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From Repatriation to Responsibility: Rethinking the Conservation of Nigerian Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century Through Hybrid Museology

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Abstract

In recent years, the call for the return of Africa's tangible cultural heritage has increased, leading to the repatriation of cultural objects, and Nigeria is no exception. Amidst the growing demands for the restitution of Africa's cultural heritage objects, post-restitution conservation is rarely incorporated into restitution plans despite its critical role in ensuring sustainable care and interpretation. There is a need to give this negligence utmost attention not only for the purpose of preserving the objects but also because holding institutions refuse to return objects, claiming that there is poor conservation capacity in Africa. This paper explores the limitations of some Western conservation methods in the Nigerian context using the National Museum, Lagos, as a case study. It discusses how effective indigenous knowledge systems and community engagement can be included in the conservation strategies of Nigerian museums. The present study used a qualitative method to identify the gaps in post-restitution conservation with a theoretical framework based on 'Third Space' and 'Contact Zone' concepts. The outcome of the research showed that repatriated objects can be conserved in the National Museum, Lagos. A hybrid conservation approach and collaboration with holding institutions were recommended for sustainable post-repatriation conservation.

Keywords: post-repatriation; conservation; hybrid museology

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, some individuals and institutions in possession of tangible cultural heritage removed during the colonial era are responding to repatriation calls by returning the objects (Barkan 2000; Hoffmann 2022; Sarr and Savoy 2018). The number of such returns has increased significantly in recent years in response to colonial injustices, decolonization policies of museums, restoration of cultural identity and the need to foster reconciliation (Okwir 2026; Onibere and Edewor 2024) and Nigeria is a prominent participant in the restitution movement. Some of the country's cultural property abroad has been returned from different countries such as Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Germany, and the repatriation campaign still continues for the return of the country's cultural goods.

While repatriation (the return of heritage objects held abroad) is an important step towards redress, it cannot on its own achieve the desired healing or repair needed for social

justice and cultural identity restoration; therefore, restitution is needed to correct historical injustices associated with the unlawful acquisition of cultural heritage (Hicks 2020; Prott 2009). Aware of this, indigenous communities clamor for the restitution of their heritage objects held in different Western institutions, but most often, the restitution plans focus more on the return of objects with little or no attention given to post-repatriation care despite its importance in achieving restitution (Murray 2025; Ren 2023). Repatriation should include a post-repatriation conservation plan for proper preservation and ethical stewardship of the objects. Post-repatriation conservation should be integral to every repatriation process so as to preserve the objects for the purpose of research, entertainment, and future use. The necessity for post-restitution care is further underscored by the fact that holding institutions claim that receiving countries do not have the conservation capacity to preserve the artifacts if they are returned. Accordingly, including conservation in repatriation plans will help to formulate strategies for proper preservation of the returned objects.

In most museums in Nigeria, the Western methods and principles of conservation introduced during colonialism are still used in preserving heritage objects. Although some of these methods are effective, there have been some challenges and limitations associated with their use with respect to sustainability (Araoz 2013; Okpalanozie and Kamndu 2023; Wijesuriya 2005). They include toxicity, non-availability of conservation materials, high cost of equipment, and exclusion of source communities in conservation strategies. Conservation is not merely a technical process, but it is also relational and includes recognizing objects as living heritage and engaging with indigenous communities. Nevertheless, museums can overcome these constraints by integrating indigenous methods into the conservation protocols used in the museum where it is found necessary as a safe, better, and effective alternative.

This research is empirically situated within the National Museum, Lagos, Nigeria. It is a museum owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria and under the control and management of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), the Nigerian Federal Agency mandated to control and regulate the activities of national museums, historical sites, and monuments. National Museum, Lagos, is at the frontline of receiving, conserving, and curating repatriated objects. By examining the challenges experienced by practitioners at the National Museum, Lagos, this study highlights the limitations of some Western preservation strategies in addressing local conservation realities.

This paper argues that repatriation should be understood not as the end point of decolonization but as the beginning of post-repatriation responsibility. This responsibility requires receiving museums to reconsider conservation authority and practice by combining appropriate professional conservation expertise with indigenous knowledge and source community participation. In this sense, decolonization extends beyond the physical return of cultural objects to include how returned heritage is conserved, interpreted, and stewarded after its return.

