



+27 21 202 4071



info@ijr.org.za



www.ijr.org.za

Stay updated and follow us on social media



THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

30 March 2026 Column

By Tamuka Chekero (PhD)

Image Credits: GCIS

BEYOND REBURIAL: ADVANCING REPARATIVE JUSTICE FOR KHOI AND SAN COMMUNITIES

On 25 March 2026, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the enslavement of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade as the gravest crime against humanity. This decision brings hope for healing and justice, as it begins to clearly name the harm. This moment connects to what is happening in South Africa with the reburial of 63 Khoi and San ancestors. Both events deal with past wrongs that were long ignored. The reburial is moving because it restores a dignity that was taken away, but it is also troubling because it shows how deep the harm of colonialism still is. In the same way that the slave trade is now being recognised, the return of these ancestors asks us to face the past with honesty. This brings us back to one question: is this enough, or is it only a small step towards real justice?

REBURIAL IS NOT JUST ABOUT PLACING BODIES IN THE GROUND. IT IS ABOUT RECOGNISING THAT THESE WERE PEOPLE WITH FAMILIES, HISTORIES AND DIGNITY

Restoring Dignity through Reburial

The return of the remains matters. For many years, the bodies of the Khoi and San people were treated as objects. They were taken from graves without consent.



They were moved across continents. They were studied in ways that ignored their humanity. In this sense, reburial is not just about placing bodies in the ground. It is about recognising that these were people with families, histories and dignity. The ceremony, with prayers and traditional practices, begins to repair a moral wrong. This connects with how Leslie Marmon Silko writes about ceremony as a way to heal moral and inner wounds in her 1977 novel, Ceremony. It allows communities to mourn properly. It allows the dead to rest at home.

The Limits of Symbolic Justice

At the same time, this act feels small when placed against the scale of the injustice. The remains of 63 people have been returned, yet thousands were taken. Many are still held in museums and institutions worldwide. This raises an important point. Reburial, while important, is only one part of reparative justice. It deals with the past symbolically, but it does not fully address the systems that enabled such harm.

Reparative justice must go further. It must include the return of all human remains and cultural objects taken from Africa during colonial times. It must also include a clear acknowledgement of wrongdoing, meaning that institutions and governments must openly admit the harm they caused.

This is seen in current debates on reparative justice for France's colonial actions in Africa, where the African Union has declared 2025–2036 the “Decade of Reparations” and placed this issue at the centre of its 2025 agenda. While France has taken some steps, such as returning cultural objects and acknowledging certain harms, it has largely resisted formal financial reparations. It has not issued a full apology for its colonial past. Without this, acts like reburial risk become quiet gestures rather than meaningful change.

There is also a need to think about material repair. The Khoi and San communities continue to face inequality, land loss, and limited recognition. Returning remains does not restore land. It does not fix poverty. It does not fully repair cultural loss. If justice is to be real, it must improve the living conditions of these communities. This could include land restitution, better access to education, and support for language and cultural revival.

Another concern is the question of voice and participation. Some residents expressed frustration with how the reburial process was handled. They felt excluded from decisions about their own ancestors.

This is a serious issue. Justice cannot be done for people without their involvement. It must be done with them. This resonates with the argument made by Ruth Murambadoro in her book “Transitional Justice in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe was a sensory experience”. She argues that justice in Africa must be centred on human relations and community involvement, rather than purely adversarial or Western legal frameworks. Thus, community leadership and consent should be central in all such processes. Otherwise, the same patterns of control and exclusion may continue, even in acts meant to correct past wrongs.

THE REBURIAL SHOULD BE SEEN AS A BEGINNING. IT IS A STEP TOWARDS DIGNITY, BUT ALSO A CALL FOR DEEPER ACTION. IT ASKS SOUTH AFRICA AND THE WORLD TO MOVE BEYOND APOLOGY AND TOWARDS TRUE REPAIR.

Towards Deeper and Inclusive Repair

The timing of the reburial during Human Rights Month gives it added meaning. It links the past to the present. It suggests that human rights are not only about laws and policies, but also about memory and respect.

However, it also highlights a gap.

South Africa has strong human rights language, yet many communities still feel marginalised. This shows that symbolic acts must be matched by real change on the ground.

There are signs of progress. The recognition of Khoi-San names in official documents is one such step. It shows an effort to include and respect identity. Yet, like reburial, this is only part of a larger process. True recognition must be deeper. It must be seen in everyday life, in schools, in public spaces, and in national narratives.

In the end, the reburial of these ancestors still poses the same question: is it too small, and is it enough? It is a necessary act, but not a complete one. It opens a door rather than closing a chapter. It reminds us that justice is not a single event, but a long process that requires honesty, care, and commitment.

What follows?

What matters now is what follows. If more remains are returned, if communities are fully involved, and if material conditions improve, then this moment will have real meaning. If not, it risks becoming a symbolic gesture that soothes the past without changing the present.

Thus, the reburial should be seen as a beginning. It is a step towards dignity, but also a call for deeper action. It asks South Africa and the world to move beyond apology and towards true repair.

- **Tamuka Chekero** is an anthropologist and researcher whose work focuses African migration through African epistemologies, ontologies of care, and relationality. He investigates how social ties, community practices, and digital networks influence migrant decision-making. His work connects lived experiences and policy, showing how structural factors and transnational governance interact with migrants' strategies and hopes.

PREVIOUS ISSUES



THE OTHER STORY BURIED IN THE HEADLINES: HEALTH FUNDING OR DATA EXTRACTION?



PAN-AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE EMERGING GLOBAL ORDER



WHAT SOUTH AFRICANS REALLY THINK OF THEIR MUNICIPALITIES: INSIDE THE SIVIO INSTITUTE SURVEY