

5th Biennial Conference of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA)

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The 5th ASAA Biennial Conference

From October 24 to 28, 2023, the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) met in Lubumbashi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, to celebrate its 10th anniversary. During this 5th Biennial conference organized around the theme of “Repatriating Africa: Ancient challenges, critical insights,” scholars, activists, and policymakers were encouraged to shift their *epistemological vantage*, widen the scope of reflection on African matters, and develop a new thinking about cultural *justice* in the long history of Western colonial plunder of both tangible and intangible valuables from Africa. The conference’s main theme was then articulated around four axes that included restoration, reparation, repatriation, and restitution.

The ASAA was founded in 2013 at University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana where it is hosted by the Institute of African Studies (IAS). As professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo, one of the founding members, contends:

“[This move] was the response of African scholars and activists on the African continent to have a space... where we could determine an agenda for the study of Africa; where we could share our diverse knowledge especially with younger generation...; where we could discuss our professional wellbeing as practitioners; and where we could advocate for each other”.

How to cite this paper:
Kafarhire, T. M. (2024). 5th Biennial Conference of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA).
Global Africa, (5), pp. 286-292.

<https://doi.org/10.57832/m82x-v749>

Received: January 15, 2024

Accepted: February 09, 2024

Published: March 20, 2024

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To keep the promise to gradually cover the entire continent, the Association convenes a Pan-African conference every two years, in a different country, to debate important issues emerging on the continent. The 2023 conference took place in a French-speaking country for the first time since the founding of the Association. It was a unique moment in building bridges within the continent and across its diaspora, to heal inherited wounds created by the colonial experience. Scholars arrived from all over the world¹ to share ideas, produce new knowledge, disseminate their research findings, or simply to create a space where they could share their experiences. Lubumbashi, therefore, became the epitome of the reconciliation between colonial past and neocolonial present, allowing us to learn from each other, and expose the socioeconomic consequences of unassumed critical posture. There could be no better opportunity for us to consolidate awareness about our history and find home-made solutions than the momentum ASAA created in Lubumbashi.

In the margins of its 5th biannual Conference, Lubumbashi also held one of the three sessions of the 6th edition of the International Congress of African and African Diaspora Studies (ICAADS) to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the African Union. Africanist scholars who felt the need to resurrect the ICAADS wanted to mark this milestone in the history of Africa, but also to remember the 50th anniversary of its third convening in Addis Ababa, thus giving a new impetus to the extraordinary dynamic of worldwide transformation in African studies, which began in Ghana, in 1962, with the first International Congress of African Studies. The first one of these series of international congresses took place in Accra while the subsequent gatherings were held respectively in Dakar (1967), Addis Ababa (1973), Kinshasa (1978), and in Ibadan (1985). Given that no further meetings took place after Ibadan, our intention was to gather different African studies associations with the diaspora and walk the talk of unity, holding high the spirit of Pan-Africanism.

Unpacking the Restitution Concept: Between Meaning and Experience

The ASAA 2023 conference had set out to address a number of questions in line with its mission of making knowledge production on the continent relevant to policymaking and social transformation. Thus, for four days, participants tried to identify inherent obstacles to the reparation, restoration, repatriation, and restitution of the African cultural heritages despoiled by the colonial West. Unless these important African spiritual assets are returned, the cultural socle of development will remain shaky. Thus, it is imperative to ask oneself these important question: What are the necessary conditions for a fair and right restitution of Africa's cultural heritage? What would it take to sensitize stakeholders on the positive impacts of restitution? During their four days stay in Lubumbashi, the scholars that attended the conference pondered over these four axes: reparation, restoration, repatriation, and restitution. Thanks to their unique African perspective, they came up with fresh insights, generating thus new knowledge and questioning the arguments against restitution –most of which are rooted in a Eurocentric vantage.

