

African Art and The Colonial Encounter: Commodification and Restitution of Sacred Objects in Linus Asong's the Crown of Thorns

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Abstract:

African art though dynamic has changed in form, function, and meaning over time. However, the concept of Indigenous African art has remained static. This paper aims at examining the complex relationship between African art and colonial encounter while interrogating the commodification and restitution of African artifacts which has become a topical issue. This is because pre-colonial sacred objects have an aura of untainted timeless past reflecting the way of life of the African people. The colonial encounter with Africa witnessed a rush for African traditional religious artifacts and antiquities which left indelible marks of hostilities and cultural clashes among the African people. Many African artifacts looted from their countries of origin during colonialism and are now housed in museums and private collections around the world. While most studies on Linus Asong's *the Crown of Thorns* focus on feminist analysis, the paper is read from the perspective of New Historicists' exegesis that interrogates the commodification and restitution of African sacred objects stolen from Africa during colonialism. The findings show that, although the issue of the commodification and restitution of African artifacts is a complex and controversial one, there is a growing recognition of the importance of acknowledging and rectifying the historical injustices associated with their commodification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Colonization had a major impact on Africa's culture, history, and African art. The scramble for and partition of Africa which began in 1880 gave Europeans the opportunity for economic, political, and social expansion. The Portuguese, Germans, British, and French, were the major European countries that set out on a colonial mission to Cameroon. They perceived Africans as primitive and inferior, which allowed them to justify their actions and continue with their imperialistic plans (Clemens, Jayna, 2017, p.2). European colonization greatly impacted

negatively on the economic, cultural, political, and social aspects of Africa. Given the fact that Africa is a vast continent with distinct cultures, languages and people with different crafts and traditions, African art though dynamic has changed in form, function, and meaning over time. However, the concept of indigenous African art has remained static. This is because, 'pre-colonial sacred objects have an aura of untainted timeless past reflecting the way of life of the African people' (Clemens, 2017, p.4).

The impact of colonialism on contemporary African art cannot be overemphasized because their art through sacred objects express the values, thoughts and attitudes of the people which are a reflection of their past experiences. African arts and cultures in their diverse forms are highly requested for and respected respectively in the global world today. This diversification of African arts and cultures, form a colourful cultural heritage distinct of the people only. In Linus Tongwo Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* (1990), what starts as a big joke develops into grim tragedy as the statue of the god of Nkokonoko Small Monje is discovered to have been stolen and sold to a white man. The tradition demands instant execution of all the perpetrators guilty of desecrating the land. Though historically set at the dawn of independence, the novel explores the divergences that pose a threat to the emerging national consciousness. This paper focuses on the colonial encounter and how it affects African artifacts as illustrated by Asong in *The Crown of Thorns*. Although previous studies on this text addresses feminist and language issues, this paper aims at exploring the issues of commodification and restitution of African artifacts looted during colonialism.

Colonial encounter with African culture, led to the disappearance of African indigenous cultural artifacts and sacred objects some of which have been found in several museums across Europe and America (Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy 2018, p.3). Some of these colonialists saw the commodification of these African artifacts as a means of enriching themselves thus creating indelible marks of hostilities and cultural clashes among the African people. These sacred objects carry with them the people who venerate them. While the commodification of these antiquities yields financial benefits to the Western colonizers or explorers, at the same time, it tears apart their spiritual unity, the one thing that binds Africans together given their diverse cultural heritages and practices. This is in line with what Sarr and Savoy (2018) describe in their study as an interrelation of two dynamics. They opine that:

The Intellectual and Aesthetic appropriation combined with the economic appropriation of the cultural heritage of the other, which, within the cities of the conqueror, within his houses, his circles of experts and on the art market acquire a value, another life disconnected from their origins. Intentional alienation and deculturation of subordinated populations whose psychological equilibrium has been broken, sometimes definitively, through the focal objects-objects of orientation that have been passed down from one generation to the next (p.7).

