"Bring the Objects out of the Basement!"

The Wellcome African Collection at Manchester Museum

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Manchester Museum (MM), like most museums caring for works from Africa, includes objects with some provenance, but many others that have no collection information at all. MM holdings include more than 300 anthropological objects from Africa that came from the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum (WHMM) dispersal in 1982. The museum is part of the University of Manchester and contains approximately 15,000 African cultural heritage objects that were collected at the height of colonization and wholly connected to the expansion of the British empire to Africa. Further, there are more than 1,000 objects from Africa that are not provenanced.[1] These unprovenanced objects do not have any contextual information on where they were collected, apart from labels that only indicate "Africa?" The accompanying question mark on these labels is problematic—and is testament to absent provenance information. Typically, this shows colonial appropriating practices in which collectors did not prioritize context and communities of origin where these objects were made.

In this paper, we discuss a public engagement event that we conducted during Africa Day celebrations at MM on May 25, 2024, using selected African objects received from the WHMM as a point of dialogue (Fig. 1). The purpose of this engagement was to initiate future conversation towards conducting collaborative object biography research with African diaspora communities. Aside from object engagement, the other activities on Africa Day included African masquerade dancing, choir performances, drumming, and bead making workshops. Further, Afrobeats music and African wares market stalls marked part of the celebrations, as we sought to make the museum a more welcoming space to the ever-growing African diaspora population in Manchester (Fig. 2). This engagement, particularly the object handling sessions, gave African diasporans[2] living in Manchester a rare opportunity to see and touch objects ordinarily kept under lock and key (Fig. 3). The museum's basement storage rooms, where the objects are kept, house approximately 4.5 million objects across the cultural and natural sciences divide, making it the largest university

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1 Africa Day at Manchester Museum Invitation Poster.

museum in the UK. During Africa Day, we openly disclosed colonial contexts associated with Wellcome's African collection as we engaged with African diasporans in coproducing new narratives and meanings on the objects that we did not have prior to the event. Therefore, when we talk about inclusivity in museums, the starting point is to allow those who suffered from colonialism to be at the forefront of the telling of their own story (Sleigh 2024). Inasmuch as we think of museums as places where objects are conserved for posterity, our approach in reinterpreting these objects together with African diasporans was premised on the understanding that museums are custodians of cultural heritage acting on behalf of communities.

Apart from the Wellcome Collection material, the other African objects at MM collected at the beginning of the twentieth century out of colonial contexts are classified and categorized as the Collier, Speaks, Boyd, Halifax, and Salford Collections. To name object groups after the collector who amassed them was a well-established practice of colonial collecting, one that relegated community agency to the category of the "other." The whole idea of "othering"" comes from a nineteenth century anthropological practice of collecting objects from the colonized as palimpsest representations of their cultures, which were viewed as different and inferior compared to modern British cultures (Kuper 2023). As a result, objects' biographies were silenced upon being collected and deposited in ethnographic museums as static, frozen, mundane, and timeless "things" waiting to be gazed at within the visual encyclopedias of knowledge about the empire (MacKenzie 2009). At the same time, objects of the "other" from Africa were ordered according to regimes of Western knowledge that erased Indigenous ways of knowing. In respect to this, Sleigh (2024: 27) argues that deep-seated problems of "othering" in museums with

1 African masquerade dance at the Manchester Museum Africa Day, May 25, 2024.
Photo: Njabulo Chipangura

ethnographic collections can be disrupted by conversations on what the ethic of care means from an accountability point of view. The dislocation of objects of the "other" from original contexts to the imperial center changed and affected the ways in which they were understood by originating communities (Taiwo 2022; Barringer 1998). Meanwhile, colonial violence took many forms, and while some objects moved legitimately, we need to think broadly about what constitutes colonial violence and engage the public in this wide range of histories. This is because some African objects were collected via trophy hunting, grave robbing, punitive expeditions, salvage anthropology, pseudo donations, and missionary activities. We are particularly careful in the way we use the word "collecting," as we are conscious of different colonial collecting histories associated with African objects. For example, in the case of looted Benin cultural heritage objects that we hold, we gave our visitors the context surrounding the collection of a tusk, which was on display in our Living Worlds Gallery, as part of the infamous 1897 punitive expedition (Hicks 2021). The provocation point here was when we asked visitors what they thought MM should do with this tusk in view of the outlined violent collecting history: 95% of respondents said we must repatriate the tusk back to Nigeria (Chipangura 2023). We subsequently removed the tusk from display and it's now in the basement awaiting repatriation to Nigeria.