By revisiting colonial policies and legacies of plunder, their ideological underpinnings, the conference also proposed an academic sovereignty and a reappropriation of the interpretation of our daily experiences, historical and present-day perspectives. As a result, the conference not

1 More than 200 participants came from various universities in Africa and beyond to participate in the Conference. Others who could not make it physically attended online. The universities that took part in the 2023 conference were: the University of Cape Town, University of Ghana, Université Gaston Berger, Université nouveaux Horizons, Université de Lubumbashi, Université de Kinshasa, James Madison University, Delaware University, Oxford University, University of Bucharest, University of Johannesburg, l'Université de Yaoundé, University of West Cap, l'Université de Lomé, Egerton University, l'Université de Dschang, Loyola University Chicago, l'Université Méthodiste d'Angola, Stellenbosch University, Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University, University of Toledo, l'Université officielle de Mbujimayi, Deakin University, l'Université Catholique de Louvain, University of California Irvine, Kanyatta University, USIU-Africa, l'Université de Dalhousie, l'Université Nzuzu, Leeds University, Makerere University, Howard University, UC Santa Barbara, Northumbria University, York University, University of Texas at Dallas, Rhodes University, University of Glasgow, Ohio State University, to name but a few. There were also Amherst College, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Boston College, as well as the Cercle Kapsiki, the Kenyan Ministry of Fauna and heritage, other political actors, artists, civil society, and journalists.

only reassessed the consequences of Western-centric epistemic legacies but also identified these canonized perspectives as the major obstacle in the demand for restoration, reparation, repatriation, and restitution of Africa's cultural heritage held in the West.

"Repatriating Africa: Ancient challenges, critical insights," was like a rallying cry for scholars-activists and artists-activists who went to Lubumbashi with the expectation to visit Shilatembo, the site of the assassination of first Congolese elected Prime Minister, Patrice Emery Lumumba, killed on January 17, 1961. For most Africans, the assassination of Lumumba showed the hypocrisy behind the so-called independence from the colonial regimes, and the promotion of an African pro-West leadership. The restitution debate is certainly open and alive. With the new insights that were gained during the conference, we see the coming of age of a whole new generation of Africanist postcolonial scholars who are questioning the very foundation of the assumptions we take for granted. Whose Africa is to be repatriated anyway? Where from? Pedro Monaville's restoration approach, for instance, looked critically at the memory, legacy, and usability of the revolutionary students' movements against such Western trickery while wondering what needs to be restored and what should be reinvented in relation to the legacy of our colonial past.

What the metaphor of "repatriating Africa" is supposed to mean is also the widening of the scope of analysis, to escape the narrow clichés inherited from Western canonized stereotypes. The conference also raises the importance of understanding the political, economic, ethical, and moral costs – real or imagined – of undertaking such a project. Who wins? Who loses? What do they lose in implementing restitution? To say the least, ASAA 2023 conference fundamental claim sought to de-canonize the dominant view about Africa, i.e. the position defended by Western stakeholders in the debate on restitution and the knowledge rooted in colonial-ridden images of Africans, produced for Western consumption. It is simply important to agree on the principle of returning African artifacts, and bringing closer to home, all colonial archives so that African researchers can have an easy access to them. To the new generation of African scholars that attended the ASAA 2023 conference, it is also an imperative that African studies open new venues for new conversations on issues that matter to Africans. The conference was indeed the continuation of an unfinished task of trying to achieve Africa's independence, sovereignty, and self-determination, resuming *the* burning topic of *restitution* which has emerged almost every decade since independence.

Take for instance the idea that Africa is poor that is enshrined in the minds of most Westerners. This stereotype is only good to justify bad policies like foreign aid when, in reality, what is needed is justice in international trade. Aware of such West-centric operative episteme – and taking stock of other knowledge production conditioning factors – the position about repatriating Africa suggests reappropriating the discourse on Africa, and bringing back the African material and immaterial cultural heritage that constitute the locus from where Western postcolonial thinking draws epistemological legitimacy while perpetuating the symbolic colonial violence which V.Y. Mudimbe has written about so eloquently.

As Prof. Alexis Takizala, founder and rector of the University Nouveaux Horizons (UNH) that co-hosted the conference alongside the Centre Arrupe pour la Recherche et la Formation (CARF), rightly argues, "the greatest good one can rob a person of is their identity. You empty them of their personality and their soul, so to speak. Instead, you create in them an inferiority complex, making them doubt themselves. That's all one needs to dominate a people. There are several ways of doing this, not least by telling them all day long that they are worthless, that neither them nor anyone else in their family is good enough at anything. As a result, their culture is turned into a subculture, a pseudo-culture".

