



GSJ: Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019, Online: ISSN 2320-9186  
[www.globalscientificjournal.com](http://www.globalscientificjournal.com)

**CONNECTING USERS AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH REPATRIATION  
OF RECORDED MUSICAL TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL MATERIALS**

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**Connecting users and communities through repatriation of recorded musical traditions  
and cultural materials**

**Isaac Machafa**

Lecturer, Department of Music Business, Musicology and Technology

Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Email: [machafai@staff.msu.ac.zw](mailto:machafai@staff.msu.ac.zw)

Cell: +263772788091



## **Abstract**

The post-independence era in Zimbabwe has witnessed huge efforts being made in the repatriation of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage artefacts back to their original indigenous communities. During the colonial era significant cultural materials were taken to foreign lands where some have summarily disappeared with others finding their way into international museums and archives. The advent of political independence and international cooperation amongst nations has seen a rise in the repatriation of recorded musical traditions as well as traditional materials back to their owners. This paper discusses the challenges that populate this initiative as some receiving communities are not readily equipped to derive value in the tangible and intangible repatriated heritage.

## **Key words**

musical traditions, communities, repatriation, cultural materials, recorded, users

## **Introduction**

African communities are well known for taking great pride in their traditions and several other cultural practices that characterise their daily living. However, this view can be contested given the opposing forces taking place in African communities today. Within the African communities, traditional practices are held dear as these define the state and sense of being and belonging for one in his or given community. It is in this view that scholars like Collins (2002) have summarily defined African people's generally culture conservative.

Culture plays an integral component within the lives of many African communities throughout Africa. Culture in this context is understood as the way of life of a people. Culture can be defined as the sum total of a way of life a society can offer in terms of material implements and possession; in terms of intellectual and educational level of development; in terms of standards of living and ways of life; in terms of values and value systems, and in terms of social relations between members of the society, in terms of arts and crafts and in terms of religion. A people without a culture are a people without identity. A people's culture gives them the reason to live as it guides them to make correct and beneficial choices in life. Culture is of crucial importance in the development of a nation, and its integration as it ensures that economic development is in line with philosophical values and social values.

Zimbabwe's development must therefore be looked at holistically. Culture must be seen as integral to development, and since development cannot take place without the full support and participation of the people, it is essential that all Zimbabweans participate actively in the creation and promotion of a culture that is responsive to their needs and aspirations. From a UNESCO (2002) point of view, culture is defined as that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a human as a member of society.

In an endeavour to weaken African communities during the colonial era, several African artefacts were taken away from their original owners and were taken to far away lands where they some were sold to merchants and curators who deposited them in their museums and archives where the majority are still lie up to present day. The advent of political independence and freedom brought about amazing enlightenment onto many African citizens, Zimbabwe included. There has been a wave of consciousness amongst scholars, researchers and the general population on the need to reclaim what originally belongs to the African

culture and its people. While this exercise has been long and fraught with resistance in some quarters, there is general understanding amongst many researchers on the need to repatriate African artefacts back to the African communities so that the artefacts once again belong in the custody of the indigenous African communities.

### **Call for repatriation**

With the rise of globalisation, a common question has been raised: Should cultural property taken by a stronger power or nation remain with that country or should it be returned to the place where it was created? Since the 1990s this question has received growing attention from the press, the public and the international legal community. For example, it is well documented that prestigious institutions such as the J. Paul Getty Museum of Art in Los Angeles and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have agreed to return looted or stolen artwork or antiquities. British smuggler Jonathan Tokeley-Parry was convicted and served three years in prison for his role in removing as many as 2,000 antiquities from Egypt. Getty director Marion True defended herself against charges that she knowingly bought antiquities that had been illegally excavated from Italy and Greece. New books on the issue of repatriation of art and antiquities have captured the attention of the public. In addition, a documentary based on one of these books was shown in theatres and aired on public television on several platforms in Europe. The first international academic symposium on the topic was convened in New York City in January 1995 and thereafter many academic fora have been organised to discuss issues to do with repatriation to reconnect with users mainly in the receiving communities.