For this article, we focus our attention on Africa Day objects formerly in the collection of Sir Henry Wellcome, who in the nineteenth century employed White European anthropologists, colonial administrators, police officers, and missionaries to collect large amounts of material originating from different parts of the world. At MM we have portions of Wellcome's collections from Oceania, Asia, the Americas, and Africa. African objects that we hold came from people from today's Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Lesotho, Ghana, and Nigeria. These include everyday objects like beadwork, *mbira* musical instruments, headrests, drums, beaded gourds, baskets, mortars and pestles,

clay pots, knives, sweeping brooms, axes, spears, snuff boxes, beaded skirts, and necklaces that were part of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum (WMHM). Following Wellcome's death, the bulk of these ethnographic materials were dispersed, first by auction in the late 1930s, and then via a phased series of transfers to museums in the UK and overseas that continued until the 1980s (Russell 1986).

The Trail of the Wellcome Collection: Amassing Objects of the World

The focus on works from Henry Wellcome's museum for Africa Day emerged as a way to counter several of the inherently colonial aspects of the collection. The collection of Henry Solomon Wellcome, the American-born pharmaceutical magnate, amateur anthropologist, archaeologist, and philanthropist, presents an interesting case for considering the way in which meaning in a collection is bound to the subjective narrative of the collector. This is the case with MM, where all the African objects from Wellcome's collections are classified under his name in the absence of biographical information of the makers. Therefore, our object-handling session during Africa Day was meant to address this lacuna as we sought to generate collaborative dialogue with diasporans in search of new meanings and stories derived from their own lived experiences.

Formed between the 1880s and 1930s, Wellcome's collection consisted of over one million objects, five times larger than that of the Louvre and approximately three quarters of which were ethnographic (Hill 2006). His vast and disparate collection was designed to show "the actuality of every notable step in the evolution and progress from the first germ of life up to the fully developed man of today" (Henry Wellcome, cited in Arnold and Olsen 2003: 37). But the

3 Revealed Wellcome Collections on the Object Handling table during Africa Day. *Photo: Njabulo Chipangura*

4 Basket Bag
"Africa"; date unknown
Wellcome Collection 0.8683
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

collection outlived the man, and the decades that followed his death in 1936 saw its systematic dispersal and fragmentation. By the mid 1980s, the Wellcome collection had become a "widely spread diaspora" scattered among more than 100 museum sites across the globe (Hill 2006: 342).

Wellcome's collection included anything from global and Western antiquities, artworks, weaponry, musical instruments, clothing, and "ritual" items[3] to archaeological finds and ancestral remains. Wellcome did not publish on his collecting work and was famously evasive about the overall purpose and aim of his collection. His most repeated phrase, reportedly, was "never tell anyone what you propose to do until you have done it" (Turner 1980: 32). The closest he came to defining the nature and purpose of his project was when questioned by the Royal Commission for Museums in 1928. It emerged during questioning that Wellcome had various layers to his collecting project. There was the Historical Medical Museum, established to "illustrate the history of science" by placing modern developments in medicine in their historical and social context.[4] This, he informed the Commission, was a "research" institution intended for serious study and only "made available to the public under certain conditions" (Turner 1980: 3). But it became clear during the questioning that the Historical Medical Museum was to be linked to a much more ambitious project, meant to "develop a Research Museum which will deal with anthropological questions in a wide sense" (Turner 1980: 39). At a time when medicine and academic disciplines were becoming increasingly specialized, Wellcome wanted this "Research Museum" to demonstrate that the history of medicine was inseparable from "the study of man" in a wider sense and that knowledge was, in fact, "diverging all the time" (Turner 1980: 1).