This indicates the cultural alienation of a people from the sacred objects that bind them together, thus, the reason for a high demand for the restitution of these cultural artifacts by Africans. Today, the demand to preserve African tangible sacred objects and antiquities has been on an increase in most countries in the African continent, the reason the repatriation of African artifacts looted during the colonial period has become a prevalent topic within politics and art today. This increasing demand for the restitution of African artifacts and the

preservation of the African cultural heritage has in the past few years become an important subject of discourse in Africa and the diaspora. According to Woldeyes as quoted in Kiefer (2020, p.4), a return of African artifacts 'helps address the historical injustice museums have caused and restores Africans' agency as producers of their own history' because about 90% of Africa's artifacts are outside of the African continent.

The French President, Emmanuel Macron in 2017 initiated a return of African artifacts found in the French Museums. This laudable initiative as stated by Kiefer (2020, p.4) 'was applauded by many European countries who keyed into this initiative to return the looted cultural objects from Africa'. In Africa, some countries like Namibia, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana, just to mention a few, are already a step ahead in the demand for a return of their cultural artifacts and sacred objects which disappeared during the colonial period. In 1957 for example, the Queen of England restituted a valuable Asante stool to Accra during the celebrations of Ghana's independence (Kiefer 2020). This indicates that the demand by most African leaders for the restitution of their sacred objects and artifacts from Europe started a long time ago.

In 1973, Thomas A. Johnson, a reporter with the New York Times Magazine, reported about the return of the sacred statue of the Afo-a-Kom (a wooden sculpture, sacred to the Kom people of Cameroon, found in Furman Gallery) back to the Kom people. This statue which disappeared in 1966 according to Nkwi (1975, p.121) 'first arrived in France before it was finally bought by Aaron Furman, a New York specialist in African and Oceanian art, and later put on sale by its new owner in a New York art gallery'. The same New York Times Magazine reported that the journey of the return of the Afo-A-Kom from New York and Washington to Yaounde, and on its way to the grassfields was 'studded by African and American protocol, with spirited reverential welcomes by the thousands of people who revere it, and finally with solemnity as the Fon, or King, of Kom, Nsom Ngue, accepted it as it lay packed in a gray wooden case in bright sunshine before the Fon's throne' (1973, p.1). The history surrounding the disappearance of the Afo-a-kom from the Kom Fondom reiterates the subject of this paper as reflected in Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*. Still in Cameroon, the wooden sculptor of the Bangwa Queen has been at the centre of this debate regarding the repatriation of colonial artifacts. The Bangwa Queen is a wooden ancestral sculptor of spiritual importance to the Bangwa indigenous people of the South West Region of Cameroon. According to Campfens (2019) this sacred statue looted along with other sacred objects during the German invasion of the Bangwa country was later found in possession of Gustav Conrau in 1899 and in 1926, it was brought to the Ethnological Museum (Für Völkerkunde) in Berlin. The artifact is currently located in a French museum in Paris.

In the North West Region of Cameroon, the people of Nso lost the statue of their Queen Mother, Ngonnso to the Germans during the colonial encounter. The statue of Ngonnso disappeared from the Nso Fondom in 1902 and was later found in the Ethnological museum in Berlin in 1903 as part of a donation of the colonial officer Kurt Von Pavel. The statue of Ngonnso represents a strong cultural and spiritual bearing of the people of Nso the reason why the people of Nso resident in Germany, took to the streets of Berlin in September 2021, demanding for a release and a return of their Queen mother, Ngonnso back to the Nso Fondom. The continuous

campaigns and requests by the Fon of Nso and his people for the restitution of the statue of Ngonso finally saw the Foundation Board of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in collaboration with the Stiftung Preubidcher Kulturbesitz's president Hermann Parzinger (June 07-2022), together with the Cameroonian government and the representatives of the Nso people fostered the restitution process of the statue of Ngonso (Sylvie Njobati Vernyuy, BBC News Africa, 2022). This indicates that the reclamation of the Ngonso statue by her people, embodies the Nso cultural identity and heritage, which therefore justifies its significance and possible return to her community of origin.

