

The Benin tusk and Zulu beadwork: Practicing decolonial work at Manchester Museum through shared authority

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Abstract

The museum world is currently grappling with questions of how to decolonize anthropological collections and many of these debates are epistemologically oriented. In pursuit of colonial ordering, material culture was extracted from colonized societies, deprived of its contextual meaning, and scrutinized through the lens of colonial knowledge. This article considers how an empirical decolonial practice can be applied drawing on from the current work at the Manchester Museum (MM). Dialogue, open engagements, multivocal conversations, collaborations, and shared authority in knowledge production are some of the decolonial strategies that I share. To illustrate this praxis turn in museum decolonial work, I first look at how we have addressed cultural objects looted from Benin in 1897 that we hold and “contain” at MM in our living cultures collection, underscoring a commitment by MM to transparency and a provision of access to the living collection by different groups of people. The second example is drawn from a collaborative provenance research that I undertook with Nongoma community members in South Africa in rewriting biographies of Zulu beadwork that we house at MM. Overall, I argue that decolonization should embrace a relational practice of caring for objects through active relations of reciprocity and dialogue with communities. The downside of decolonial practices and how are they are inherently shaped by power imbalances and tensions between curators and communities is also critically discussed.

KEYWORDS

collaborations, colonial violence, decolonization, dialogue, living cultures, tensions

THE MANCHESTER MUSEUM: A NEW APPROACH TO CARE, IMAGINATION, AND INCLUSIVITY

The Manchester Museum (MM) is a part of the University of Manchester and has more than 25,000 ethnographic collections, mostly dispossessed from local communities and ordered and categorized according to the geographic regions of Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and Asia. The African collection at MM has more than 10,000 ethnographic “objects” and I am responsible for the curation with care of this entire living cultures collection. I want to emphasize here from the outset that we acknowledge the problematic history of our collections and that our acts of curation are not a domain of exclusive expertise constrained by dictates of disciplines. Rather curating is a space for facilitating dialogue and building active relationships with descendant

and diaspora communities whose African collections we hold. MM has been part of the University of Manchester since it first opened its doors in 1890. It is one of the largest university museums in the United Kingdom (Merriman & Logunov, 2012). The original Victorian building was designed by renowned architect Alfred Waterhouse, and the museum has become home to around 4.5 million objects (Alberti, 2009; Manchester Museum, 2023). The first of those objects came from the Manchester Natural History Society, particularly the collection of local industrialist and naturalist John Leigh Philips. Philips's success in textile manufacturing rested on slave-grown cotton. MM was born of civic spirit and curiosity but also of the British Empire (Alberti, 2009; Merriman & Logunov, 2012). The collections grew as part of the colonial project and soon encompassed human history alongside natural history. Our work to understand and address this complex history and colonial past shapes

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our actions today (Manchester Museum, 2023). This includes research and important conversations about how we can best care for and share collections.

Like many other European institutions—the establishment of MM came from an emerging interest in understanding ancient and contemporary worlds from the beginning of the 19th century, which was fueled by Victorian and Edwardian science (Merriman & Logunov, 2012; Morphy, 2020; Oswald, 2022). Encyclopedic museums took shape as global repositories of extracted objects, sites of ordering them according to colonial knowledge, and spaces where the public could acquire knowledge of (and control over) colonized peoples and cultures (Alberti, 2009; Bennett, 2018). European colonialism was an epistemic project bound up with Enlightenment notions of reason, progress, and modernity, which imagined Europe as the global site of scientific knowledge and which set about creating the non-Western world as its mirror (Mignolo, 2011; Morphy, 2020). Admittedly, MM is also complicit of amassing African “objects” during the same period and perpetuating the thinking that supported colonization (Minott, 2019). Colonial knowledge produced colonial practices of ordering African “objects” that drew upon Linnaean classification and informed scientific racism, educational curricula, and legal and administrative frameworks. In pursuit of colonial ordering, material culture was extracted from colonized societies, deprived of its original and contextual meaning, and scrutinized through the lens of colonial knowledge (Chipangura & Mataga, 2021; Muller & Langhill, 2022).

However, collaborations between local and global museum constituencies, and between source communities and museums, are providing an opportunity to reimagine the meanings of these objects as living cultures (Muller & Langhill, 2022). Across the world, the public-facing work that museums do, and their responsibilities toward their collections and constituencies, has increasingly come under the spotlight. Moving beyond epistemic cultures of ordering objects as materialities, MM is marshaling previously marginalized Indigenous knowledge to challenge colonially derived curatorial practices. Various approaches have been suggested for museums as they engage with local communities from where objects were dislocated and categorized in accordance with colonial epistemes (Muller & Langhill, 2022; Oswald, 2022). These include co-creation, co-production, social inclusion, and co-curatorship in museum spaces (Chipangura & Mataga, 2021). Drawing from these insights, our approaches at MM have centered around the application of relational curatorship as both a method and concept that we are using in reordering living cultures. In this respect, MM has progressively sought to transform into a space of inclusion and to facilitate conversations about the meanings of objects rather than presenting them as materialities of ordered cultural knowledge. Our new approach to curatorship is a profoundly relational practice of caring for objects through active relations and dialogue with our diaspora and descendant communities. Through emphasizing the ethics of care, inclusion, and imagination, we have begun to rethink the African collection collaboratively. A commitment to inclusion means greater collaboration and coproduction and foregrounding diverse perspectives so that we become relevant to these communities.