These events signify a shift away from the historic tradition of plunder and theft, and evidence a move to protect and repatriate cultural property. However, efforts to reclaim and return stolen or looted artefacts face complex issues. First, there has always been debate

about what approach should be taken with respect to a country's ownership of cultural property. Second, the process itself requires delicate cooperation among government, law enforcement, museums, and antiquities dealers and frequently includes transactions where there are gaps in historical records. Finally, there is a tangled web of both local and international laws covering the subject.

### **What is repatriation?**

Repatriation is the act or practice of returning cultural materials to their original owners. The process of repatriation needs to be done in honesty and transparency. For repatriation to be a success it is important to consider the cultural values of the indigenous people who in the majority of the cases are the receiving communities. It therefore means cultural feasibility should always be done to minimise unnecessary cultural losses. Failure to uphold these virtues in many cases result in the process being just a ritual falling short of satisfaction from the receiving communities. There is need to ensure there is meaningful amount of preparedness in the receiving communities to ensure the received materials create a bond with the receiving community

The return of ceremonial materials has assisted some communities in their efforts to renew cultural values and practices and contributed to efforts to revive traditional ceremonial practices as a component of contemporary life. For example, the Blackfoot community of Southern Alberta in Canada has been active in seeking the repatriation of ceremonial objects, in this case sacred medicine bundles that traditionally played an important role in maintaining health and well-being in the community and provided a focus for establishing personal and community discipline and responsibilities.

After decades of suppression and social injustice many colonized indigenous peoples are seeking to revive traditional values and cultural practices as part of a process of renewal

intended to strengthen cultural identity, heal personal and community ills and provide a stimulus for new creativity. Cultural heritage in its tangible and intangible forms is integrally linked to social structure, ceremonial life and cultural identity. Indigenous activities regarding heritage preservation are therefore often part of cultural maintenance or renewal strategies and tied to community concerns in many other aspects of community life, including indigenous education, sovereignty, language renewal, intellectual property rights, land rights, economic development and health and well-being. Spiritual and religious practices are being revived as indigenous people seek ways to maintain their cultural identity and forge a successful path through contemporary society.

Repatriation of traditional artefacts is generally linked to community concerns in many other aspects of community life, including indigenous education, sovereignty, language renewal, intellectual property rights, land rights, economic development and health and well-being. Spiritual and religious practices are being revived as indigenous people seek ways to maintain their cultural identity and forge a successful path through contemporary society. As humans we all want to remain a link to the past, we remember our heritage through the foods we eat, the language we speak, and through the stories we know of our ancestors, hence the importance of keeping a permanent link with various cultural materials that identify with our daily living. According to Collins (2002)

for many Native Americans the importance of having a direct connection to the past is one of the most important aspects of retaining their culture. Because such a large portion of their heritage and culture has been either lost or destroyed it is imperative that their youth hold on to what they can find of their ancestry.

For this reason, it is important to note that, literally millions of American Indian artefacts are housed in non-native museums and private collections. Many of these objects, like tools,

weapons, and clothes, were acquired through perfectly legal means. Others, however, were bought for pennies, or stolen.

In an effort to connect today's users in the general consumption of cultural materials, musical arts included, it is important to understand the context within which the bulk of African musical traditions found their way in the hands of non-indigenous people who are found in geographic spaces outside Africa. This is important so as to minimise incidents which will result in artefacts being moved away from their original owners

During the colonial era, from 1890 to 1980 when the country attained its political independence, for Zimbabwe that is significant musical recordings were made by missionaries and researchers largely from outside Africa or in Africa but with affiliation to private institutes and organisations from outside Africa. Huge amounts of recordings were made for personal use and others for commercial use with significant amounts finally being deposited in both private and public archives

### **Debate for and against repatriation**

Generally, there is huge debate for and against repatriation of cultural materials mainly in Africa. As a gesture of good will several countries in the global north have clear policies that encourage their institutions to repatriate foreign owned cultural material. In most cases repatriation is done simply because it is the right thing to do. According to Collins (2002) today, literally millions of American Indian artefacts are housed in non-native museums and private collections. Many of these objects, like tools, weapons, and clothes, were acquired through perfectly legal means. Others, however, were bought for pennies, or stolen. The United States of America government saw nothing wrong with this, since its official position on the tribes was to try to assimilate them into the mainstream.