It is impossible for people of African descent to live a fully humanizing life without claiming justice, reparation, and restoration of their dignity. The questions debated were extremely critical, having ontological, epistemological, and ethical implications in explaining why the restitution debate is recurrent throughout Africa's postcolonial era. The idea of sequestering African artifacts in Western dungeons called museums is simply a capitalistic strategy to commodify African spirituality, culture, and patrimony. Ambassador Dorbrene E. O'Marde, from Antigua y Barbuda, vice chair of CARICOM REPARATIONS COMMISSION (CRC), made a powerful case when he argued that the West

has accepted elsewhere to make amends for past wrong deeds, when he discussed the issuance of reparation apologies and monetary payments like in the case of Japanese Americans, Eskimos, Native Americans, New Zealand's Maoris, etc.

Obviously, African scholars and those in the diaspora have come to realize that the wrongs done to Africa by colonization, let alone the slave trade, are yet to be addressed. They reclaimed in Lubumbashi the right to refine, redefine, and redesign the debate on the necessary conditions for returning Africa's tangible and intangible assets, which unless returned, still uphold the stronghold of a political control, epistemological dominance, and economic exploitation of the West. Participants in the conference believed repatriating these assets would not be enough unless accompanied by reparation (moral and material) of the damages caused by these colonial spoliations, the consequences of which are still perceptible in today's global system. By breaking the restitution question into different aspects, the conference raised awareness on the urgency of reparation, repatriation and restoration first, before focusing on the restitution of tangible and intangible assets. For most people defending Africa's interests, the equivocation of Western stakeholders who champion logistical shortage in Africa reveals the West's fear of losing an important source of power and income that would be transferred to Africa.

Some Inherent Obstacles to the Reparation, Restoration, Repatriation, and Restitution of Some of Africa's Cultural Heritage

It is not uncommon to encounter resistance in the West on the issue of the restitution of both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Africa that has been stolen before, during, and even after the colonial era. The arguments put forward to justify such a stand are not only exogenously produced and legitimized by what V.Y. Mudimbe has called the colonial library² –a body of knowledge produced for this purpose –but they are also endogenous and are thus a proxy for the expression of inferiority complex, self-hatred, and internalized subjugation as explained by Frantz Fanon. Hence, the importance of beginning with the restoration axis that focused debates and analytical attention on the stigmatization of African cultures and knowledges (Essomba Christophe), the denigration of African cultures (Abiona Lawrence), and cultural biases such as gender, linguistics, or meaning.

The relevance of the restitution question today cannot be overstated. Indeed, *external justifications of holding on to Africa's cultural heritage in Western museums, libraries, archives, and universities* on the one hand, and *local rejections of the whole idea under the pretext that conservation will pose a problem* reflect the very dialectic to which we already alluded above. I would like to believe that there are people with good faith among these two groups, but it is a naïve good faith if there is any. They belong to those who believe colonization was a blessing that benefited Africa in many regards. In reality, snatching some valuables from Africa, no matter the methods (razzias, buying, gifts, etc.) used, was part of a strategy to wean Africans from their ancestors and their beliefs, so as to thrust them into a Western *weltanschauung*. Westerners stole these valuables with the intention of stripping African people from their beliefs. As a result, the African worldview was relegated to the back, and gradually erased, taken as something bad, evil and dangerous. However, these cultural and spiritual assets were not only crafts, but they were also the loci where Africans stored their wisdom, religions and knowledges.

The spiritual naïveté of those who believe in the good intention in the colonial bad institution also helps to maintain a system that consecrates cultural disparities, global exploitation and racial injustices. They condone the West's cultural superiority complex, pushing the idea that precolonial Africa did not have anything good to offer, any form of polity, or any culture and civilization. It should be emphasized right from the onset that all human attitudes are learned, and therefore, a

² The colonial Library is made of written texts, constructed narratives, repeated representations, accumulated knowledges, canonized discourses, established attitudes, epistemic orthodoxies, and official histories of Africa that were produced for colonial consumption. See Toussaint M. Kafarhire, S.J. in Zubairu Wai, *Africa Beyond Inventions: Essays in Honour of V.Y. Mudimbe*. (forthcoming 2024).

product of socialization. Such attitudes resulted from the colonial hermeneutical position, taught in school and other colonial institutions (Christianity) and could thus be attributable to what two Western philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer respectively called “fore-structures of understanding” and the “pre-judgments of the interpreter”. The point here is to acknowledge that any intellectual position is intentionally or unintentionally biased as it stems from the historicity, adventitious condition, facticity, and positionality of its author. In the same vein, the massive body of knowledge produced under the colonial system responded to an imperative ethics of the day.

