

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Looted artifacts and museums' perpetuation of imperialism and racism: Implications for the importance of preserving cultural heritage

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Abstract

In the midst of recent protests and antiracism movements following the death of George Floyd in May of 2020 and other Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) murdered in the United States by police violence, protestors and advocates around the world recognized the need for Western governments and other institutions to reckon with their own imperial history—to acknowledge the linkage between the slave trade, colonialism, and racism in their countries. This recognition led to the tearing down of statues depicting racist colonial leaders and calling for museums who have perpetuated imperialism and racism through their acceptance and display of looted artifacts to return them. This article sought to answer the question posed in the call for papers, can the many manifestations of racism be effectively dealt with in our society if the status quo is unwilling to engage with the issues, address them, and relinquish power. Further the author argues that cultural looting has its roots in colonialism and racism and discusses implications of the linkage between one's stolen cultural heritage and individual and community well-being. Answers to the question include both yes, manifestations of racism can be addressed, and no, they cannot be addressed when institutions and governments refuse to engage, address the issue and do not relinquish power. The article also includes the author's thoughts on using a living heritage approach to preserve cultural heritage and offers suggestions that community psychologists, advocates and activists can help to decolonize museums as part of the broader social and racial justice movement.

KEYWORDS

Benin Bronzes, British Museum, museum imperialism, repatriation, stolen artifacts

Highlights

- Preserving cultural heritage is important for identity
- Museums should be held accountable for stolen artifacts
- Stolen artifacts of any type should be repatriated

INTRODUCTION

Restitution is not subtraction. It is refusing any longer to defend the indefensible. The continued display of Benin loot is a continued violence.... Returning the Bronzes will not heal the wounds inflicted in their taking. But it will take the knife out.—Dan Hicks

The murder of George Floyd in the United States in May of 2020 resulted in historic antiracism protests

around the world including the United Kingdom (UK). In addition to peaceful protests, vandalism and looting occurred in many regions and were publicly condemned by politicians and other entities on the global front. Media coverage of vandalism took priority over looting, but advocates calling for the return of looted artifacts taken from continental Africa during the colonial era used the moment to pressure Western museums to make restitution since looting had been denounced. One UK

protestor carried a sign that read, “Don't like looting? You will hate the British Museum” (Hickley, 2020, para 2)! Further the Art Museum reported that five protestors were arrested in Paris for attempting to seize artifacts at the famed Musée du Quai Branly because they were taken during colonialism. George Abungu, an archeologist and former director of the National Museums of Kenya argued that museums should have long ago dealt with their part in accepting and displaying looted artifacts because colonial-era looting and racism are intricately connected, and that repatriation, is now in order (Hickley, 2020).

Today, protestors and advocates around the world are still calling for Western governments and other institutions to reckon with their imperial history—to acknowledge the linkage between the slave trade, colonialism, and racism in their countries. Museum institutions such as the British Museum who has been historically praised for their expansive collections are being put to task for displaying stolen colonial artifacts. Yet, some governments and the British Museum are not willing to address their past and return stolen artifacts to their rightful owners. Identifying itself as a “universal museum,” the British Museum maintains that it is a global institution with the right to exhibit artifacts from diverse cultures (Duthie, 2011, p. 12). Duthie argued that the museum remains a trope of empire: that it is still an imperialist institution resistant to attempts to dismantle a dominant British culture of the past (p. 12).

In addition to propagating imperialism, the British Museum's refusal to return the stolen artifacts also speaks to the perpetuation of the legacy of racism as well. Jackson (2009), put forward there are explicit connections between colonialism, particularly formal colonialism, and racism. Formal colonialism flourishes on theft of resources and labor exploitation of those who have been conquered such as the colonization of Africa and Asia by Europeans. This type of colonialism included territorial expansion and the conquest and near-destruction of Indigenous Peoples. An additional model of colonialism is internal colonialism which depends on the creation of race and maintenance of racial hierarchy, such that “to the extent that racism exists in the United States, colonialism is also present” (p. 162). Internal colonialism is conceptualized as the uneven effects of economic development on a regional basis as the result of marginalizing Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) within a wider society, leading to political and economic inequalities between regions with a state (Howe, 2002). Notably, internal colonialism within our wider society has the same goals as formal colonialism, the maintenance of wealth, power, and domination for the colonizers (Bonilla-Silva, 1994). Sarah Olutola (2020) added that the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others made clear that the problem of police violence is rooted in anti-Black racism, and importantly, Olutola

agreed that police violence in Black communities has its roots in the history of colonization.