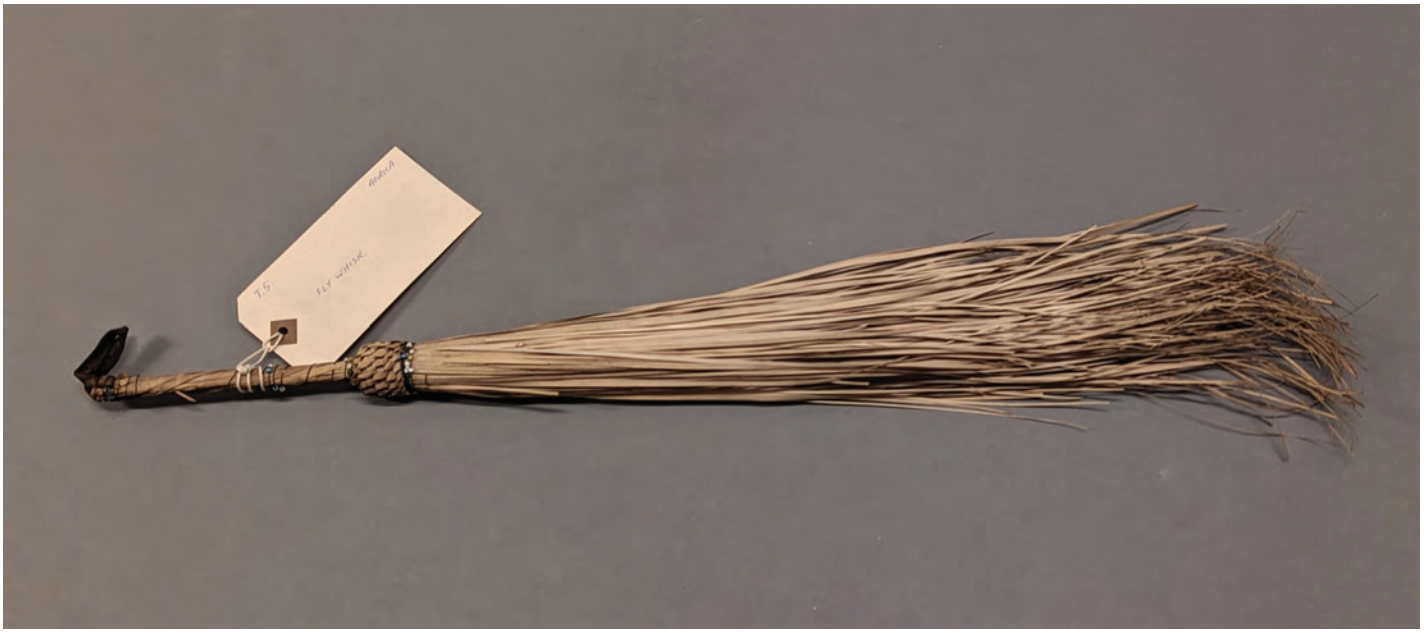
Wellcome was also clear to the Commission that his Research Museum was guided by evolutionist principles. He declared his nearest counterparts to be Pitt Rivers and Frederick Horniman, who both believed that the story of human progress could be discovered by studying the differences among objects of the same type from different cultures arranged in historical sequence.[5] In Wellcome's words, the objects in his museum would illustrate "Human Progress" and "show from the beginning, the evolution and development throughout, the passing on from one stage of progress to another of particular objects."[6] It followed, in Wellcome's

mind, that the more objects he amassed, the more complete a picture of human progress he would be able to construct. He collected with tremendous zeal and industry, and in the 1920s, Wellcome's annual expenditure on acquisitions exceeded even that of the British Museum.[7] He is the perfect example of Cardinal and Elsner's characterization of the "totalizing collector," who "can brook no constraint, can show no hesitation, in the compulsion to possess a complete category in each and every of its variations" (Cardinal and Elsner 1994: 3). Wellcome collected cross-culturally and without constraint. His study of anthropology, being so broad, lacked a depth of research into specific cultures and was the antithesis of the school of field anthropology pioneered by Franz Boas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His acquisition methods were those of a "business man" as opposed to a "connoisseur" (Turner 1980: 2) and he bought largely on the secondary market, employing agents and museum staff to buy at auctions and from dealers in Britain and abroad. He invariably purchased many auction lots—in many cases, entire existing collections. Wellcome remained personally involved in the acquisition process, marking up sales catalogues and giving the final say on sales prices (see Griffin, this issue).

The mass of objects in Wellcome's collection and the research that Skinner (1986) conducted into the purchasing activities of the Historical Medical Museum suggest that Wellcome made little distinction between types and values of objects and was not interested in paying high prices for artifacts of outstanding merit or beauty. He regularly bought duplicates or replicas of objects he already possessed, believing them to be useful for study purposes, and a lack of provenance was not something that would necessarily prevent a purchase (Skinner 1986: 395). Mary Cathcart Borer, a scientific assistant at the Historical Medical Museum in the 1920s, recalls that salesrooms assistants were wise to Wellcome's collecting practices and deliberately salted their catalogues with "a good deal of rubbish … for which they were pretty certain he would bid" (James 1994: 356).

To use a phrase repeated by Wellcome in the official Historical Medical Museum handbooks, when an object or group of objects entered his collection, its purpose was to form "a link in the chain of human experience," as illustrated by the microcosm of the collection.[8] The Wellcome "flimsy" archival cards inherited by the museums that received material after his death invariably demonstrate that all that was routinely recorded at acquisition was a transcription of sales catalogue entries or brief descriptions establishing identity and geographical location. The cards sometimes do not include any information about an object's cultural significance or use. Wellcome believed that as long as sufficient data was gathered together, "scientific" researchers would construct their theories at a later date by studying the "links

5 Quiver and arrows
"Africa"; date unknown
Wellcome Collection 0.9321/12
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins



6 Fly whisk
"Africa"; date unknown
Collector unknown, T5
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

in the chain" of the collection en masse (see Lawrence 2003: 62). Often in its secondary phase of collection or separated from information that would relate it to its provenance, the status of the individual object and its biography was secondary to the status of the collection as a whole.