Imagination underscores an engagement with big ideas, bringing people together to tell stories and to explore important questions and research (Manchester Museum, 2023). Our value of care is at the heart of acknowledging the role that colonial violence played in ordering our collections as we look at what it means to care for people, their ideas, and their relationships with these “objects,” which are living cultures. All these values directly speak to our pragmatic approach to doing decolonial work as we advance the notion that while museums are about collections, museums are also about people (Ali, 2023).

While museums historically have constructed narratives that legitimized and normalized knowledge of (Western) self and (non-Western) other, today the act of curation is a radical undertaking, a “transgression,” or act of “deviance” (Esche, 2011). Instead of regarding museums as clear and irrefutable senders of messages, calls are being made for the inclusion of multiple voices and pushing them to adopt social missions. In so many ways, museums are also being challenged to give up their authoritarian voice of control and allow the public or communities to speak for themselves, making them less temples and more forums of interactions (Muller & Langhill, 2022). Many museums are trying to become more socially responsible in their curatorial and public programming and are responding to social issues affecting communities (Bautista, 2013; Silverman, 2015). It is aspirational to argue that museums can provide an enabling forum that empowers community members to actively engage and take control of their future (Sandell, 2002: 7).

RELATIONAL CURATORSHIP AND THE DISOBEDIENT MUSEUM

Museum objects become more extraordinary when they connect with people in active curatorial relationships and meaning-making, rather than merely being treated as static and frozen in displays or storage rooms. I refer to this as relational curatorship, which we have embraced at MM as a decolonial practice. With imagination, the objects we care for help to build understanding between cultures and a more sustainable world (Ali, 2023). In relational curatorship, objects are neither treated as frozen nor ordered in a timeless past but are reordered as living beings connected to the present and future in continuous ongoing relationships (Golding & Modest, 2019; Muller & Langhill, 2022). These objects connect people, places, and events. Equally, they represent histories of continuity and change. By using relational curatorship as both a theory and a method, we seek to reimagine a curatorial practice that is more inclusive and open to views from communities that were subjected to different forms of colonial violence and regimes of global ordering. In our attempt to reorder knowledge using relational curatorship, we recognize and accept communities as experts, sources of knowledge, and research partners. It is correct to posit that MM has become more of a repository of social histories by moving beyond the confines of physical and temporal materialities (Oswald, 2022).

Furthermore, the collaborative production of new knowledge in relational curatorship is centered on the application of the practice of “waking up objects” through touching, looking, smelling, and listening, which is a representation of living

cultures. This approach emphasizes liveliness and counters the colonial emphasis on disciplinarity, ordering, and containment (Muller & Langhill, 2022). Meanwhile, relational curatorship draws its inspiration from what Message (2018) defines and describes as the disobedient museum—one which prioritizes engagement with formerly ostracized communities outside the dictates of instrumentalized forms of knowledge production informed by scientific studies in disciplines such as archeology, anthropology, and ethnography. The disobedient outlook is thus a typical model in which MM is anchored as we embrace collaborations with communities in a non-disciplinary or undisciplined way (Message, 2018). This disobedient museum is a form of engagement outside the scientific categories of knowledge production, and it prioritizes community participation (Message, 2018). In light of these developments, MM has developed holistic approaches and methods in interpreting objects and collections in an interrelated connection with community aspirations and ways of seeing.

Meanwhile, in an African context, objects have potency and are treated by communities as living beings that they can use, touch, smell, and taste. Although these “objects” may appear stagnant within ethnographic classifications in museums, they have individual biographies and carry with them important meanings connected to their ritual and cultural functions located in their societies of origin. Being the curator of living cultures at MM aligns well with the notions of un-disciplining the museum through a recognition that the “objects” that I am responsible for are not just static things but rather are living cultures representing living people and their practices. Before 2018, this curatorship position was predicated on disciplinary thinking that categorized and classified living cultures as anthropological objects. The anthropological category of “objects” framed the makers, users, and owners as silent and anonymous, with the meaning behind these objects subsequently obscured (Minott, 2019). The other curatorial change that promotes our decolonial work at MM came with the appointment of a new curator of Indigenous perspectives in 2020. It can be argued from a positionality perspective that the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in our work is a further testament to how much we are sharing authority and embracing different ways of knowing and doing within our relational curatorial approaches.

