

On the Return and Rehumanization of Rwandan Human Remains that are located in Germany

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1. INTRODUCTION

With regards to the management of colonized countries' human remains, ~~German museums have taken a proactive stand.~~

They decided to define and guide the debates around what will be done about these human remains, whether they will be repatriated or kept in German museums for further research.

On the discussion about what constitutes “a context of injustice” for the colonial human remains,

German museums established that only those human remains that were collected using violence or against the will of the owners will be seen as having been collected unjustly.

Secondly, those human remains that were taken away through “coercion, theft, grave robbery or deception” will be put in the colonial context of injustice (The German Museums Association 2013).

Owing to the fact colonialism itself was a system of unequal power balance between the colonizers and the colonized,

it is hard to find any context where the collection of colonized countries' human remains would be seen as having taken place within the context of justice.

Even in the context where human remains were purchased or given to European ethnographers and/or physical anthropologists or even to colonial administrators,

still this exchange was done within the colonial context that constitutes itself a context of injustice.

In the new dispensation of imperialism in the second half of the 19th century, physical anthropology with its branch of anthropometry undertook research on human races.

People of colonized countries were considered as not having reached the human evolution equal to that of Europeans.

Because it was difficult to have access to living human beings in the anthropological measurements, dead bodies were increasingly favoured.

Thus, the collection of human remains from colonized countries began with impetus.

The German Museums Association in its report published in 2018 reinforced the ideas of its 2013 report.

It recognized the magnitude of the exploitative and oppressive features of colonialism.

At the same time, it showed its awareness about the colonial racist ideologies, many of which became destructive in colonized's societies during and after formal colonization.

Colonialism was also a system that enabled the plunder of objects from colonized countries that went to enrich European museum collections.

The whole colonial apparatus made of ethnographers, missionaries, and colonial administrators were used for the purpose of this collection of objects and human remains.

It is worth noting that African human remains in a museum are not objects nor collections, since they are part of human body.

So, this complicates their position in a museum exhibition or storeroom.

But colonialism treated them as objects.

Concerning repatriation of human remains, I argue that rather than dealing with each family or ethnic group, German museums should negotiate with national governments.

I also address the following questions:

- What strategies should African governments devise in this negotiation for restitution and repatriation of human remains?
- How will they work with African museums in this move?
- What does the return of human remains mean to African museums and African communities?
- And whether this process will lead to rehumanization.
- I highlight the practices of return of human remains that should entail this rehumanization process.

Finally, I argue that beyond rehumanization, the return of human remains needs other actors, activities and mechanisms.

2. OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification of Africans happened in several ways.

- The colonial enterprise itself objectified Africans because it made them objects of economic production.
 - What is peculiar about human remains is that even the dead were exploited in the form of taking away and using the dead bodies for scientific and economic benefits.
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- Certain human remains were “collected” just after genocides and mass violences, as in the case of the Herero and the Rwandans.
 - Thus, human remains are stolen and brought to Europe in the context of colonial violence including colonial genocide.
 - But it is more appropriate to talk about this theft of colonized’s human remains as **dehumanization** rather than objectification, so that we remain in the human’s logic.
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3. REHUMANIZATION

- Rehumanization is the reversing of the dehumanization process.
 - Then, to what extent is rehumanization possible?
 - Is the return of human remains tantamount to rehumanizing the colonial subjects whose bodies had been taken away and used in European museums?
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- What does it mean to rehumanize the dead?
Remember that these are not human remains but our
ancestors.

- What does it mean to rehumanize the dead's families
and descendants who are still alive?

Because they have also been dehumanized through
losing their ancestors.

4. Practices of return of human remains that should entail this rehumanization process

- What practices of reburial that can guarantee this rehumanization process:

Since burial practices have themselves evolved:

Is it the original ways of burial?

Is it the current ways of burial?

- What spaces of reburial are appropriate?

Is it graveyards?

Is it mausoleums?

Is it memorials?

Is it monuments?

Is it anything else?

- What practices of commemoration should be set up?
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Is it commemoration at national days?

Is it a commemoration process managed by African museums?

Is it anything else? What is it?

5. Beyond return of human remains for rehumanization

- Reparation
 - Production of new (i.e., decolonized) narratives
 - What is the role of African museums in the production of decolonized narratives?
 - What is the role of African universities in the production of decolonized narratives?
 - Production of new policies and laws
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Thank you very much
for
your kind attention!