Fundamentally, this paper advances a two-pronged argument. First, repatriation contributes to the decolonization of museums in the Global North by disrupting patterns of custodianship established through colonial-era acquisition and retention. Second, repatriation requires a corresponding transformation in conservation practice in receiving institutions: returned heritage should not just simply be transferred into a conservation regimes developed elsewhere, but should be cared for through locally appropriate approaches that recognize indigenous knowledge, community authority and contextual environmental conditions alongside relevant conventional conservation practice. The paper therefore argues that post-restitution responsibility extends beyond the physical return of objects to include their long-term conservation, interpretation and stewardship. To conceptualize this process, the study develops a hybrid museology informed by Bhabha's Third Space and

Clifford's Contact Zone through which conventional and indigenous forms of conservation can interact without being treated as universally dominant.

Building on this two-pronged argument, the paper proposes a hybrid museology for post-restitution conservation. Hybrid museology, as used in this study, refers to a negotiated model of stewardship in which professional museum conservation practices, indigenous conservation knowledge, and source community participation are brought together rather than treated as mutually exclusive alternatives. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the Third Space is used to explain the negotiation and transformation that can occur when these different knowledge systems meet, while Clifford's (1997) concept of the Contact Zone is used to explain the museum as a site of encounter, dialogue, and negotiation between museum professionals, source communities, and other stakeholders. Multi-sited stewardship describes the practical implication of this arrangement: responsibility for returned heritage may be distributed across museums, source communities, and other institutions rather than being confined to a single custodial site. The paper therefore does not use Third Space, Contact Zone and multi-sited stewardship as interchangeable concepts; rather, they perform different but complementary analytical functions within the proposed hybrid museology. These concepts therefore operate at different analytical levels and collectively support the paper's argument. The study asks how these principles can be operationalized at the National Museum, Lagos, to support sustainable and contextually appropriate care of repatriated Nigerian heritage.

The central proposition of this paper is that successful restitution requires a shift from a model of ownership transfer to a model of shared responsibility for heritage care. Returning objects to Nigeria without addressing how they will subsequently be conserved leaves an important part of the restitution process unresolved. Conversely, post-restitution conservation should not be evaluated solely according to conservation standards of the institution from which it is returned. The evidence from the National Museum, Lagos, supports the possibility of combining professional conservation practice with locally available materials, indigenous knowledge and community-defined values. The proposed hybrid model therefore seeks not to reject Western conservation nor to romanticize indigenous practice; rather, it argues for a negotiated conservation framework in which different forms of knowledge and expertise are evaluated according to the material, cultural and social circumstances of each heritage object.

Fundamentally, this paper aims to bridge the gap in post-restitution planning by demonstrating the need for a conservation framework in a restitution process, evaluating the limitations of Western conservation methods, and proposing a sustainable, hybrid conservation strategy that advocates for the introduction of indigenous knowledge systems in heritage conservation in museums. It also emphasized the need for collaboration between the holding institution and the institution receiving the returned cultural property.

2. The Politics of Restitution and the Retention Narrative

2.1. Capacity in the Defense of Western Custodianship

Western heritage institutions have refused the return of illegally acquired property on the premise that they are holding them for humanity, to be studied and enjoyed by everyone (Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums 2006; Merryman 1986; Curtis 2006). The claim implies that the acquired heritage items are the heritage of nations and are housed in a place where they can be viewed by everyone for the purpose of education and enjoyment. However, this concept is gradually weakening with the current repatriation trend grounded in decolonization, repatriation justice, and provenance research (Sarr and Savoy 2018; Burlingame 2014), and some holding institutions have started returning the cultural goods in their custody. Another major reason given by

custodial institutions for denying return is that heritage institutions in the source country do not have the technical, financial, and environmental capacity to care for the objects if they are returned. The proponents of this school of thought claim that source countries do not have qualified heritage professionals, sufficient financial resources, and adequate infrastructure and materials to care for their cultural property if it is returned (Savoy 2022; Sarr and Savoy 2018). In reality, this assertion should not be used as a defense for non-restitution, as some heritage-holding institutions in the Global North do not have ideal conditions and structural capacity to care for colonial collections. They are not exempt from theft, heritage deterioration, and dissociation.

Conservation of tangible cultural heritage is not a one-size-fits-all practice, but it is a matter of context. Technically, the practice and process of conservation is a function of the specific circumstances, environment, culture, or situation in which it is undertaken. The approach used in conserving cultural heritage in Global North institutions does not need to be the same as that used in source countries. Prior to the advent of colonialism and the carting away of the heritage property of indigenous nations to the West, the owners cared for them and preserved them with indigenous methods for the purpose of serving different functions in the society (Ndoro 2001; Peers and Brown 2003). The preservation was performed without recourse to Eurocentric conservation methods. In light of this, it is not proper to say that source countries do not have the capacity to conserve the heritage which they made and used for various purposes from one generation to the next. Upholding lack of capacity as a reason not to repatriate cultural goods portrays its use as a geopolitical power tool.