Such a Western posture of self-aggrandizement did only produce a defeating attitude of a self-deprecating Africa but also a global system that allows the West self-proclaimed moral leadership and political authority – so to speak. Speaking on behalf of another is both morally and intellectually crippling, but it is also dehumanizing. Confiscating Africa’s valuables, including the very humanity of those whose artifacts were stolen, is the highest expression of hypocrisy.

This cultural bias of the West instructed and legitimized the colonial stripping of Africa’s spiritual and cultural expressions, in its strategy of erasing memories and rewiring the minds of African people through colonizing structures (V.Y. Mudimbe). As a result, Africans gave up the very soul of their being to embrace assimilation and westernization in forms of religion, civilization, language, and other expressions of spirituality that allow to symbolically craft meaning for daily life occurrences. The subsequent codification and canonization of West-centric produced knowledge was not politically innocent nor economically unmotivated. To maintain the *status quo* of a system that benefits the West, it was important to dissuade efforts that would remove Africans from longing to abandon their practices in order to embrace those from Europe.

Yet, in 21st century, this intellectual attitude should no longer be justified in anyway. This is because this order of things is precisely one of the important sources of the problem that face not only Africa but the whole world today. The scientific arrogance of 18th century Europe has denied others the right to be different, to practice their spirituality, and not to alter the environment. As Pope Francis (2015) argues in his book *Laudato Si*, today we are not faced with multiple crises that are translated into ecological crises, social disparities, immigration, racism, and the like. It is one and the same crisis and it is deeply a spiritual one. The resistance of the surviving colonial order appears almost natural because there are those who benefit from it. However, to keep the status quo is to condemn the world to suicide. In Lubumbashi, this new generation of African scholars coming of age will not accept things at face value. They are wary of the self-proclaimed good intentions of the West towards Africa. They are demanding that Africa’s cultural and spiritual symbols and heritage be returned to their rightful places. These places are not going to be dictated by the settlers. They will emerge from national conversations and local communities. At this historical watershed, Lubumbashi ASAA 2023 was critically important because it helped new interpretations to emerge, younger scholars to sway the existing beliefs, and new truths about history to be articulated.

Some of the Conference’s Recommendations and Outcomes

A number of resolutions were adopted at the end of these debates. They targeted different stakeholders, including the international organizations such as the UN and the African Union, African governments and policymakers, scholars and academic authorities, the African diaspora, artists, and local communities.

Among the important recommendations that were voiced at the conference there is the fact that participants asked that:

1. African governments have a coordinating body that will exchange expertise and knowledge on the issue of restitution and reparation, and that this entity is available and accessible to colleagues in the Caribbeans. These national restitution coordinating bodies are also going to be concerned with advocacy work at the African Union and the United Nations, in order to

continue the conversation at the continental and global level. In fact, representatives from these national bodies could form an African Union expert commission to harness global leverage in negotiating and advocating for the restitution to and reparation for Africa.

2. They also requested the elaboration of bills related to reparation, restoration, repatriation, and restitution of Africa's tangible and intangible assets. The subsequent adopted laws should be taught in schools, from primary to high schools, so that African youth and citizens gain greater awareness on the issue of Africa's need for social, historical, cultural, and epistemological justice.
3. African nations should create national pantheons to welcome and store human remains and relics that are to be returned, as this is also part of the repatriation project. These could also be national cemeteries where our exiled ancestors are going to find eternal rest back in their homeland.
4. Participants also emphasized the fact that we should also invest in educational conservations at the local levels –within civil societies –for the seriousness with which the issue of restitution is treated will show us whether art works are valued or not at the local level. It is only by enhancing the value of these works of art in the minds of people that the true construction of collective memory will occur. There is work in creating a generation of civically aware Africans to protect what is important to them.
5. African governments should also protect archaeological sites that have already been identified and those that will be in the future, to encourage research and perpetuate memory. Besides, best practices in different African countries should inspire others to establish museums, create intentional inventory programs in the form of observatories for cultural practices to assess what is “ours” and where abroad are our cultural assets domiciled.
6. Furthermore, it is an imperative to move away from mere denunciation of colonial abuses by investing in innovation and promoting the autonomy of African thought, the value of Ubuntu philosophy, and the transmission of African wisdom and knowledge.
7. African scholars should also intensify research and make sure their findings and publications are integrated in schools and universities curricula, to intensify education on the issue of restitution, raise awareness among multiple stakeholders, and maintain the scientific interest alive in such fields as physical and cultural anthropology, bioarcheology, museum curator, library, archives conservation, and colonial sciences to make our universities relevant in transforming our societies.
8. New channels of communication should be formed so as to create a bridge between Africa and its diaspora, raise awareness about the identity continuum with those living outside of the continent, and include them in the development of the continent. Next to this, a conscious effort should be made to improve the visibility of African languages, in particular by setting up editorial publications in African languages so as to protect them from going extinct, and to promote them as well, because identity is preserved through language.