All these demands are indications that a people's cultural heritage seen in the sacred objects is priceless and, therefore, needs to be preserved in their appropriate quarters to ensure that spiritual connection among the people who venerate them. As the world becomes increasingly aware of the historical injustices inflicted upon African nations during the era of colonialism with the increasing debates over the restitution of African Artifacts, Asong's novel offers a thought-provoking contribution to this important conversation.

A couple of critical works on Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*, are centred on gender issues as well as the conflict between the postcolonial government and the governed. Fonchigong (2006) and Alaiyemo (2016) both base their arguments on gender inequalities in Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*. They argue that in this novel, women are presented in a debased position projecting marriage as an institution where the man's genitals are 'washed' by his wife. 'A virgin had been chosen to 'wash the genitals' of the chief on the first night of his coronation' (Asong, 1990, p.41). To these critics, this dehumanizing portrayal of women are parochial views which must be changed as women are pivotal to the literal survival of community and societal norms. These works however, focus mostly on gender inequalities but the relationship between the statue of Akeukeur, the chief to whom the woman is handed out in marriage, and his duties as the custodian of the people's tradition cannot be overemphasized.

Apart from gender issues in the novel, Gomia describes Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* as a novel that 'evokes the recurrent conflict between the post-colonial government and the governed stemming from the former's incomprehension of the values that held together and imaginary post independent setting - Nkokonoko samll Monje' (Gomia 2015, p.245). The theft and sale of the statue of Akeukeur the god of the people of small Monje to a white man is what sets the entire community in turmoil. The District Officer sees the statue as a mere antiquity that could fetch him some money, while the people of Small Monje value it as the very foundation of life. A detachment from this spiritual base to them, means a complete separation from the only thing that binds them together.

To culminate the above assertion, Ashuntangtang compares the kind of leadership portrayed in Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* to that of West Cameroon during colonial encounter. To her, Asong's novel though published 20 years after it was written in the 1970s, 'captures the colonial experience and her policy of indirect rule in the Southern states of Cameroon'(2016, p.111). In the text, the chieftdom of small monje that enjoyed autonomy under their traditional rulership is now controlled by the District Officer and his accolades. The entire community is answerable to the D.O who knows nothing about their customs and traditions. The effects of

this system of governance are precarious as they lead to the theft and sale of the statue of Akeukeur. This brings about chaos and frenzy as the people are bent on retrieving the original statue of the 'god of our gods' not minding the consequences of their actions thus, they cannot fold their arms and watch at the desecration of their land by strangers.

Theoretical Leanings

This paper is read from the New Historicists perspective as it emphasizes the ways in which literary works both reflect and shape the social and political discourses of their time. New Historicism is a paradigm extension of Historicism which Stephen Greenbalt (1989, p.4) argues that 'History cannot be divorced from textuality'. He attempts to situate artistic texts both as products of a historical context and as a means to understand cultural and intellectual history. Among some of Greenbalt's presumptions is the fact that literature has a historical meaning, a literary work of art is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems but it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it therefore, is through the culture and the society that produces it. This means that interpreting a literary work one needs to take into consideration the culture of the society under which the work is written. This claim is supported by Evrim Dogan where he purports that:

Literature, for new historicism is a social and cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness, and it cannot be diminished to a product of a single mind. Therefore, the best way of analysis is achieved through the lens of the culture that produced it...(2005, p.81).

Dogan notes that literature is the creation of social and cultural constructs. He also argues that because man is a social construct, so is literature; as such, literary texts should therefore be analysed within history and culture and not out of them. To him, history and literature have dialectical relationship as the 'literary text is interpreted as a product and producer'(2005, p.82). This means that literature is a product of history and at the same time literature produces or rewrites history.

New historicists are also concerned with the realities of the time the literary work is produced. This is so because any work that is produced at any given era must incorporate the realities of the time and space. This idea is purported by Greenbalt and Gallagher (2000, p.31) where they intimate that 'We wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendental'. This means that literature reflects the era during which it is produced. The socio-historical happenings, therefore, gives birth to literature and since culture forms an important part of human existence, literary works cannot therefore be separated from reality and culture.