When Wellcome's life came to an end in 1936, the staff and Trustees of the Wellcome Foundation inherited full responsibility for the mass of objects that had been acquired during his lifetime, the majority of which bore little relation to the history of medicine. The fact that he had failed or refused to make real plans for the future of his collection left his employees with a near-impossible task.[9] The evolutionist method which underpinned his collecting practice, already losing favor when Wellcome began his project in the early 1900s, was also becoming increasingly discredited during the 1920s and 1930s, further damaging the status of this vast collection of objects (Lawrence 2003: 66). Baudrillard's description of the withdrawal of the collector into an "all-encompassing object system … impervious to communication from others" in which objects fail to be fashioned into "a discourse oriented otherwise than toward oneself" is resonant with Wellcome's project (Baudrillard 1994: 24). Wellcome's collection, in all its completeness and incompleteness, had failed to establish a narrative that could be understood or embraced by the outside world or its immediate inheritors at the Wellcome Foundation. The Trustees made the decision that material not related in a broad sense to the history of medicine would be sold at auction or transferred to museums that could provide a more suitable home. Following Wellcome's death, the bulk of the ethnographic material was dispersed to new homes, first by auction in the late 1930s and then via a phased series of transfers to museums in the UK and overseas that continued until the 1980s (Russell 1986). Manchester Museum also benefited from this redistribution, receiving between 1981 and 1982 over 1,000 objects in total.[10] Objects that came from Africa in particular constituted around 300 items collected from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Lesotho, Namibia, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Sudan, and Nigeria.

Curatorial Humility

We acknowledge the problematic history of the Wellcome's collections from Africa through deploying curatorial humility as both a theory and concept that promotes transparency, truth telling, accountability, disclosure, and openness (Alberda 2022). Curatorial humility encourages critical reflexivity and reciprocity by collaborating with originating communities to address epistemic injustices and paternalism associated with museum practices (Alberda 2020). We achieved this empirically by bringing out objects from the basement where they were concealed, classified, and essentialized as representations of cultures of the "other" (Soares 2023) to begin building a collective dialogue with African diasporans looking at what care means for them, their ideas, and their relationships with these "objects" which are living cultures. Within this reciprocal engagement with African diasporans, we did not position anthropological knowledge as superior nor as having a more legitimate or privileged claim over the past. Instead, during all the conversations that we had, we allowed community

7 Reed bag
"Africa"; date unknown
Collector unknown
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

members to elaborate their varied social understandings of the objects and their uses, both past and present. In adopting this inclusive approach on Africa Day, we agree with Soares's (2023) anticolonial museum concept and its application at MM as we also fully acknowledged the pervasive presence of the "others" who are here to stay and to share their voices by contesting hegemonic narratives that previously excluded them from their cultural heritage contained in ethnographic museums. Furthermore, these museums were built on the foundations and legacies of the empire and still entwined in museological discourses of extraction and misrepresentation (Linn, Hall, Nunn, and Cromwell 2024; Longair and McAleer 2012).

If we acknowledge that meaning in an object or collection is always culturally and historically located (Hall 1997), it is important to make connections between objects and communities—either diasporic or originating. However, the whole idea of searching for "crystallized communities" by museums is deeply problematic and rooted within tokenist approaches and extractive tendencies. To start with, communities are inherently heterogenous, with different interests and aspirations. Imagined museum communities (see Anderson 1983) are now serving as neocolonial sites of exploitation marked by glaring inequalities and power struggles that favor curatorial authority in collaborative practices (Boast 2011). The question then is how did we do things differently at MM in view of these growing critiques? The whole idea of hosting Africa Day was collectively thought about from the onset together with Professor Erinma Bell MBE DL—a community peace activist of Nigerian pareentage and the first Black woman to have a statue at Manchester City Town Hall dedicated to her activism role in ending gun violence in Moss Side and Longsight

Southern Manchester.[11] Erimna cofounded a charity organization called Community Alliance for Renewal Inner South Manchester Area (CARISMA) in 2007. This is a frontline community-based group set up to offer life chances for people in the community by giving them positive alternatives other than violent street, gun, and gang crimes.

Erinma continues to lead on work around issues such as restorative justice, peace, and conflict resolution as well as peace making, peace keeping, and peace building within an urban environment.[12] Erinma's prior knowledge of working with African communities in Manchester was crucial for the success of Africa Day, as she was able to coordinate the African choir, African drumming, and African masquerading dancing. The precursor was when Erinma invited the first author to give a talk on the Benin Bronzes during the 2023 Africa Day Celebrations she hosted at the University of Manchester (Chipangura 2023). We thereafter saw a huge potential for engaging with African disaporans if we were to host the next event at Manchester Museum in view of leveraging the conversation around African collections and their problematic histories of acquisition. Apart from Erimna, we also worked with Dr. Charles Layman Kachitsa in putting together programming for Africa Day. Charles is a community leader, academic, and entrepreneur who is passionate about making a contribution to society to make people realize their full potential and live a positive, harmonious life. At community level, he is the chairman of African Council UK (ACUK), vice chair of Africa Israel Partnership (AIP), chairman of the APC–Apostolic Pastoral Congress Welfare Committee, and is the founder, director, and chair of the Flames Heritage, Ltd. He has done vast work in the area of heritage and Africa reawakening. What we are emphasizing here is that there was a true sense of collaboration from the outset with different community partners, and all of the activities on Africa Day were not