THE BENIN TUSK: TRUTH TELLING AND OPEN DISCLOSURE, “RETURN THE TUSK!”

Benin is a kingdom in Nigeria, West Africa that was ruled by a succession of kings known as Obas since the 14th century. Objects play important roles in our daily lives but objects themselves have complex lives, none more so than the carved elephant that is among nine positively identified cultural objects that we have at MM from the Kingdom of Benin (Welsh, 2021). It is thought that this tusk served as a spiritual point of contact between the Oba and his ancestors (Blackmun, 1997). This tusk is among 135 similar elephant carvings that are dispersed around museums in Europe and in the United States. Around

1750, Oba Okeugbuda—the leader of the powerful West African Kingdom of Benin honored his father Eresonyen by having an carved elephant tusk with legendary scenes in his memory. For decades it sat proudly on an altar for worshiping ancestors (Amos, 1980). This massive tusk measures 80 inches in length. The motif on the tusk denotes history, folklore, and religious beliefs associated with the Kingdom of Benin. The figures on tusk were done in honor of the reigning Oba, who commissioned the art (Blackmun, 1997). Representations carved on the tusk include crocodiles, mud fish, and frogs, symbolically showing the connection between land and sea—all of these water species were abundant in the waterways of the kingdom. In 1884, European colonial powers met in Berlin to carve up the land, resources, and people of Africa. Benin had been a cultural, learning, and trading center, and it was this wealth and influence that attracted British colonizers. Oba and his people fiercely resisted any attempts by the British to colonize them and their kingdom, but this became increasingly impossible (Amos, 1980). The British were determined to punish this resistance and launched the now infamous Benin Expedition of 1897. Some 1200 heavily armed soldiers attacked Benin, resulting in mass loss of life, rampant destruction, and Oba's exile. Subsequently more than 5000 culturally significant ivory and brass objects, including this tusk (Figure 1), were looted by the British soldiers—they were sold to recoup the costs of the attack and dispersed globally (Hicks, 2021).

Museums, galleries, and collectors were quick to exploit this looting. In Manchester, shortly after 1897, L. Gerald Andrew



FIGURE 1 The tusk after it was removed from display. It is now in the Africa store awaiting collaborative processes toward unconditional repatriation. Source: Picture by Njabulo Chipangura, 12 January 2023.

purchased the tusk and then donated to the Salford Museum, which later transferred it to MM in 1969. As part of our commitment to care and truth telling, we presented the history of the loot to our public together with the Benin tusk in one of our galleries (Manchester Museum, 2023).

The selection of this tusk as a point of reference was in part a curatorial decision informed by transparency, truth telling, and openness. Since the tusk had been on display for a long time, it was a popular object for esthetic viewing, but what was lacking then was the story behind its acquisition. In view of the other dialogues happening in the United Kingdom regarding Benin material, we felt it was the right moment to open the question of repatriations in public as a form of shared authority (Benin Dialogue Group, 2010; Digital Benin, 2022; Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d.). One might argue that this was illustrative of a curatorial practice that is relational with regards to multivocality and allowing for different perspectives to shape the course of the repatriation. Provocative questions were asked as a form of engagement such as: Do you think the tusk should be returned to Benin or stay here in Manchester? What other action could we take? Would you like to know more about why and how objects are returned? 90% of the 300 comments received were in favor of repatriation, with a particularly powerful quote being “British powers stole it. Return it. This is one of your ancestors' actions that can be done something about, so stop asking us questions and offer it to its rightful owners.” The option to remove the tusk from display was wholeheartedly informed by the public and what we also deemed a morally correct curatorial practice that listens and pays attention to different views. Below are the transcripts of the responses that we got from the public in an overwhelming show of solidarity for the return of the tusk;

Response 1. The Manchester university with the museum should return the tusk, we are not that war-driven civilization we once was, so its time to see ourselves as one, a world for everyone. If the Benin agree with, keep it, if don't, return it [sic].

Response 2. I think it should be gifted back to Benin. If they do not want it back, if they say they wish Manchester to keep it for whatever reason, then keep it. Otherwise, it should not and should never have been yours to keep. It is only selfish to keep something, especially something born of sentimental value when it was stolen away. It doesn't matter how beautiful or historical it is. Do the right thing, unlike our ancestors.

Response 3. The tusk should be returned to Benin from where it was looted—perhaps an opportunity to open up a dialogue for research and an exhibition with the African community.

Response 4. Return it. History demonstrates it is not yours. It is more than just doing the right thing—it is restoring the damage and the culture that was taken.

Response 5. How is this even a question?—Give it back.

Response 6. Who will you give it back to? Are descendants of the family still around? If so and they want the tusk, give it back. If not, it doesn't really make a difference and it's better kept and preserved here.