Given that literature exposes social ills, new historicists argue that if literature is superior to history which is subjective, literature therefore plays a vital role because it mirrors the society. Literary writers see art as the viable means through which they can ridicule the ills of society. The history and reality of colonialism and its effects on indigenous African communities influenced Asong to write *The Crown of Thorns* which offers a powerful critique of the commodification of African art during colonialism, and its impact on African communities.

The new historicists' approach to the commodification and restitution of African artifacts emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts in which these artifacts were taken, as well as the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism that continue to shape power relations and cultural dynamics today. New Historicism in this case therefore suggests that cultural artifacts are not static entities that exist in isolation, but rather are shaped by the historical and cultural contexts in which they are produced and consumed.

Colonial Dominance and Materialism: Commodification of African Sacred Objects

During the colonial era, African art and artifacts were often viewed through a Eurocentric lens, leading to its commodification. European colonizers saw these artifacts as exotic curiosities, stripping them from their cultural context and reducing them to mere objects of aesthetic value. Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*, exemplifies this commodification through the sale of the Akuekeur, the god of the people of Nkonkonoko Small Monje. Commodification according to Appadurai is 'the removal of objects or images from enclaved zones to ones where exchange is less confined and more profitable' (quoted in Conradie, 2019, p.15). *The Crown of Thorns* portrays the removal of the sacred statue of the god of gods of the people of small monje from its sacred sanctum and its sale to a total stranger. In this text, the arrival of the American explorer from Texas to Small Monje brings to lime light the financial implications of the famous statue of the Akuekeur, the god of the people of Nkonkonoko Small Monje. The text opens with the throating words of Ngubefuo declaring that 'Akeukeur, the god of gods of the tribe of Nkonkonoko Small Monje has been cut off, stolen and sold to a white man' (Asong, p.2). The buying of Akuekeur, by Virchow from the District Officer and his accomplices according to Gomia (2015), 'yields not only financial benefits but at the same time, sets ablaze the spiritual unity, the one thing that held the people of Nkonkonoko Small Monje together' (p.246). Through an interactive session with Virchow, the D.O. 'learned that there was a craze for antiquities from Africa in the United States and Europe' (Asong, p.9) and as such, the sell of a statue worth the size of Akuekeur could fetch Small Monje millions in the United States.

This revelation unveils the D.O's greedy intentions as he maps out a plan to sell the statue to the American tourist without the knowledge of the people of Small Monje. In connivance with Achiebefuo, the wood carver, he cajoles with a fake promise of 50,000frs payment if he would carve another statue almost the same as the Akeukeur. To Chief Nchindia, the D.O promised him 100,000frs which the Chief feels "it was the right amount of money he required as capital to embark on trade" (Asong, p.11) without giving a second thought unto the supreme importance of the statue in the lives of his people. The members of the Council of Elders whom the D.O connived with to execute his plans were equally promised 5,000frs and a bottle of gin each which they never got at the end of the day. The statue of Akeukeur is eventually sold to Virchow at the cost of 400,000frs, a far cheaper amount than anticipated. "When it came to the money actually changing hands, it did not cost millions as Virchow had intimated. In fact, it was to cost only few hundred thousands - four hundred thousand francs" (Asong, p.9). Here, greed, deceit, and corruption are the other of the day as those involved in this act do not end up getting what was promised them. This illustrates that, the financial investments attached to African artifacts is more beneficial for the owner.

Keifer refers to Steiner's notion of financial investment in possession of African art collectors thus:

Ownership of African art today has become linked closely to economic investment. Once considered a thrifty substitute for the ownership of modern art, African art (when purchased from a 'reputable' auction house or gallery) now constitutes a major financial venture with high monetary stakes (2020, p.23).