8 Conical basket
"Africa"; date unknown
Collector unknown
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

9 Mat
"Africa"; date unknown
Collector unknown
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

parachuted on them by MM but rather agreed upon as a collective endeavor. Monthly planning meetings were held between January and May 2025, either in person or online, as we prepared the program of the day. The final program (see Fig. 1) had an African choir, African masquerade dance, African drumming, Afrobeats, an African collections object-handling table, family workshops, African wares stalls, and an Africa Day public lecture.

Mined, Revealed, and Reimagined: Wellcome's Collection on Africa Day

In working with these partners, Africa Day activities at MM were conceived in order to reveal collections that were in the basement and build new collaborative understandings and biographies drawn from diasporans' lived experiences as part of decolonizing knowledge production. The day itself was punctuated by activities that celebrated the diversity of African cultures using objects for socially engaged curatorial practices. Therefore, lived experiences brought museum objects alive and subsequently heralded polyphonic dialogue with diasporans (Sleigh 2024). In view of taking this empirical approach, we argue that decolonization and repairing of past injustices starts with the people through their involvement in museum practices that previously marginalized them (Soares and Witcomb 2023). Collaborative approaches like these constitute the broader agenda for decolonizing museum practices in that they confront long-standing imbalances regarding who makes decisions and who benefits (Chipangura, Bond, and Sack 2020). Read in this light, we also agree with Bruchac (2014), who argues that a decolonizing agenda informed by community collaborations counters the dominance of colonial ideologies and improves the accuracy of indigenous representations. For example, during this collaborative engagement,

10 Rattle made of seed pods
"Africa"; date unknown
Collector unknown
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

stories on the cultural significance of African drums and their uses in different ceremonies emerged as people referred to them as "talking drums," which are not lifeless, as they appear in museum classifications.

Methodologically, the choice of selecting objects from the Wellcome collection and bringing them out to the handling table on Africa day (Figs. 4–12) was informed by the diversity of this collection and prior conversations that the first author has been having with colleagues in the UK, United States, Zambia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe who are also grappling with similar dispersed collections under their curatorial care. Over the past two years, an informal group was formed among the Science Museum, Manchester Museum, Wellcome Collection, National Museum of Ghana (Accra), Livingstone Museum of Zambia, Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, and Fowler Museum at UCLA to find ways to connect the objects with originating communities in Africa. Elsewhere, Simon (2010) describes collaborations as fulfilling the mandate of what she calls the participatory museum, which is different from the colonial museum in that it involves stakeholders and is central to cultural and community life. The participatory museum is closely linked to Clifford's (1997) and Pratt's (1991) concept of the contact zone, which is a force for inclusionist, collaborative programs and the development of mutual interest with all social groups.

Meanwhile, nineteenth century collectors like Sir Henry Wellcome often justified removing native objects from their culture of origin to be placed in museums by arguing that they were rescuing them from obscurity and neglect (Classen and Howes 2006). Within this school of thought, which was driven by salvage anthropology at that time, objects were thought to better off in the clean, bright, protected environment of the museum under the aegis of knowledgeable scholars/curators. Museums also became sites of surveillance and public order, in which strict bodily discipline was required from museum visitors who were expected to be as close to pure spectators as possible: not to touch, not to eat, not to speak loudly (Bennett 2018). It cannot be overlooked that museums have been complicit in some of the worst collecting practices, ranging from looting, appropriation, dislocation, and colonial violence visible in

the ways in which objects were collected and imprisoned in the museum. As argued by Wintle, "over the last twenty years, the museum has increasingly been posited as a committed participant in the British imperial project" (2012: 37). During Africa Day Celebrations, we also came to grips with the reality that museums have the capacity to stimulate productive conservation using objects as contact zones (Pratt 1991; Clifford 1997).

Africa Day at Manchester Museum was celebrated within the spirit of *ubuntu,* an African philosophy that denotes ideals of togetherness and sharing that connect all humanity. We joined the rest of the world in celebrating Africa Day—an annual commemoration of the foundation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), today known as the African Union, on May 25, 1963. For Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, Africa Day signifies unity, pride in being African, and an opportunity to celebrate their heritage by donning traditional outfits and putting on vibrant displays of culture and diversity. Significantly, Manchester is an important city for Africans because it hosted the Pan African Congress in 1945 intended to address the decolonization of Africa from Western imperial powers at Chorlton-on-Medlock Town Hall. The Congress demanded an end to colonial rule and racial discrimination as well as the recognition of human rights and equality of economic opportunity for all peoples of African heritage. We put out social media and website posts clearly articulating the significance of this historic event, explaining why Africa Day at MM was going to be an important event. Dialogue and conversations generated by diasporans as they were seeing selected objects from Wellcome's African collection for the first time brought with it intercultural exchange and new relationships that will further progress our collaborative provenance and biographical research. Most of the disaporans afterward signed up to be involved in future conversations on African collections.