Response 7. Return all African artefacts to their nations.

Response 8. It should be returned to its rightful home. However, its story should stay here in the museum so that future generations can learn from mistakes of the past.

Response 9. Return it to Benin, it only here as a result of looting and exploitation. I would like to know more about returning African cultural objects.

Response 10. Giving more perspective on the history of the tusk is already making a difference for visitors. Collaborating with associations, universities of Benin would be the next step and you could also provide an entire exhibition with the story and let the story go globally thereby helping Benin to rebuild its past.

Response 11. We need to stop profiting from colonialism and return everything from the countries we pillaged and raped. The British Empire is the biggest offender for this, must set an example.

Response 12. I believe museums are the manifestation of civilization and development of humans, including both capability and morality. How and why stolen objects are returned is an important way to show and differentiate right and wrong mistakes and corrections.

From these responses that we got from the public, it is clear that the Benin tusk must be returned to Nigeria. The tusk was immediately removed from public display and there will be no more years of holding on and holding back. We believe it is not a question of if but when it will return, and we are talking to peers in Nigeria and audiences in Manchester about what happens next in light of our approach toward the unconditional restitution.

Precedent for this unconditional repatriation approach was laid out in 2019 when 43 secret, sacred, and ceremonial items from MM were returned to Gangalidda and Garawa, Nyamal and Yawuru Aboriginal communities in Australia. At the time of the request, MM's collection policy did not specifically outline a procedure for the repatriation of sacred or ceremonial items. However, with the appointment of Esme Ward as the museum director in 2018, there was a

reorientation to the curatorial work toward building active, reciprocal relationships of care with communities whose collections we hold. This came with the adoption of democratized curatorship and shared authority in engaging with source and diaspora communities. Signaling this change in curatorial approaches was MM's collaboration with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in 2019, which facilitated the negotiations for the returns on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations. AIATSIS is Australia's only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse history, cultures, and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Simpson et al., 2019). The institute's partnerships span the globe, including government, academic, corporate, cultural, and community sectors. AIATSIS leads the Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) program to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their cultural heritage material held overseas (Simpson et al., 2019). The RoCH program supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in affirming their custodianship of their cultural heritage material held overseas and making decisions about where and how it can be best looked after in the present. What shape that return takes—repatriation, loan, or digital copy—is a decision for custodians so that they can achieve these aspirations, which also directly speaks to our unconditional repatriation approaches (Simpson et al., 2019).

Using the “ask first” principles, it was ultimately community elders who determined which objects would be the subject of the return request. This information was then presented to the University of Manchester's Board of Governors, which greatly assisted in coming to a prompt and unanimous decision to approve the unconditional repatriation of 43 collection items to the Aranda people of Central Australia, the Gangalidda and Garawa peoples of northwest Queensland, the Nyamal people of the Pilbara, and the Yawuru people of Broome. It was the first time MM had repatriated sacred or ceremonial materials rather than human (ancestral) remains (Manchester Museum, 2023). In view of our unconditional repatriation approach, I posit that although decolonial work has been critiqued extensively as essentially epistemological and somewhat slowly becoming a metaphor (Kassim, 2017; Minott, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012)—the work that we have been doing significantly points toward empirical decolonial engagements. Repatriations are not in any way a loss but rather present an opportunity for building active relationships between museums and their communities. As such, I have been actively involved in follow-up discussions on the afterlives of the repatriated objects with Australian Aboriginal communities. Together with colleagues in Indigenous studies at the University of Melbourne, we have been exploring questions of what happens when objects are returned in view of seeing repatriations not as an end but as a start to the building of active relationships between museums and Indigenous communities.

I regard unconditional repatriations as a decolonial methodology that is informed by praxis approaches based on our ethics of disclosure combined with proactive strategies of

identifying objects that were looted as result of colonial violence and returning them back to the communities. What this means is that by taking this truth telling initiative, we do not have to wait for claims to come from source communities who might not be aware of what we hold in our collections. MM has publicly committed to working with relevant parties in Nigeria and across the Nigerian diaspora, with peers in museums and with communities on our doorstep, to return items of cultural heritage currently held in our collection that were taken through colonial violence from the Kingdom of Benin. Bringing local diaspora community knowledge to the cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Benin is part our work and is premised on initiating dialogue toward unconditional repatriations. In 2020, through the Collective Conversations project, we engaged African diaspora community members in filmed conversations around objects in our collections. These conversations enriched understanding of and connection between the objects, their silent biographies, and living cultural practices. A provenance report of the Benin material was conducted in 2021 as part of the process of accounting for what we hold. The report revealed that we hold nine cultural heritage items looted in 1897, and a further 12 items remain under review (Welsh, 2021).