This article then, seeks to answer the question posed in the call for papers, can the manifestations of racism be effectively addressed in our society if the status quo is unwilling to engage with the issues, address them, and relinquish power? To answer the questions, this article initially discusses the manifestation of colonial state racism and then illustrates that in the case of museums accepting and displaying looted artifacts, museums such as the Horniman Museum in south London who are opting to return stolen goods are engaging with the issues of modern-day racism, addressing them and thereby relinquishing power. However, the British Museum, who has some 900 stolen artifacts from Benin City, now Nigeria in its collection, refuses to address this issue, arguing that they are prevented from returning them by order of the British Museum Act of 1963 and the Heritage Act of 1983 (Sherwood, 2022, para. 8). As a supporting discussion speaking to the implications of racism on the health and well-being of historical and contemporary BIPOC communities, this manuscript also offers an argument that the linkage between stolen artifacts and lost cultural heritage negatively impacts one's cultural identity and a sense of belonging and community—and rather than addressing imperialism and racism, instead, continues its legacy. The last section offers thoughts on roles community psychologists might play in helping to decolonize museums and help advance restitution. Equally important, the article also makes a demand to the British Museum to repatriate any and all stolen artifacts, specifically the Benin Bronzes, to the Benin people. Every nation has a right to preserve and care for its own cultural heritage, tangible, and intangible.

Benin, Benin bronzes, and other stolen African artifacts

Historical accounts report the Benin Kingdom was “one of the oldest and most developed states in the coastal hinterland of West Africa. It was formed around the 11th century and lasted until it was annexed by the British Empire in 1897, at the same time they stole the Benin Bronzes” (Strayer, 2013, pp. 695–696). The Benin Bronzes are sculpted brass and bronze artifacts which include elaborately decorated cast plaques, commemorative heads, animals, human figures, items of royal regalia, and personal ornaments. These pieces were commissioned for the ancestral altars of past Obas (African leaders) and Queen Mothers and used in other rituals to honor African ancestors and validate the succession of a new Oba. Some of the pieces are more well-known such as the brass plaques which once recorded the Benin royal palace and provided important historical records of the Kingdom of Benin.

Today the great Benin City is lost to history, destroyed by British soldiers—looted, blown up and burnt to the ground. It is easy to parallel this chronicle to that of the *Tulsa Massacre* in Tulsa, Oklahoma and *Rosewood* in Florida—the hegemonic mind of the colonizer flowing into America once Africans were enslaved here and were able to build cities and communities for themselves. While a modern Benin City sits amidst the ruins of the former Benin, the preservation of this historical city is nowhere to be found. Current tourists to Nigeria are often shown places that might have been part of the ancient kingdom, but the walls that were erected and reported to be longer than the Great Wall of China in Benin City are nowhere to be seen. The inherent talent it takes to have developed such an advanced artistic culture as the Benin people is remarkable—and was not beyond the ears of the British and Portuguese to exploit when they learned of its splendor. Benin City was termed, “one of the most beautiful and planned cities in the world” (Koutonin, 2016, para. 6). Sadly, reports conclude to get a better idea of this great city, it's best to visit the British Museum in central London (para 28).

Importantly, the Benin Bronzes are not the only artifacts to be stolen from Africa. The 3 ft 6 in high Rosetta Stone, also displayed in the British Museum is originally from Egypt and features the text of an edict written by priests in 196BC, during the reign of Pharaoh Ptolemy V. Records are unsure how the stone was discovered in July 1799, but some report it was found by soldiers fighting with the French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte. When Bonaparte lost the war, the British took the stone under what was said to be the treaty of Alexandria in 1801 (Obayiuwana, 2010).