This resonates Asong's portrayal of the commodification of Akeukeur as a valuable object in the hands of its possessor. The reason the D.O. uses every available means at his disposal to sell the god of the land to a stranger. The D.O only thinks of the millions he is going to accrue from the sale while Chief Nchindia thinks of his booming business once he gets his own share of the booty. It is unfortunate that these same people who are put in place to lead the people suddenly forget their duties and the only thing they can think of is how to enrich their pockets at the detriment of the customs and traditions of the people.

Cameroonian artifacts have gone through this commodification phase from one buyer to another and across nations and continents. This is evidenced from the sale of the Afo-a-kom, the statue of the Bangwa Queen, and many others. The sale of the Akeukeur resembles the sale of the Afo-a-kom and the Bangwa Queen from the North West and South West regions of Cameroon respectively. According to Chechi et al.,

The Afo-A-Kom (literally, the Kom thing) was 'stolen' in 1966 from the Ngumba House, Laikom, a village of the Kom Kingdom, a tribal population of approximately 30,000 people in the north part of Cameroon... sold it in a town in East Cameroon for \$100; then the Afo-A-Kom was exported and later sold to an American art dealer, who, in turn, sold it to the New York-based Furman Gallery(2012, p.2).

Upon request by the Cameroonian Government for the restitution of the Afo-a-kom, Chechi et al note that Aaron Furman 'put the statue on sale for \$60,000, whereas he had bought it for \$25,000' (2012). This indicates the financial benefits attached to sacred African artifacts.

Apart from the financial benefits accrued from the sale of the Afo-a-kom, Keifer also reports of the financial gains gotten from the sale of the Statue of the Bangwa Queen in the Los Angeles Times Magazine. To him,

The first time Njuindem was sold for a high offer at an auction was in 1966 when Harry A. Franklin bought the sculpture from the Helena Rubenstein collection for US\$26,000 (Muchnic 1990). The second time the sculpture was auctioned for a high price was when the sculpture was sold for US\$3.4 million at the auction of the Harry A. Franklin Family Collection by Franklin's daughter, Valerie Franklin, to the Musee Dapper in 1990 (2020, p.23).

These are instances projecting the commercial value attached to Cameroonian sacred artifacts. These indicate that looted African artifacts objects have been in possession of the art collectors who choose to either auction or sell them for financial benefits. The stealing and sale of the Akeukoer, the god of the land of Nkokonoko Small Monje is what brings about a rift between the Council of Elders and the Administrative Officer of this community. One part of the community is interested in the financial benefits they will make from it, while the other part is

more concerned with the estrangement the sale will bring to the community and those who venerate their gods.

Reversing Imperial Dominance: Restitution of Pre-colonial Artifacts

The use of the term restitution in this study means a return of an object that does not belong to you to its rightful owner. Sarr and Savoy (2018, p.29) uphold that restitution is ‘the recognition of the illegitimacy of the property that one had previously claimed ownership of, no matter what the duration of time was’. This idea of restitution clearly projects a recognition and a return of the illegitimate ownership of someone else’s property. As such, one would say that restitution refers to a recognition, acceptance and restoration of objects that one cannot claim ownership of, to its rightful place and owner.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) plea for the return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to their original places of abode, views repatriation as a form of human rights for indigenous people in the former colonies to their cultural treasures. This calls to mind a pondering on the history, and memories of the colonial past in relation to the development of Western Museum collections which Onyejegbu (2019) opines that,

The museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for the purpose of study, education and employment, material evidence of man and his environment (p.134).

Onyejegbu from this definition indicates that the museum is an important institution that collects and preserves most cherished objects of the people. Enongene (2016, p.4) on his part reiterates this view of the museum as he says, ‘the museum is an institution devoted to the collection, preservation, documentation, exhibition and study of objects of almost any character. It is a highly technical, educational and research-oriented institution of great scientific value and cultural interest’. He equally sees the museum as a centre of research and not a storage room of stolen artifacts for financial benefits. The question that arises here is, who then claims legitimate ownership of these objects collected and preserved in foreign museums all over the world? Brockmeyer (2021, p.23) argues that, to the Western world, the power of Arts may lie in ‘taking your breath away, but to the African maker, the power may lie in “it works and performs its functions’. This argument indicates that European encounter with African artifacts only served as objects of display in museums for profit making. This brings us back to the debate on the restitution of African artifacts back to their original habitats.