Looted Benin cultural material and our open resolve to repatriation was again put under the spotlight when MM commissioned Inua Ellams to write a series of poems responding to the carved tusk. Inua performed his commission in the Living Worlds Gallery where the tusk was on display on Friday November 15, 2019 (Ellams, 2022). His poem openly took a swipe at the British Empire and its contribution to the looting and displacement of millions of African cultural objects—the same fate that was suffered by the Benin tusk (Ellams, 2019). It is the poetic curatorial interventions like this one that sit at the heart of our approach in rethinking the problematic history of our African collection together with diaspora communities and our calls for social justice. Social justice is a recognition that relational curatorship must be hinged on curating stories that advance change. Our commitment to care derives from telling difficult stories of injustice that African objects were subjected to when they were dispossessed from their points of origins. Inspired by decolonial approaches in knowledge production, the commissioning of the poem by Inua brought with it inclusion and epistemic diversity. We also recognize that museums, through the decision that they make regarding narratives constructed and publicly presented, can reinforce, challenge, or potentially reconfigure prevailing normative ideas about rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness, fairness, and injustice (Sandell, 2002). Using the Benin tusk as an example of open engagement, MM became a site of activism where efforts were made by different groups of people in bringing about social change through dialogue. Elsewhere, I have argued that by committing to inclusion and diversity museums can be transformed into multi-oriented spaces for dialogue curating both stories and objects (Chipangura & Marufu, 2019).

Another important related example of our open relational engagement with African cultural objects can be gleaned from how in June 2021 we initiated formal correspondence

with the Legacy Restoration Trust (LRT). We provided LRT with initial details of objects in our collection that we believe may have taken directly through colonial violence and assured them that where there is a strong case for return—and where the LRT and others in Nigeria desire it—we will put our all into making that return happen. Stephen Welsh, my predecessor and former curator of living cultures at MM, carried out a detailed provenance report on all the Benin cultural material and put forward a case for repatriation (Welsh, 2021). With specific reference to the Benin cultural material, the provenance research identified nine cultural heritage items looted in 1897 and subsequently acquired by MM. Through collaborative engagements with Nigerian diaspora community members, a further 12 items remain under review. At the end of 2022, we also made available and provided high-resolution pictures of the nine cultural objects to the Digital Benin project in support of the creation of a digital database (<https://digitalbenin.org>). This database was launched on November 4, 2022 and has images of over 5240 objects looted during the 19th-century British punitive expedition in the Kingdom of Benin. The digital images of these objects are drawn from 131 museums and institutions from 20 countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, and Israel, as well as 14 European countries. Digital Benin brings together objects, historical photographs, and rich documentation material from worldwide collections to provide a long-requested overview of the royal artifacts from the Kingdom of Benin. Our involvement in Digital Benin is a further reflection of our commitment in making what we hold visible to help the people and institutions leading repatriation efforts in Nigeria and across the diaspora to select and prioritize cultural heritage material for return.

MM is also a partner in the Devolving Restitution project, and I have participated in several collaborative discussions that center around the question of returning African cultural objects that were looted and placed in non-European museum as a result of colonial violence. The project has brought together museums and grassroot diaspora communities, and activist groups across the United Kingdom for six events, each addressing a different theme in African collections histories and opening new dialogues with African claimants. The other partner institutions include the Birmingham Museums, the Brighton Museum, the Bristol Museum, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge University), the Derby Museums, the Glasgow Museums, the Great North Museum, the Hunterian Museum (University of Glasgow), the Leeds Museum, the National Museum NI, the Paisley Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, and the Powell-Cotton Museum (Pitt Rivers Museum, *n.d.*). This project gave MM a space to articulate its collaborative thinking and engagement with diaspora and source communities toward the unconditional restitution of African cultural objects.

However, in a more recent development that is likely to significantly shape the future of Benin cultural materials repatriations, the outgoing Nigeria President Muhammadu Buhari issued a declaration that prohibits all European and North American museums from returning the bronzes to the

Nigerian National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM). His argument was that the bronzes must be handed over to the Oba of Benin, Ewuare II, who is historically the rightful owner. This has created a lot of confusion and uncertainty within many UK museums that had been working with the NCMM toward potential future repatriations. In the proclamation, Buhari is quoted as having said that “no Benin bronze can be moved without the Oba's written authority, and he must inspect and authenticate each upon its subsequent return” (BBC News, 2023). In view of this, MM is going to continue engaging with diasporans from Nigeria. Recently, as part of this initiative, I presented a paper detailing all Benin material that we hold on May 25, 2023, during an organized Africa Day Conference at the University of Manchester. What emerged from this public disclosure was a huge renewed interest in the repatriations by the diasporans. I gathered that most of them supported the return of Benin material directly to the Oba and lauded the decision by the former president.¹