Art historians also report that that a wooden carving of the Bangwa Queen from Cameroon was stolen as well. The carving is said to represent the power and health of Bangwa people and is one of the world's most famous pieces of art that also has immense sacred significance for the Cameroonians. It is concluded that the Bangwa Queen was looted by the German colonial Gustav Conrau around 1899 before the territory was colonized. It was displayed for a time in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin and later purchased by an art collector in 1926. Subsequently, the Musée Dapper in Paris displayed the artifact until 2017. Traditional leaders of the Bangwa people have been corresponding with the foundation, requesting its return to Cameroon. (Obayiuwana, 2010). Obayiuwana further reported that other stolen artifacts include The Maqdala pieces comprising an 18th century golden crown and a royal wedding dress which were pilfered from Ethiopia by the British army in 1868. The British raided Maqdala in protest at the detention of its consul when relations between the two powers deteriorated.

The artifacts mentioned in this manuscript are but a small fraction of the recorded list of stolen pieces and

their locations today. Other museums reported to house stolen artifacts include the Field Museum of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Neues Museum in Berlin, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. In recent discourse, debates have ensued around cultural restitution, repatriation, and the decolonization of museums. To this end, Hicks, African leaders, activists, and other advocates make a compelling case for the immediate return of such artifacts to Benin and other African nations as part of a broader global movement addressing the outstanding debt of colonization (Hicks, 2020). This author, without equivocation, concurs.

Colonial state racism

For over 500 years, Europeans have sought to conquer and colonize the world, pushing forward an agenda that supported racial superiority. This belief had its roots in the Doctrine of Discovery, a noted racist theory asserting that if Europeans went anywhere in the world inhabited by non-Whites and non-Christians, they had “discovered” it and had the right to claim that territory (Claxton et al., 2021, p. 1).

Robert Stam and Louis Spence offered that racism has historically been both an ally and a product of the colonization process (p. 4). Sabado-Liwag et al. (2022) (para 4) posits that colonialism is a racial formation (a process by which the sociohistorical designations of race and class are defined). Subsequently, historical and modern-day racialization of BIPOC people continues and can be viewed as a colonial process. While colonialism has been understood as one nation establishing economic and political control over another the legacy of colonialism extends to the current time. Present day racism practices, institutionally, individually and culturally in the United States mimic formal colonialism that shaped the history of Africans for centuries (Olutola, 2020).

Europeans justified colonization by touting it as a civilizing mission. This colonial state then could set apart the colonizer from the colonized and race became the defining concept that marked the difference between groups. The production of Blackness as a racial and ideological category flourished when public display of Black people in Europe became the norm because physical attributes were different which led to people in the United States traveling to see Indigenous Africans, and Indigenous peoples from tribes around the world in exhibitions referred to as “Negro Villages.” These exhibitions flourished, as did the concept and ideology about race. Moreover, oppressive thoughts regarding Blackness were advanced through European colonial violence and was spread widely through science and culture to influence public conversation (Sabado-Liwag et al., 2022). By the time

the dust settled from colonial violence, racism was entrenched, and public and private institutions had come to reflect the norms of whiteness and racism has remained widespread (Claxton et al., 2021).

The British museum, imperialism and power

Established in 1753, the British Museum rose from one of the first national and public museums in the world to the beginning of a legacy of imperialism. The museum began with the donated works of Hans Sloane, an Irish physician and avid collector. Sloane started his collection in 1687 when he traveled to Jamaica to serve as a physician to the governor of the colony. He returned to Britain with 800 plant and animal specimens, which would become the foundation of his encyclopedias on natural history. When he returned he built up his collection by absorbing the collections of his colleagues as well as buying items from travelers and explorers throughout the British Empire (Duthie, 2011). At one point, Duthie shares, Sloane's collections were vast and space in his home was limited. Sloane bequeathed his collections to King George II in exchange for 20,000 pounds for his son and on the condition that the government would create a museum to house his collection. Thus, Sloane's collection of assorted colonial items became the foundation of what would eventually become the British Museum.