This clarion call for a return of the looted artifacts from Africa is the subject of concern in Asong’s *The Crown of Thorns* as the community seeks to reclaim the stolen statue of Akeukueor, the god of the people who represents a symbol of the community’s spiritual and cultural identity. Its theft represents a violation of their heritage which lands the Council of Elders in a state of dilemma as soon as they realise that the god of the people of Small Monje has been stolen and a fake god carved and put in place of the original. A search is immediately

launched and the culprits have to bear the consequences of carrying out such an abominable act. To go about this, a new Council of Elders is immediately put in place to oversee the decisions of the community and they have to take an oath of secrecy by 'swearing by Ku-Ngang and licking blood to keep the secret from culprits' (Asong, p.32). As tensions ensue, Ngobefuo sees nothing other than 'wickedness and treachery' to the throne of Nkokonoko Small Monje as he screams [look at our crown!, Look at our god!] (Asong pp.15-16). The people need back their god for their lives and those of future generations of the community as well as the peace and stability of the community depend on their god. This is the one thing that unifies and identifies the people of Small Monje. This accounts for the reason the people of Small Monje put up a strong resistance against the colonial representatives and all other forces behind the theft of the god of gods of Nkokonoko Small Monje. This act also raises questions about the ownership and provenance of African art, and the responsibility of Western collectors and museums to return stolen objects to their rightful owners.

Resistance is a part of identity and because identity is inherent, social resistance has to develop a community of others through a collective practice. Together the people of Small Monje reinstate a new council of elders to act immediately in fishing out the culprits of the devastating act. This act of resistance put up by the people of small Monje, reiterates Prakash and Haynes' definition of resistance as 'those behaviours and cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social functions, that threaten to unravel the strategies of domination' (1991, pp.3-4). Resistant acts or practices can range from open or apparently conscious acts seeking to redress different forms of injustices. The people of small Monje, upon the discovery of the theft of the statue of their god, demand instant execution of all the perpetrators of the act as a way of resisting colonial authority.

Ngobefuo, the chief custodian of the holy shrine, decries this monstrous crime before the new Council of Elders as he declares that,

If ever we are to get another god in this tribe, the stump of the god that was left behind by these wicked brothers of ours, must be watered down with blood. And if the blood of the sons of Nkokonoko Small Monje shall spill, then the man who led them, the man whose presence has caused the destruction of everything we were once proud of, shall not be spared. I am talking about Goment. Goment will have to go with them (Asong, p.33).

This declaration comes as a demonstration of the disillusionment from the people of Small Monje against their representatives of the colonial regime put in place to rule the people against their traditional leadership and cultural practices. The people of Small Monje are disgruntled with the activities of government agents manned to rule them. The D.O., the Prelate and the forces of law and order do not only stand on the traditional ways and practices of the people of Small Monje but connive in destroying the only sacred thing that binds these people together. This reiterates Bhabha's construct of colonial power as a political and cultural structure which controls and disempowers the subjects. To reinstate the new order, Ndenwontio burnt down the fake god that was put in place of Akuekeour, the god of the land. According to the narrator, 'Ndenwontio marched up to the statue, pulled it down and then told Ngobefuo: This is what you ought to have done in the first place. You don't allow its roots to enter the soil on which Akeukeour ever stood' (Asong, p.23).