ZULU BEADWORK STORIES: A MUSEOLOGY OF DIALOGUE

My other relational curatorial practice rethinks how research into our collections allows for co-curation through giving agency to living communities in creating their own connections and weaving their own stories. To this end, I conducted collaborative provenance research on Zulu beadwork in June 2022 through open dialogue with community members in Nongoma, KwaZulu Natal. This ethnographic research explored beads not as materialities but as connected to people, practices, belief systems, and contemporary uses (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020). I was able to reinterpret the beadwork in our African collection through active dialogue with local communities in Nongoma. In doing this, I deployed visual anthropology as a research method, showing community members pictures of the beadwork that we hold at MM. Several stories emerged from this provocation. The biographical stories of the beadwork draw on what a “museology of listening and dialogue” (Schmidt & Kehoe, 2019) that gives authority to voices from local communities in detailing the meaning of material objects from their own ontological perspectives. By using museology of listening and dialogue as a concept during the provenance research, I collaborated with Nongoma community members in unlocking their knowledge and stories about the beadwork. This form of active listening in turn allowed the community to elaborate their varied social understandings of the beads and their uses both in the past and in the present.

Community-engaged collaboration associated with the sharing of knowledge between local and global communities, between source community and museum, provides an opportunity to engage in a dialogic translation of knowledge in which ascribing meaning (knowledge) to an object is a collective process (Silverman, 2015: 5). During the dialogue in Nongoma, I critically engaged with the complex meanings associated with the beads and how they found their way into MM and ended up producing forms of ordered knowledge. Prior to undertaking this dialogic reinterpretation of meaning, the

beadwork was classified within prisms of estheticism that ignored their underlying social biographies. In this regard, one can argue that the museum has long acted as “global isolator [that] de-animates previously animated entities by uprooting them from their ‘milieu,’ and reanimates ‘dead’ objects by over-determining their signification and projecting them in a restricted field of attention” (Garcia & Normand, 2019: 16). The stories that came from the beadwork dialogue challenged the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems in narratives of “objects” that we contain at MM. Therefore, sharing power with Nongoma community members in re-narrating the story of the beads was a relational methodology that I used to pluralize, democratize, and decolonize relations. Ceremonies where Nongoma community still use beads include boys' and girls' initiation, circumcision ceremonies, and marriage rites. One community member that I engaged and collaborated with in Nongoma was a *sangoma* (traditional healer) who explicitly said that his knowledge in administering traditional healing practices cannot be separated from beadwork. He said that he made beads and amulets, which are essential to the practice of *bungoma* (traditional healing) as these beads are worn as a protection against evil spirits and misfortunes. It is biographical accounts like these by communities that illustrate that beadwork was and is still a specialized knowledge practice in South Africa.

As can be deduced from these stories of the beads, dialogic collaborations can potentially transform museums from being purveyors of lopsided knowledge and global isolators that once displayed “others” into locations of cultural revitalization, community voice, and empowerment (Onciul, 2019). In this process, as a curator of living cultures and not of static lifeless anthropological objects—I became a facilitator of dialogue rather than an indisputable champion of authorized knowledge production. In view of this, it can be argued that curatorship has evolved from being a strict, specialized connoisseurship of individuals to a public service that attends to problems in contemporary communities (Schorch et al., 2019). The outcome of the dialogue with Nongoma community members is a forthcoming coproduced exhibition that we are currently working on at MM (Figure 2).

This collaborative approach to exhibition making is reflective of how relational curatorship can be attained between communities and museum curators (Chipangura, 2019). Moreover, exhibitions have become more than just sites for the manifestation of preconceived curatorial theory; they are increasingly sites of collaborative research and knowledge production (Butler & Lehrer, 2016). They have shifted from merely presenting concluded results to analyzing social issues and producing relevant knowledge (Bjerregaard, 2019; Dahre, 2019; Hansen et al., 2019; Iervolino & Sandell, 2016). This is far preferable to the role of traditional curators who operate as discrete and invisible exhibition makers (Arero & Kingdon, 2005; Hansen et al., 2019). The collaborative approach gives room for more participatory and co-curated exhibition-making practices. A collaborative methodology in a museum has been described by Shelton (2018) as encompassing three elements: (1) transforming the role of a curator into a facilitator in which the community independently takes charge and determines the subject



FIGURE 2 The collaborative provenance research and dialogue on meanings of Zulu beadwork in Nongoma, Durban, South Africa. Source: Picture by Njabulo Chipangura, 23 July 2022.

of an exhibition; (2) collaboration in periodic dialogues with the community to ensure the fidelity of the exhibition with their expectations; and (3) collaboration as a dialogic process through which culture is generated in conversations between curators and the community representatives (Shelton, 2018: xviii). The new coproduced Zulu beadwork stories exhibition is expected to be completed and open to the public at MM in the summer of 2023.

WHAT DOES A DECOLONIAL MUSEOLOGY PRACTIS MEAN?