In my research conversations there are some young scholars who are of the view that when there is a clear case of ownership, I do think museums (and collectors) should be compelled to return historical objects to their original country. They site some of the challenges that are associate with repatriation to poor communities. Some receiving communities are poorly resourced to derive any value from repatriated materials. The level of development in the source country is in many instances way advanced compared to the receiving country. This disparity creates a situation where receiving communities can hardly interact with repatriated materials immediately after the receiving ceremony. This is common with sound and audio-visual recordings which in some instances require sophisticated equipment to playback the recorded materials.

It is also common to find that many receiving communities in the global south are characterised by civil wars and political instability, a feature that threatens the existence of archival materials as peace is a prerequisite for the establishment of facilities like museums and archives. A peaceful environment creates a platform for studies meant to restore the value of the repatriated materials. The priority to construct appropriate infrastructure like museums and archives comes very low as many governments from developing countries are preoccupied by issues to do with defence and security, health, food insecurity, malnutrition amongst others. The costs associated with maintaining viable museums and archives is beyond the reach of many governments from the global south.

### **The repatriation of ancestral remains as a stimulus for cultural renewal**

In some indigenous communities the repatriation of human remains has also contributed to cultural renewal processes and stimulated the creation of new forms of contemporary cultural practices based on traditional values, ceremonies and art forms, thereby reinforcing cultural identity in the modern world. For example, in the 1990s members of the Haida First Nation of

British Columbia in Canada discovered that the remains of ancestors had been removed from gravesites in old Haida villages abandoned in the nineteenth century following a smallpox epidemic that killed 90 per cent of the population. The Haida communities of Old Masset and Skidegate formed a repatriation committee and sought the return of ancestral remains from a number of museums in Canada and the US. Over a period of six years the remains of over 466 ancestors were located and returned. The process of organizing the collection, return and reburial of the ancestors proved to be an emotional journey for members of the Haida community, but one that has stimulated the renewal of cultural knowledge and activities and contributed to the process of community healing. In order to bury the ancestors with respect, members of the Haida Repatriation Committee talked with elders and researched traditional burial practices, using this information to devise reburial ceremonies informed by traditional values and methods. This involved the weaving of cedar bark mats for wrapping the remains, the construction of steamed bentwood boxes to carry the remains of each individual, and the stitching of blankets, decorated with clan crests outlined in mother-of-pearl buttons, which were used to cover each box during repatriation and reburial ceremonies. Haida artists relearned bentwood box-making processes and taught Haida teenagers about this form of their heritage. The process also stimulated the development of new songs and dances, evidence of the vitality of contemporary Haida culture. It can be noted that without a successful repatriation exercise characterised by mutual cooperation and understanding all this could not have been achieved for the people of Haida culture.

Drawing parallels with the above development from Canada, it can be noted that In Zimbabwe, a well renounced ancestral spirit Mbuya NeHanda was hanged by the colonial authorities in 1890 and she was beheaded, and the head was taken to the United Kingdom where it lies in some museum up until the present day. The general people of Zimbabwe have been calling for the return home of Mbuya Nehanda's skull. It can be noted that for the past

two decades calls were getting louder for her skull and those of her fellow comrades who also paid the ultimate price for defying the colonial authorities during the colonial period, to return home for proper and culturally descend burial, have fallen on deaf ears.

### **Connecting users in the contemporary era**

It is important to ensure that museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to redefine themselves if they are to remain viable to the youth and today's population. Repatriation as a process is well appreciated but it can be noted that if receiving communities are not empowered repatriation will surely result in "throwing away" in the name of repatriation. Given that African communities are characterised by various ethnic groups, it is important to ensure that the right ethnic grouping is identified for receiving. With the current technological trends, museums and archive need to devise mobile museums which can be taken to the communities to enhance appreciation of their collections with the indigenous communities. Mobile apps can also be handy as a way of enticing attention from the youthful generation. Repatriation can surely help in connecting indigenous communities with their lost traditions, but a lot of caution must be exercised to minimise the unfortunate instances of cultural loss

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