Conclusion

The African Studies Association of Africa provided scholars and society the appropriate space to cross-fertilize. This moment of intense listening and sharing was greatly appreciated, especially in a country that has been politically challenged in recent years. Such great moments in the history of the continent contribute to creating awareness about the efforts done and what is still needed for Africans and their descendants to live a meaningful and dignified life. Such moments also remind us that we cannot have democratic consolidation in the continent unless all voices are valued and heard. Thus, involving local communities to actively participate in reflections, ethnographic, archeological, and anthropological research and debates is critical if we want to make progress on the question of restitution. The primary stakeholder is the local community. Again, it depends on how we want to define “local community”. Obviously, Africa will need more capacity-building in training people and preparing infrastructures that will welcome our stolen cultural heritage. This is

an area where knowledge production can begin to shift the colonial paradigm and epistemologies, therefore contributing to real emancipation and independence of the minds in Africa. It might also shift our relationship to our ancestors, traditions, spiritualities, wisdom, dignity, and self-worth.

We will need our external partners to accompany our spiritual and cultural assets restitution efforts –especially the remains of our “ancestors” –and to transfer all the documents and documentation related to that. In a spirit of reconciliation and restoration, they should also hand over the results of the various investigations carried out during the expatriation period. African leaders in the public and private sector should spare no effort to participate in the setting up of appropriate infrastructures for the reception, management, and conservation of returned and to-be-returned cultural heritage. Our universities should also set up scholarships to train human resources and promote research in the fields where expertise is wanting in several African countries despite the fact that the need for it is immense. Let our artists of today also intensify strategies to raise awareness among the population, with a view not only to take ownership of advocacy, but also to contribute to the rationalization of the management of spin-offs and the perpetuation of this collective memory for future generations. Thus, artistic works such as theater, music, novels and personal narratives can help in the conservation of memory and creation of new knowledge.

ASAA encourages African universities to increase the number of their professors and students who adhere to the project so as to prolong this conversation. It is true that for the past 10 years of its existence, at every ASAA conference, the association’s membership has been growing, despite the challenges we face when it comes to traveling within the continent (visa application procedures, travel economic cost, linguistic differences, etc.). Unless our common experiences and the memories we build together in the spirit of Pan-Africanism are preserved, our nations and knowledges will remain autarchic. The African Studies Association of Africa hopes to use the momentum to reorient discourse on African matters, inform and educate our communities, and impact the policymaking procedures, while also helping to reframe inherited cliché images about the continent. Together, we will conquer by incrementally shifting awareness and overcoming the minority status in which Africans, African researchers, and the whole continent have been assigned.

It is also important that the African Diaspora is included in the restitution debate. This collaboration experience can help us understand our common identity, spirituality, and ancestry. Africans can no longer measure how knowledgeable they are by using Western standards sanctioned by academic degrees. Instead of remaining captives of the capitalist knowledge market, new reappropriations of the Negritude epistemologies³ should be taught and promoted. The modernist ethics is the foundation of the Western human and environmental barbarism, exploiting both Nature and humans as mere commodities for profitable gains. Justifications of colonial domination and monetary gratification are found in the production of knowledge of the modern era. Africans are willing to take up the deconstruction challenge by rejecting the dialectical entanglement of binaries set up to reinforce the otherness of non-European people and cultures. As the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once argued,⁴ Africa is not the foil of the West. Cultural diversity should not be lumped together to be put in balance with Western civilization. In reality, each person, culture, and people have their absolute worth and *raison d’être* in themselves.

3 For many years, the West has taken upon itself the mission to civilize the world (colonization), which discourse turned out to be a legitimizing strategy of plunder. In this vein, the West monopolized the space of representation, speaking on behalf of Africa and Africans. Cheikh Thiam, *Epistemologies from the Global South. Negritude, Modernity, and the Idea of Africa*. South Africa. U of KwaZulu Natal, 2023.

4 Bacon, K., ‘An African Voice,’ *The Atlantic*. August 2000 Issue. Available online at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/an-african-voice/306020/>