The Benin tusk and the Zulu beadwork examples illustrates how we have been decolonizing our African collections at MM from a praxis point of view. By creating visibility through opening our doors to our collections for the public to make decisions, we are challenging long-held authorized curatorial norms and decentering knowledge production. Decolonizing museums therefore requires reimagining museums beyond, before, and apart from disciplinary structures (Muller & Langhill, 2022). Creating visibility also helped MM to re-discover some hidden, forgotten, or untold histories, especially with regards to the beadwork. The beadwork had long been imprisoned in the collections storage and conserved as objects of the anthropological gaze. Critically thinking about decolonization also requires questioning contexts by which cultural objects were brought into the museum and who stole them

(Kassim, 2017). In most cases, circumstances surrounding how the objects were acquired remains secondary to the value of allowing the public access to that history (Kassim, 2017). In essence, by conducting collaborative provenance research that will lead to the coproduction of a non-disciplinarily informed exhibition, we were able to recenter the beads not as mere objects but as subjects that tell a biographical story connected to their ritual, ceremonial, and spiritual uses. In light of rethinking the beads' meanings in collaborations with descendant communities, I agree with Sandahl (2019: 75) who succinctly argues that “decolonising museum curating involves decoding museum collections from the colonial meanings in which they have been cut off, displayed and decontextualised from where they had once belonged.”

Meanwhile, Bergeron and Rivet (2021) talk of reformulating museology to depend on a triple and interdependent process that encompasses deconstruction, reconstruction, and redistribution of power with source communities, rather than just a mere restitution of heritage. Therefore, decolonizing museums should start in the minds of people who run them and transform the culture of museums to denounce the historical violence produced by these institutions. At MM, we acknowledge the problematic history of our African collection, and we seek to establish accountable and sustainable relationships with source and diaspora communities. Our own approach benchmarks restitutions as a function of comprehensive provenance research where curators collaborate with source communities in the process. Decoloniality is not just about a geographic relocation of objects back to their places of origins, but an interrogation of the narratives and methodologies through which these objects communicate new meaning. Elsewhere, Kassim (2017) has argued that museums are not neutral and it is not possible to decolonize them. She looked at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG), zeroing in on the *Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* exhibition, which was co-curated by six women of color with diverse heritages, who were external to the museum (Kassim, 2017; Minott, 2019). The exhibition was an experiment exploring how to decolonize and democratize the museum through adopting collaborative models. However, the whole project was fraught with tensions as some of the key exhibition decisions were made without consulting the external co-curators.

The Benin tusk engagement further illustrates that ethnographic objects have the potential to be retrieved from museum storehouses and thrust in the public sphere, allowing communities previously excluded from the museum space to influence curatorial activities (Mataga, 2018). In doing so, museums can take leading roles in decolonizing, revisualizing, presenting alternative stories, interrogating intolerance, and stimulating critical public pedagogies (Clover, 2015). Therefore public views and perceptions can reshape collecting and exhibiting practices in museums (Chipangura & Chipangura, 2020). The concept of the contact zone formulated by Clifford (2007) and Pratt (1991) has allowed museums to evolve beyond easily definable, geographic arenas of interaction into places for dialogue and intercultural exchange that bring people in contact with each other and places that establishes ongoing relations. This is exactly what we achieved during the Benin

tusk dialogue at MM with emerging discussions allowing us to reflect upon our own curatorial practices, thereby effecting social change. This approach of looking at the multiple uses of a museum, where engagement with the public is a priority, is changing the face of the museum practice globally.

Looking at the Benin tusk open engagement, it can be further posited that collaborative dialogue decenters the authority of museum curators by allowing for an investigative process in which decision-making about knowledge and objects of the past is a shared responsibility (Chipangura, 2020; Onciul, 2019). Thus, collaborative approaches constitute the broader agenda for decolonizing museum practices in that they confront long standing imbalances regarding who makes decisions and who benefits (Chipangura, 2020). Elsewhere, Simon (n.d.) 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 can be closely linked to Clifford's (2007) and Pratt's (1991) concept of the contact zone, which is a force for inclusionist, collaboration programs and the development of mutual interest with all social groups (Boast, 2011; Dahre, 2019; Walklate, 2018). However, it has been argued that contact zones are merely neocolonial sites in which hierarchies of power are still present because asymmetric relationships exist between museum “experts” and community members (Boast, 2011).

THE DOWNSIDE OF THE DECOLONIZATION OF MUSEUM PRACTICES: ARE COLLABORATIONS ENOUGH?