This act alone justifies not only the people's form of resistance and a demand for the original statue of Akeukeour but illustrates how much reference they pay to the god of the land. The absence of the god of gods, marks a total spiritual detachment from the things that bind the people of Nkonkonoko Small Monje together. According to the Council of Elders of this community, the original sculpture should be returned because of its sacred importance to the community of Nkonkonoko Small Monje. The life of the whole tribe is under the aegis of the highly revered god of gods, Akeukeour. This is because, the original sculpture served a great deal to the people. It was kept in the holy shrine for prayer and consultations purposes by the reigning Chief, and it was the custom that 'any entrance into the holy grove and shrine must be preceded by the dancing forward and backward of two masquerades, each holding a flaming torch, amidst other formalities'(Asong, p.7). This shows the reference that Akeukeour commanded from his people, thus the reason the community is agitating for a return of their sacred god.

Although there have been general debates by some scholars on the return of colonial artifacts in Africa and Cameroon in particular, some argue that due to wars and poverty within Africa, the continent is not yet institutionally ready to protect these objects. Kiefer quotes Julien Flank, the owner of Galerie Flank in Paris that exhibits tribal art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas in an interview where she says,

Returning the objects is possibly a good point, entering into dialogue is the best thing that we can do. But who are we going to return the objects to? I'm not sure today the museums in Benin are ready in terms of conservation, condition of the buildings to welcome these objects" (Euronews 2018) (00:01:24 - 00:02:47).

Some African countries like Ghana and Nigeria have gone ahead to debunk this argument by Julien as some of their returned looted cultural artifacts, are currently found in museums in the Benin Kingdom where they are carefully preserved. In a recent post on DW, more than twenty looted objects from Namibia including jewelry, tools, fashion and dolls found in the Ethnological museum in Berlin have been loaned back to Namibia at such an exorbitant amount (\$1.8billion) as part of a commitment by Berlin to repair ties with its former African colony (DW 27.05.2022). It should be noted that Namibia had demanded for \$81billion as compensation for more than 100,000 Namibians killed by the Germans in the 18th century. Instead of making such compensations, the German government is quick to make amends with Namibia through a loan. The question that arises here is, why would Germany loan back artifacts that rightfully belong to Namibia? This and many more questions are at the centre of debates surrounding the restitution of African artifacts found in Europe and other parts of the world.

2. Conclusion

Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* offers a poignant exploration of the issues of commodification and restitution in the context of African art during colonial encounter. The novel highlights the impact of colonialism and imperial dominance on African communities thus raising important questions about the ownership and provenance of African artifacts. The ongoing debates

surrounding the restitution of African sacred artifacts highlights the need for a nuanced approach that balances the rights of African nations to reclaim their cultural heritage and the importance of preserving these artifacts for future generations. The disappearance of the Akuekeour, had a great toll on the people the people of Nkokonoko Small Monje as it signifies a distortion of an integral part of their spiritual life taken away from them. Though the selling of Akuekeour yields financial benefits in the hands of a corrupt few, at the same time it tears apart their spiritual unity, the one thing that binds the people of Nkonkonoko Small Monje together. The paper concludes that, African sacred objects should not be appreciated in museums as a matter of fact but be returned to their indigenous communities of origin. By placing these sacred objects in ethnographic museums or behind glass display for people to observe, these objects do not only lose the historical impact but also the cultural meanings they embody. The presence of Akuekeour, represents the emotional and spiritual attachment between cultural heritage and the identity of the people of Small Monje demonstrated through the clarion call of the people for a return of the god of their community. The paper suggests that restitution is not only a matter of justice, but also a means of healing and reconciliation for communities that have been impacted by the theft of their cultural heritage. While current debates on the restitution of African artifacts are ongoing in Africa, Europe and America, it is therefore crucial to recognize and rectify the historical injustices inflicted upon African nations, ensuring a more equitable and inclusive representation of their cultural legacy. The reason the Cameroonian government is already one step ahead as it has facilitated the repatriation of some Cameroonian artifacts plundered during the colonial period. These efforts have yielded positive fruits as the statue of the Ngonso, Queen mother from the Nso dynasty in the North West Region of Cameroon found in the Furman Gallery in Germany has been approved for repatriation to its rightful owners, the Nso people. This hereby reiterates the fact that African artifacts should be left in the hands of African people for they constitute part and parcel of the life of the people who venerate them.

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