In revealing everyday objects like headrests, *mbira*, *marimba*, drums, beaded gourds, baskets, and snuff boxes from the Wellcome African collections, we were inspired by a highly influential 1992 exhibition at the Maryland Center for History and Culture (MCHS) called *Mining the Museum,* curated by Fred Wilson (Mignolo 2011). In that seminal exhibition, Wilson juxtaposed silver repoussé vessels and elegant nineteenth-century armchairs with slave shackles and a whipping post. *Mining the Museum*'s texts, spotlights, recordings, and objects traditionally consigned to storage drew attention to Black and Indigenous American histories, effectively unmaking the familiar museological narrative as a narrow ideological project (Mignolo 2011). Objects of slavery that were unearthed from the basement at MCHS gave us a similar impetus to bring out of the basement and juxtapose Wellcome's African collections, thereby allowing diasporans to have a conversation with them. We took this engagement a step further by allowing physical contact by the diaspora community. As already mentioned, Africa Day celebrations at MM on May 25, 2024 were inspired by earlier conversations with Professor Erinma Bell, who made the effort to reach out to African diasporans during the planning phase, alerting them to this event as well as identifying potential performers. These performers were drawn from immigrants from South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Nigeria. By the same premise, objects from

11 Oval tray
"Africa"; date unknown
Salford Collection 0.9321/628
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

Wellcome's Africa collections were selected from the basement to be displayed on the handling table with a focus on these countries. Interactions at the handling table generated a lot of interest as diasporans inquired how they could be involved in future biographical questions on the collections. Those who expressed interest left contact details on the registration table and we have been doing follow ups after the event (Fig. 3).

Diaspora Community Engagement During Africa Day and the Future of the Ethnographic Museum

Approximately 200 people attended Africa Day celebrations at MM: families, young adults, and older people, of whom the majority were diasporans who reside in Manchester. However, within Greater Manchester there were other places where Africa Day was also being celebrated. For example, the Caribbean African Health Network organized an event at the University of Bolton and the North Manchester Community Partnership had a belated event in Moston on June 8, 2024.

In the middle of joyous Africa Day celebrations punctuated by loud music, dance, and social interactions at MM, we invited diasporans to interface with selected objects from Wellcome's collections that came from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria. We posed the following curatorial questions: What do the objects make you think of? Have you seen or experienced any of these objects before? What are your thoughts around representation of African cultural heritage at Manchester Museum? Respondents were asked to write their reflections on small pieces of paper that were collected at the end of the object handling session. Following are some of the responses that we got from this engagement:

12 Bridle
"Africa"; date unknown
Salford Collection 0.9321/190.a
Part of the unprovenanced African collections at Manchester Museum
Photo: Abigail Hawkins

Response 1: This experience has given me more ideas for the African folklore novel I am writing and hoping to publish one day. I am interested in getting to know about African cultural heritage objects that the museum keeps in the basement and like to be involved in future conversations.

Response 2: Use the objects to educate children about African history.

Response 3: Why have these amazing African objects been locked away in the basement since 1900s?

Response 4: Thank you for holding this event. We need more events like this at the museum which engages with Africans in the diaspora where they are able to see, touch, and talk about the artifacts. This was both an educational and wonderful opportunity that doesn't happen often.

Response 5: It's wonderful to have an event like this which is dedicated to African culture. It is very moving and impactful to see my face on the sculptures. I feel very connected to my heritage through this.

Response 6: Being African is the culmination of stories being passed down through art, song, word of mouth, and heart. It lives in our way of life even today.

Response 7: Represent and educate always—but this could be done with replicas; give back those things [that] were appropriated.

Response 8: The artefacts are beautiful though and must not be taken back now as African governments and societies are not ready to receive and preserve them. "opinion from an African"

Response 9: Love seeing these African objects. I believe that they should stay only if there is an agreement to benefit the original cultures where they originated from.

Response 10: As a philosopher and as a matter of principle, I think all the stolen objects should be returned to their owners. That is not a negotiable fact.

Response 11: Amazing cultural feeling as I am proud to see and feel represented.

Response 12: So glad that these instruments can now be seen in their full glory and to be enjoyed by all.

Response 13: These objects should be repatriated and perhaps in the process 3D scans and replicas could be produced to allow people to retain some form of educational experience and better visualise cultural history.

Response 14: I believe the objects should be repatriated. I think what Germany has done in creating Digital Benin is interesting, allowing people all over the world to still see the objects online. But with such a long history of violence and colonisation, the objects deserve to be repatriated.

Response 15: Lovely to see these African objects. It would be wonderful to see the whole collection in the basement.