I will try to answer the question of “are collaborations enough?” starting off with a provocation by Minott (2019: 561), who argues that “indeed the need to decolonise the museum exists because museums were tools of colonial celebration during the colonial era and continue to contribute toward neo-colonialism in the present.” Decolonization is a complex process that must be analyzed carefully in museum spaces so that it does not end up being just a metaphor or another buzzword (Taiwo, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012). It is challenging because the legacies of European colonialism are wide, far reaching, and ever mutating. A critique of collaborations as a decolonial methodology is usually centered on the location of power in these activities (Chipangura, 2020; Golding & Walklate, 2019; La Salle, 2010). It is for this reason that Boast (2011: 4) argues that no matter how much we might think of pluralizing knowledge production in museums through collaborations, intellectual control will remain in the hands of curators. Thus, although community collaboration has become a major museum decolonizing methodology, there is no critical evaluation of what it means in terms of geographies of power (Shelton, 2018). In addition, the heterogeneous nature of a community means that there can be problems and challenges associated within the application of collaborations in museum practices. Collaboration itself is not one uniform idea or a practice but rather is a range of strategies toward more accurate, inclusive, and ethically sound

representations practices in museums. Collaborative methods still produce unequal exercises of power and self-referential knowledge because, in most cases, the researched community has no control over the information extracted. Hence, despite the good intentions of making collaborations a decolonial strategy, this can still perpetuate the same exploitations inherent in traditional research (La Salle, 2010). Therefore, I admit that even when we collaborate with local communities, as was in the case with the Zulu beadwork, there is still potential for uneven distribution of power and disenfranchising of the same communities. Communities have often complained about being patronized in museum collaborative projects with no meaningful benefits being availed to them. However, what was different with the Zulu beadwork provenance research was that we allowed the community to take the lead in deciding which stories they wanted to tell in the exhibition. As a result, the coproduced exhibition is informed by stories of love, healing, symbolism, and contemporary meanings told by the community for itself by itself. In the case of the Benin tusk, we were aware of the emotional implications that could have potentially emerged from disclosing the violent history associated with the 1897 punitive expedition. However, I must underscore that in the comments we gathered from a diverse group of people (not only African diasporans) one common recurring theme was an overwhelming agreement that the tusk must be returned to Nigeria. Therefore, a popular public sentiment on how museum should do the right thing with respect to unethically acquired cultural materials seems to have outgrown any emotive feelings of a particular group. Additionally, follow-up conversations that I have been having in trying to facilitate the return of this tusk have been with interested Nigerian diasporans; they have been happy with the direction of truth telling, transparency, and accountability that MM took from the outset.

CONCLUSION

I have illustrated in this article the decolonial strategies that we embraced at MM in reimagining the African collection from the point of care, imagination, and inclusion. I highlighted the pragmatics of what it means to decolonize a collection of African living cultures dispossessed as result of colonial violence, using the case studies of Benin cultural material and stories of Zulu beadwork. First, I looked at how a tusk was looted in 1897 from the Kingdom of Benin by British punitive forces and the steps we took at MM to account for the colonial violence that informed its acquisition. The second case study highlighted a collaborative provenance that I conducted with community members in Nongoma, Durban, South Africa. The beads are housed at MM and were acquired unethically as result of colonial violence. From the start, I looked at how MM was established as a site of knowledge production and for a while remained heavily burdened by colonial legacies that contributed to the ordering of the world through the practice of classifying and categorizing objects from “other,” distant cultures. However, of late MM has been proactively and openly engaging with its communities and, in the process, building active, sustainable relationships between cultures. Public engagement

on the cultural significance of the Benin tusk showed that open conversations can be embraced by museums in collaboratively deciding how objects that were looted should be ethically and respectfully repatriated. In contrast, the output from the Zulu beadwork provenance research is a coproduced exhibition that is going to be installed at MM in the summer of 2023. The article also highlighted a deep commitment by MM toward unconditional repatriation where we truthfully disclose the history of our collections and proactively initiate public dialogue toward potential returns. I underscored that this praxis approach does not rest on waiting for communities to make claims and demands on having back their cultural materials because they will never know what we hold unless we disclose it to them. I discussed an example of this approach drawing on the unconditional repatriation of 43 secret, sacred, and ceremonial cultural material from MM to a group of Australian Aboriginal communities in 2019. While other research has been grappling with decolonizing the museum, which has become synonymous with the restitution of objects, I posited in this article that this is only a small area where the museum needs to be severed from its colonial ties. Instead, museums must rethink the colonial knowledge that led them to collect objects by disclosing what they hold for diaspora and source communities to determine how these restitutions should proceed. This form of truth telling through open engagements on the biographical meanings of objects must be undertaken first as a praxis of doing decolonial work derived from Indigenous ontologies. Communities are valuable sources of expertise and partners in knowledge creation, not passive recipients of authorized anthropological discourses. Museums can also be sites for activism where efforts are made by different groups of people in bringing about social and political changes through dialogue, as I have discussed with respect to the Benin tusk and Zulu beadwork provenance research.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ A conversation with Professor Erimna Bell, a community peace activist who organized the Africa Day celebrations. Erimna is a diasporan of Nigerian heritage and has been actively involved in discussions around the return of the Benin tusk.

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