care. We didn't ask loudly enough. We didn't protect what remained. Now, in their return, we must avoid

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parading these objects as mere trophies. Preservation must take precedence over possession.

So, thank you, Director, for the crate. It is a powerful symbol – but also a call to action.

What does it mean now?

As we unwrap these items, we must ask: what do they mean today? Not to the looter, nor to the distant scholar. But to us – here and now.

To many of our young people, these objects no longer resonate. Their context, their spirit – severed long ago – has not yet been restored. What once pulsed with ritual and meaning is now, to them, an enigma. In Europe, they were preserved. Here, they face reintegration without preparation. It is not restitution if it lacks renewal.

In some cases, these objects may even speak more clearly to audiences in Berlin or Paris than to those in Bamako or Kumasi.

Over there, they are exhibited with care and context. Here, they often sit beside broken cabinets and expired pest control.

This is not about blame, but about reckoning. Do we want these artefacts for their intrinsic value, or because they were taken? Are we pursuing justice, or simply redress?

And yet, their return is not without significance. Even in their silence, they bear witness to a history interrupted. Their presence is a reminder of a story paused – but not ended.

What justice requires

Real justice goes beyond symbolism. It requires investment – in people, institutions, and infrastructure. It calls for transparency: provenance must be shared, as must our budget shortfalls. It demands collaboration, not conditional loans.

Shared curation should be the norm. Proceeds from exhibitions should support preservation efforts in the countries of origin. Projects like the Edo Museum of West African Art should move from concept to concrete.

Justice should have teeth. It should include agreements, timelines, and measurable commitments. It must hold both former custodians and current recipients accountable.

Above all, justice requires political will. The next time a crate lands, let it be met by our leaders with a clear plan – not just for applause, but for preservation. If they cannot say how the artefact will be housed and used, then perhaps it is not yet time.

Justice will not always be comfortable – but then, it's not meant to be.

> RESTITUTION IS NOT A CRATE. IT IS A COMMITMENT – ONE THAT MUST BE MUTUAL, ONGOING, AND ACCOUNTABLE.

On double standards

It is difficult not to notice the differing treatment of global heritage. The Parthenon Marbles are defended with legal arguments and security systems. African masks, meanwhile, are returned when sentiment shifts. Greek stones are universal. African spirits are disposable. The inconsistency is not lost on us.

Meanwhile, some institutions rush to return items while simultaneously commercialising the act – selling tote bags next to empty cases. Others offer 'indefinite loans' to avoid parting with stolen heritage. These contradictions cloud the path to true restitution.

African leaders, too, have been inconsistent – championing culture abroad while underinvesting at home. The result is a vicious cycle: Europe hesitates to return more, citing poor storage; Africa struggles to improve storage without resources. And so, the impasse continues.

Perhaps it is time to think differently. Yes, some objects may be better served by travelling the world – but only if Africa has equal custodianship, not symbolic inclusion.

In closing

Dear Director, we acknowledge the gesture. We will accept the artefact. We will issue a press release with the expected adjectives: historic, healing, hopeful.

Please continue the returns. Let the bronzes, masks, and ancestral pieces come home. But also help us rebuild the systems that once honoured them.

Restitution is not a crate. It is a commitment – one that must be mutual, ongoing, and accountable. Africa must not only receive what was taken, but also rise to the responsibility of safeguarding it.

Let this be the beginning of something greater: not just the return of objects, but the restoration of memory, meaning, and capacity.

Until then, we remain caught in the theatre of restitution – moving, symbolic, but not yet complete.

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