In the 19th century the British Museum was known to the world as symbolic of an empire, and the representation it offered was immensely instilled with the culture of British imperialism. Barringer and Flynn (1998) concluded in their book *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, the British Museum was an “imperial archive” and the most spectacular repository of the material culture of empire (p. 27). Barringer and Flynn also noted that the meaning of an object is inflected and even re-invented by the context in which it is displayed. Thus, the removal of some objects by the British Museum from a “colonial periphery” to an “imperial centre” changed the ways in which they were interpreted. This action symbolically positioned London as the heart of the empire. Overall, museum building in the 19th century was related to war, colonialism, and missionary expeditions. On these jaunts, British soldiers returned with all sorts of artifacts to display along with the hope that these exploits and the empire would be lasting achievements (p. 12).

Dan Hicks (2020) put forward a searing account of the spoils of the British Empire found within the British Museum in his prolific work *The British Museums, The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. Hicks captures the coldness and callousness of the act of pillaging precious artifacts from the country of Nigeria, Africa in 1897, namely the *Benin Bronzes* by the British navy. This bounty was passed on to Queen

Victoria, the British Museum and to a myriad of other museums and private collections. This article focuses primarily on the British Museum's acceptance and display of these stolen artifacts for the sake of brevity while not exonerating Queen Victoria. More in depth information is available on the royal family's involvement (Garabedian, 2021).

Highlighting that these stolen goods are now sitting behind plate glass, dignified, and tastefully lit, British Museum leaders argue that the pieces should be in their museum for sharing with the world. Yet, at the same time, the Benin people are crying out for their return such that the artifacts mean so much more than a physical object for display. Each item has ontological value—a sacredness, a *cultural heritage* that cannot simply be found in a physical object. Enotie Ogbekor, an artist from Benin City explained:

the Benin Bronzes are narratives...they form part of the bedrock of the identity, culture and history of Benin—the city in Nigeria that was once part of the Kingdom of Benin, not the modern nation of Benin. They were made to tell stories, to keep memories and to hand over all these stories and memories from one generation to another. (as cited in McClean & Marshall, 2021, para. 5–6)

Ogbekor further asserted:

the looting of the Benin artifacts was the “equivalent of taking the works from the Renaissance in Europe all the way to the modernist. Imagine if Bach, Handel, Shakespeare, Mozart and all arts and culture from the Renaissance was taken away for the last 130 years from Europe. That's what was done to us. Do you think Europe would be where it is today? (para 17)

Importantly, like most stories that revolve around colonialism there are typically two sides: the truth of what happened and narratives that mythologize the past. The events of 1897 regarding the stolen Bronzes are no exception. Called the *Punitive Expedition*, this version of the story portrays the Benin people as having murdered British officers for no reason who had come to Benin to meet the Oba (leader). To *avenge their deaths* the British sent back 1500 men, some armed with early models of machine guns, murdering the Benin people in retaliation and taking the artifacts. The other narrative as told by historians and contemporary Nigerians reports the incidence as the *British Massacre* where the British were looking for a reason to attack Benin because the Oba had too much power and the soldiers were aware that Benin also had a plethora of riches. Most of these riches were stolen (Obayiuwana, 2010).

While the British Museum and other cultural institutions have benefitted for centuries displaying stolen artifacts as forage to build an empire and profiting off the legacy of colonialism and racism, the loss of these artifacts to the people of the countries where they were stolen indicates not only a loss of tangible pieces, but a loss of cultural heritage as well.

The influence of culture on identity

Idang (2015) wrote that the culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity (p. 97). Culture, as it is usually understood in cultural studies, points to the traits and characteristics that are inherent to a people. These traits and elements include the people's language, dress, music, work, arts, religion, dancing, social norms, taboos, and values (p. 98). Culture is passed on from generation to generation and is intertwined in the socialization process and is linked to one's identity. Fafunwa (1974) shares that,

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of their people. They imbibe it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. Children watch the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage rituals, funeral obsequies. They witness the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or their relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape their cultural and physical environments... (p. 48)

Antia (2005, p. 17) added that “culture is not fixed and permanent. It is always changed and modified by man through contacts with and absorption of other peoples' cultures, a process known as assimilation.” Wahab et al. (2012) also pointed out:

...for example, in sub-Saharan Africa people and culture are inseparable since there is no denial of the fact that what makes any human society is its *culture*; a Latin word which was derived from “*colore*” meaning to practice or cherish. For a society to be societal it must be cultural; therefore, society and culture are also intertwined. (p. 1)