Response 16: Really lovely to speak with the staff here today and have the objects brought back to life. Such important work is being done to ensure knowledge isn't lost. Bring these collections upstairs permanently

Response 17: Repatriate as you don't need original objects to tell stories/history—they belong to their home!

Response 18: I really enjoyed hearing about the different collections—they deserve to be out of the basement and to be returned to their homes.

Response 19: I think Western museums should replicate if they must, but return original items to their homes. Keep an open line of communication with other museums in order to trace the origins of the artefacts. The idea to give them back is amazing!!

Response 20: Bring the collections out of the basement! Amazing work relating to repatriation but replace them with replicas. It is crucial to talk about brutality of colonialism to make people remember it.

Response 21: Keep the collections out of the basement for people to see, maybe have people who know how to play the instruments come to play them on a days like this. Keep inviting people to share their lived knowledge and keep repatriating as possible.

Response 22: Hold a parent/student event where students come with their parents who will be able to identify the objects. Incentivise the parents to attend with their kids. Hold over a few days to give parents options. Collaborate and or partner with schools across Manchester.

Response 23: Working with university students to spread awareness via social media or having a stall at the student union.

Response 24: There is need for provenance research to find information about the social biographies and history of the collections. Museums should change western interpretations by giving African diasporans a voice like this. This is commendable.

Response 25: Share online that way you can reach a wider audience, generate more conversations and hopefully help locate the provenance, people, culture of the objects. Get them out of the basement.

Response 26: I loved learning about the objects and how some are being repatriated. It's is so smart to use replicas for those that already have been too. It is sad though how much we don't know about the stories of the objects and how they have been used. I hope we will come to know more. It is so great that the objects were brought out of the basement.

Response 27: The objects made me think of home and my grandmother preparing dinner for the family. I have seen a lot of the objects back in Somalia. Born and raised in London it can be really fantastic to see a part of African culture here as well. I extremely enjoyed Africa day and all of the displays.

Reflecting on the meaning of Africa day and what it means being African in the diaspora in light of *ubuntu*, one respondent succinctly put it across by in the following narration:

One day at work my colleague (she is British from London) asked me, "Wadzie, do you know Chioma [surname withheld]?" I said no and she asked again "What about Lethu?" again I said No. My assumption was maybe these people are our coworkers, but I haven't met them, so I asked her who these people were, to my surprise she said The[y] were her former workmates from London—I was confused, I mean, how was I supposed to know her former colleagues from London????? And then she said, "thought you said you are from Africa and these guys are from Africa too" OMG!!! I remembered the book titled *Africa Is not a Country* by Dipo Faloyin and I realised that there are still a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding Africa. It took me hours to explain to my colleague that Africa is a continent, but the continent is far more than the sum of its stereotypes and

> the most important thing to know is that Africa is not a country; it's a continent of 54 countries that are diverse culturally and geographically. Yesterday's Africa Day at Manchester Museum I took time to introspect, and one of the questions that was at the back of my mind was "Why do they see Africa as a country?" Fortunately, the event was diverse I personally had a chat with people from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya and I think my question was answered. Africa, we are ONE!!! Ubuntu!!!, It is that belief that we are all defined by our compassion and humanity towards others that binds us together and makes it look like the whole continent is just a small country in the corner. I am AFRICAN, I am so proud to be an African. So many diversities and uniqueness.

Overall, from the feedback that we received, it's clear that the diasporans want the objects to be taken out of the basement and to interact with them more often, beyond Africa Day. This would lead to a display that celebrates the diversity of African cultural heritage, which is conspicuously absent at the present moment. Objects that were on the handling table include drums, headrests, beaded gourds, *marimba*, and *mbira*—musical instruments which have never been displayed before as they are always in storage. Questions about repatriation were also asked by many of the respondents, who said that they want the objects to go back to African communities. In the case of the Wellcome Collection, which has specific provenance information on the countries these objects came from, their return would entail a proactive engagement with originating communities to facilitate such returns. However, unprovenanced objects that are just identified as "Africa" will require both diasporan and originating communities to be brought into a conversation that can pave the way for collaborative provenance research informed by their knowledge, memories, and lived experiences. Meanwhile, our open interactions with African diasporans challenged the anthropological category of "objects" as things that were collected by Sir Henry Wellcome and, in the process, portrayed the makers, users, and owners as anonymous, as well as silenced and obscured the biographies and meanings embedded in these "objects" (Minott 2019). Engaging with African diasporans during this event resulted in a greater sense of understanding of Wellcome's African collection that had not been seen before in public. Many were seeing the objects for the first time and did not have the slightest idea that MM had so many African objects in the basement. Therefore, truth telling and openly engaging with diaspora communities can potentially challenge the authoritarian control previously vested in the hands of curators towards building collaborative dialogue that unlocks silent biographical meanings of objects.

Collaboration or Extraction?

Although community collaboration has become a major museum decolonizing methodology, sometimes there is no critical evaluation of what this means in terms of geographies of power (Shelton 2018; Thomas 2019). For this same reason, Boast argues that no matter how much we might think of pluralizing knowledge production in museums through collaborations, the intellectual control will remain vested in the hands of curators (2011: 4). Thus collaborative methods still produce unequal exercise of power and self-referential knowledge because in most cases the researched community has no control over the information extracted (Chipangura 2024). Hence, despite the good intentions of making collaboration a decolonial strategy, it can still perpetuate the same exploitation inherent in traditional research (La Salle 2010). Similarly, Linn, Hall, Nunn, and Cromwell (2024: 3) argue that, more often than not, collaborations are designed internally to suit the needs of museums, wherein collaborators are seen as contributors and not partners. As mentioned earlier, during the planning process of Africa Day with our community partners we were conscious of the possibility of uneven power relations that could potentially stifle their voices in what Lynch (2017) characterizes as "museum empowerment lite." This was eliminated by being transparent from the start and stepping back to facilitate dialogue with diasporans without holding on to all the authority and power.

By being this democratic, we were able to practice decolonization beyond its now common and popularized use as a metaphor or buzzword (Tuck and Yang 2012: Taiwo 2022). Bringing objects that are part of the Wellcome Collection from the basement among many other Africa Day activities was a decolonial methodology informed by sharing control and authority in storytelling with diasporan communities. Significantly, we hope that the successful story of Africa Day will shape our two- to four-year future ambition toward co-creating a new space at MM together with African diasporans that will celebrate the diversity of African cultural heritage by using objects from the collection as contact zones for more dialogue.

Reflections and Afterthoughts

From the outset our decolonial approach was premised on critiquing the colonial gaze, as we were all aware that one cannot decolonize a museum without delinking its colonial matrix of power. The practice of collecting and classifying objects is deeply embedded in colonialism itself, which created the museum institution as we know it today (Mignolo 2011; Abungu 2019; Vawda 2019). By being reflexive, we were critical of the colonial foundations of MM by admitting that museum authority is no longer premised on curatorial expertise but instead ought to be informed by knowledge-sharing and intercultural exchanges (Soares and Witcomb 2023). We argue that to decolonize empirically the "other" must share their voices and contested hegemonic narratives presented in colonial museums (Soares and Witcomb 2023). This was taken into consideration from the fact that colonial museums like Manchester continue to reinforce notions of the "other," thereby deforming the identity of the colonized and displaying their cultures as frozen, mute, and mundane in showcases (Soares 2023). Elsewhere, Soares (2023: 14) argues that decolonization is not something that is apprehended in museum manuals as a theory but rather must be regarded as a movement and an ongoing process towards liberation and political and social change. To decolonize as an action requires acknowledging the multiple ways that colonial museums can be driven by communities traditionally marginalized and excluded in participatory projects and exhibitions (Chipangura 2024; Linn, Hall, Nunn, and Cromwell 2024). The Wellcome African collections engagement during Africa Day Celebrations at MM was a step towards an empirical decolonial practice.

Notes

1 Njabulo Chipangura is currently carrying out research on unprovenanced and unaccessioned African objects that are only labelled "Africa?" Over the past three years, I have been conducting provenance and biographical research on this collection with the African diasporans in Manchester from Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Lesotho, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Tanzania with an interest in displaced African heritage.

2 "Diaspora" has become a popular term of use by museums in the UK in reference to communities of people that migrated mostly from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia post British colonial rule. The origin of the word itself is connected to the Windrush Generation, which came aboard the Windrush ship that docked at Tilbury in London on June 22, 1948, bringing 500 passengers from the Caribbean to help rebuild Britain after World War II. This occasion is seen as symbolic of the start of postwar Commonwealth Britain and its shift toward becoming a multiethnic society.

3 Wellcome defined objects cross-culturally, hence his use of the catch-all term "ritual object" (see Mack 2003: 218).

4 Wellcome, Written answers to the Royal Commission on Museums, 1928, p. 2.

5 See Pearce on the collection of Pitt Rivers and Scott (Pearce 1992: 8), and Scott on the Evolutionist aims of Frederick Horniman (Pearce 1994).

6 Transcript of Henry Solomon Wellcome's evidence to the Royal Commission, Dec. 1928, p. 17.

7 See Skinner (1986: 383) for details of expenditure from the archives of the Historical Medical Museum.

8 Booklet on the Research Institutions and Museums founded by Henry S. Wellcome, 1934, p. 17.

9 See Russell (1986: S4) for provisions made by Wellcome in his will for the running of the museum and collection.

10 Manchester Museum Annual Report 1980–1981, p. 16.

11 https://www.greatermancunians.blog/dr-erinma-bell-peace-activist.

12 See https://www.greatermancunians.blog/dr-erinma-bell-peace-activist

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