Identity and culture are inherently linked. Identity is a complex concept, shaped and influenced by many factors including culture, individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social political

contexts (Tatum, 2000). Notably identity is also heavily influenced by who the *world says one is*. Messages are reflected back to a person by the faces and voices of influencers, including early colonialists. Questions are ongoing in one's life such as who am I or how am I represented in the cultural images around me? Am I missing from the picture all together? To this end, Africa, and its people, as valuable assets in the world were missing from early textbooks and teaching among public schools. When Africa was mentioned it was taught to students including this author, an African American woman with African ancestors, as the “dark continent”—dark as in “uncivilized.” This teaching was core to an identity imposed on me and other African descendants. On the other side, British colonists identified themselves as “civilized” sealing this comparison throughout history between dark and light, namely the color of skin. Thus, for decades, this myth became one of the mirrors that African Americans saw themselves through. It was not until the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s that I and other African Americans recognized the stories we learned about Africa and its people, were simply fables. The fallacy of who is civilized and who is not, is simply the product of the hegemonic mindset of British colonists setting up the social construct of white superiority and must continue to be disrupted.

Mirror image or *looking glass-self* is the theory of sociologist Charles H. Cooley (1902) who described how we think others perceive us as a mirror for how we perceive ourselves. George Mead (1934) a fellow sociologist of Cooley built on the theory, noting that what matters for self-concepts is not how we think others see us but the way we *imagine* they see us (p. 30). With regard to identify formation, W.E.B. DuBois (2003) in *The Soul of Black Folk* discusses the same mirror image phenomenon not as the looking glass theory, but *double consciousness*. DuBois put forward. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 9). This lens is particularly important with respect to healthy identify formation.

Erikson (1968) coined the struggle with forming one's identity as having an *identity crisis* and proposed that the social, culture, and historical context appropriated to a person is the foundation in which individual identity is entrenched. Erikson elaborated, “the identify formation process is...for the most part unconscious expects where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, “*identity consciousness*...” (p. 7). Identify formation is then, a lifelong process that includes the discovery of the new; recovery of the old, forgotten, or appropriated; and synthesis of the new and old (p. 11). The return of the Benin artifacts may forge a pathway for reclaiming healthier identify formation—for

modern day Benin people and for future generations of people from the African diaspora.

Cultural heritage and implications of loss

Heritage itself is not a thing and does not exist by itself—nor does it imply a movement or a project. Rather, heritage is about the process by which people use the past—a “discursive construction” with material consequences (Smith, 2006, pp. 11–13). As a human condition therefore, it is omnipresent, interwoven within the power dynamics of any society and intimately bound up with identity construction at both communal and personal levels (Harvey, 2008, p. 18).

Aligning with this concept of heritage, Brumann (2015) shared that *cultural heritage* includes the sites, things, and practices a society considers worthy of conversation. Silverman and Ruggles (2007) offer that cultural heritage is a concept to which most people would assign a positive value. The preservation of material culture—objects of art and of daily use, architecture, landscape form—and intangible culture—performances of dance, music, theater, and ritual, as well as language and human memory—are regarded as a shared common good by which everyone benefits. Both personal and community identities are formed through such tangible objects and intangible cultural performances, and a formation of a strong identity is considered a fundamentally good thing. (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007).

The elimination of culture and destruction of cultural heritage has always been seen as powerful tools of domination and key for dismissing the values and norms people live by. Destroying culture and culture heritage, no matter whether it occurs by war or looting has been defined by UNESCO as a form of “cultural cleansing.” Murdering people is an oppressors way of attempting to erase the existence of individuals and groups of people such as George Floyd, Ahmad Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., millions of Jewish people, millions of Africans, and millions of Indigenous People, respectively. In this way, the memory and identify of entire nations of people are hopefully erased, such that, this destruction is often a precursor to genocide.

Cultural heritage and local communities' well-being

Societies have long fought diligently to protect and preserve its cultural heritage for educational purposes, historical research and the longing to reinforce a sense of identity particularly in times of war and conflict. Further, more local communities need to have a sense of ownership of their heritage; this reaffirms their worth as a community, their ways of going about things, and

their culture (Campfens, 2020). This lens at the community level speaks to the well-being of communities when they are strong in knowing and able to articulate their cultural heritage—this tradition is passed down through generations building strong families and communities.

Researchers (Chatterjee & Noble, 2013; Dasgupta, 2001; Power & Smyth, 2016; Watson & Waterton, 2010) concur that known cultural heritage can have a positive effect on individual and community well-being. Well-being can be viewed as a sense of being content, comfortable and happy, typically associated with physical, mental and emotional health, along with a standard of living that provides the resources to sustain health and wellness, depending on the culture. Taçon and Baker (2019) offered that all heritage is an important part of contemporary culture, and threats and losses can diminish well-being. For example, protecting heritage has improved the health of Aboriginal Australians, and preservation of rock art has fostered well-being among Indigenous People. Importantly, Fujiwara et al. (2014) concluded that visiting heritage sites has a greater impact on well-being than attendance at sporting events. Monckton and Reilly (2019, p. 14) added that other ways that heritage interacts with the well-being of individuals and communities include:

- Combining physical activity with outdoors and cultural heritage
- Forming new relationships with the past that can create new perspectives for healing historical trauma
- Creating long-lasting benefits through increased self-awareness and social networks; and
- Developing a wider collective sense of community, belonging, and equality of inclusion through place-based initiatives

Further, when communities have access to and can engage with cultural heritage, a sense of community identity and well-being is heightened. When access and engagement is linked to community attachments to place, feelings of civic pride and belonging can be fortified (p. 1303).

A living-heritage approach: Call to action

UNESCO is the leading organization engaged in shaping attitudes to, forming statements of principle about, and engaging with its member states in, projects aimed at protecting *all* forms of cultural heritage and cultural diversity. Since 2003, UNESCO has offered the viewpoint that cultural heritage protection does not depend alone on top-down interventions by governments or the expert actions of heritage industry professionals but must involve local communities. It has become clear that it is important that the values and practices of local

communities, in co-creation with other management systems are fully understood, respected, encouraged and accommodated in all management plans regarding heritage and heritage resources. Yet, efforts to preserve and sustain cultural heritage are no easy tasks. International laws often prohibit the return of artifacts such as the Benin Bronzes, or at minimum, stymie the process. Local cultural heritage institutions and Indigenous community heritage programs face funding shortages, tourism challenges include costs for preservation and development, and in the case of music as cultural heritage social media users often delete songs (Baker & Collins, 2017).

To move these efforts forward, a *living heritage approach* has surfaced as a framework useful for decolonizing museums and attempts to get stolen artifacts returned (Taçon & Baker, 2019). This approach can lead to radically reconceptualizing the existing concept of heritage and the principles of heritage conservation by challenging strong assumptions established over time, which were developed along with a material-based approach and maintained by a values-based approach. Contrarily, a living heritage approach calls for (1) that the power in the conservation process is no longer the sole responsibility of conservation professionals but passes on to the communities; (2) the focus is no longer solely focused on preserving tangible material such as the Benin Bronzes, but is also focused on the maintenance of the intangible connection of communities with heritage; and (3) heritage will no longer be considered a monument of the past that has to be protected from the present community, for the sake of future generations (seemingly the British Museum's position). Heritage must be viewed now and protected as an inseparable part of the life of the present community. Thus, past, present, and future are not separated (discontinuity), but unified into an ongoing present (continuity) Therefore, a living heritage approach attempts to:

...mark the shift in heritage conservation from monuments to people, from the tangible fabric to intangible connections with heritage, and from discontinuity to continuity. This is a challenge to shift from the longstanding Euro-American derived approach to heritage, which focuses on objects, monuments and the built environment as in the World Heritage concept, to a focus on living peoples living in and interacting with heritage as a meaningful part of the rest of their lives. (Taçon & Baker, 2019, p. 13)

Bumbray et al. (2020) articulated the following perspective which align with the living heritage approach.

For people who have long been denied justice, the return of African cultural heritage is more than a symbolic gesture. Restitution—the process through which objects stolen by colonial powers can be returned to their communities of origin—is not about being preoccupied with the wrongs of the past, it is an action to right the future. (para 1)

Situations such as the capitalist and colonial investment of retaining stolen artifacts, as is the British Museum's position make a living heritage approach one of the best ways for moving forward for African people while they fight for reclaiming their cultural heritage, namely the Benin Bronzes.

Considering living cultural heritage as an inseparable part of the life of the present community as discussed, this position opens the door for community psychologists who can get involved in decolonizing museums.

A community psychologist might step into this process and come alongside of those working to decolonize museums by:

- Starting or re-energizing research programs and helping to establish plans for restitution and/or repatriation of tangible artifacts
- Providing letters and other position papers for museums to review to influence restitution and/or repatriation of tangible artifacts
- Working with museum leaders to cocreate strategic plans for decolonizing respective spaces
- Volunteering at spaces which invite museum goers to question the attribution of objects and images
- Teaching and including the history of museum imperialism in community psychology courses and curriculums that discuss power dynamics
- Working alongside of museum leaders to offer public materials that clearly state the ways in which the institution benefitted from a racist and colonial past; and
- Calling for changes within the legal structures that propose artifacts originally taken without consent and held anywhere be returned to their countries of origin

The decolonization of museums should be added to the long lists of areas community psychologists, abolitionists, and activists are engaged in. With such a proximal relationship to racism and imperialism, it is important that museums be held accountable for stolen artifacts on continued display.

As community psychologists participating in decolonizing work in all types of spaces including museums, we can and should hold entities accountable in ways appropriate for each situation. Engagement within museums can help illustrate community and cultural

resiliency, while raising awareness of the ways in which museums and galleries typically focus on the history of colonialism from the colonizers' gaze. "Decolonization work in museums is the same as other entities; It is turning our gaze on the origins of suffering to uproot them" (Marya & Patel, 2021, p. 441). Through this work, museums can position themselves to be learning institutions that portray truth and accurate history, providing space where all can learn from history, reflect on that history in the present while positioning themselves to change the future for so many. The past cannot be changed but returning stolen items can help restore power to the African diasporic people for constructing a future free from the legacy of colonialism and anti-Blackness. Although restitution is only one part of achieving reparations for crimes against all Black people, it can open the door to possibility for communities robbed of their heritage—for dignity, for agency, for identity, for equality, and for justice (Bumbray et al., 2020, para 15–16).

CONCLUSION

Having argued that violently taking artifacts from Africa was a manifestation of colonial-state racism, imperialism and power, and the unwillingness of some entities such as the British Museum to return the artifacts, the answer is no, manifestations of racism nor imperialism cannot be effectively dealt with without relinquishing power. The British Museum and others must give up power that speaks to colonialism ideologies such as Western museums can take better care of these artifacts than the originators—or stand by determinations that the significance of a return won't be impactful to the respective community.

Returning the Benin Bronzes is a critical step in restoring cultural heritage to the Benin people while simultaneously dismantling imperialism and racism. Heritage contributes to both individual and community collective memory, a sense of community and belonging, cultural identity, and social cohesion—all elements interconnected with mental health and well-being.

There is a growing recognition that the conservation of cultural heritage is not simply about preserving material things such as the Benin Bronzes, but it can be viewed as safeguarding and sharing heritage for the betterment of people's lives along with our environment. Well-being is no longer relegated to measuring by economic standards but takes into consideration the fundamental rights of people—the respect and honoring of human dignity. When museums ignore such practices as the looting of artifacts it often forces them to create displays with false narratives, thereby contributing to power and domination ideologies that erase cultures.

The connection between cultural heritage, whether tangible or intangible and the formation of one's true

identity cannot be understated. While the Benin Bronzes may be looked at by the British Museum and others as simply art to be enjoyed, to the Benin people they have personal, historical and cultural importance. Further, it is up to the Benin descendants to decide how they wish to preserve their history and culture represented through the Benin Bronzes, and whether they want them returned. Therefore, whether it is in repatriation of stolen artifacts, reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans in America, restitution should be at the immediate forefront of museums and all other institutions, where applicable, as a gesture toward worldwide social, racial and restorative justice, and the dismantling of the lasting legacy of imperialism.

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