2.2. Deconstructing Conservation Paradigms: From Conventional Models to Western Practice

The distinction between conventional and indigenous conservation should not be understood as a simple opposition between Global North and Nigerian practice. Conservation theory and practice have evolved considerably, and contemporary approaches increasingly recognize the importance of cultural values, context, sustainability, preventive conservation, and stakeholder participation (Muñoz Viñas 2005). It is therefore useful to distinguish between earlier conservation paradigms that placed emphasis on material stability and technical intervention, and contemporary conservation approaches that recognize the social and cultural dimensions of heritage and the particular ways in which conservation is practiced in Nigerian museums and communities.

In this paper, conservation refers to professional actions aimed at maintaining the material and cultural significance of heritage, while preservation refers more broadly to preventing or reducing deterioration. Care and stewardship are used more broadly to describe ongoing responsibilities, relationships, and decisions involved in looking after heritage. Indigenous knowledge refers to locally developed knowledge and practice for caring for cultural heritage within communities and cultural contexts. The term is used cautiously, recognizing that such knowledge is context-specific rather than a fixed or uniform body of knowledge.

Earlier conventional approaches to museum conservation often prioritized the physical stability and longevity of objects through environmental control, treatment, and the management of the agents of deterioration (Sully 2007; Szczepanowska 2013). Such approaches remain important and are still effective. However, contemporary conservation theory has increasingly questioned the assumption that material stability alone determines what should be conserved or how conservation decisions should be made. Lambrechts et al. (2024) challenged preservation approaches centered only on arresting material decay, arguing for greater attention to the transformative and generative dimensions of decay and to how heritage values may change across time. Value-based and people-centered

approaches recognize that the significance of heritage may derive from social, cultural, spiritual, and community relationships as well as from its physical materiality.

The issue for Nigerian museums is, therefore, not whether to accept or reject 'Western conservation'. On the contrary, it is how Western conservation principles and methods can be appropriately applied within local environmental, infrastructural, economic, and cultural conditions. Nigerian museums operate from contexts that differ from Global North institutions in terms of access to advanced conservation materials and equipment. The museum professionals in Nigeria work within local knowledge systems and communities whose relationship with heritage may include functional, social, and spiritual dimensions that influence decisions about care. Ndahekelekwa Nghishiko-Ndjamba (2024) similarly demonstrated the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into contemporary conservation practice, particularly where cultural materials are embedded in community knowledge, practices and values.

Indigenous conservation practices should similarly not be treated as a single uniform system or assumed to be automatically sustainable or appropriate for every object. Their relevance depends on material, function, cultural significance, environmental context and knowledge of the community concerned. The distinctive contribution of the Nigerian context lies in the possibility of bringing these different forms of knowledge into dialogue: professional conservation expertise, contemporary international conservation principles, locally available resources, environmental realities and community-defined values. This is the basis for the hybrid conservation approach proposed in this study.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Museology

In this study, hybrid museology is proposed as a decolonial model of museum stewardship that brings together professional museum practice, indigenous knowledge, and source community participation in the care and interpretation of repatriated heritage. It does not imply an unequal or uncritical combination of all practices, nor does it suggest that indigenous methods should replace professional conservation. Rather, it provides a framework for negotiating between different knowledge systems and selecting conservation responses according to the material condition, cultural significance, use, value, and wishes of the community associated with an object. Hybrid museology therefore challenges the assumption that there is a single universally acceptable model of conservation while retaining the value of professional conservation training and scientific knowledge.

2.3.1. The Hybrid Imperative

The present-day decolonial debates concerning the repatriation of African culture portray a false dichotomy. At one end is the Eurocentric group that opines that cultural objects should remain in a controlled environmental condition in Western museums for the purpose of preservation. At the other end is the radical critique that contends that Africa's material heritage should be returned to the indigenous communities that own them, even if they are affected by environmental decay. However, some modern post-repatriation realities do not uphold any of these schools of thought; instead, they have shown that none of these methods should be applied strictly; rather, repatriation should be seen as a multi-sited practice (Bell et al. 2013). Some objects are returned to the source communities to resume their social lives, while some are kept in national institutions with the consent of the heritage owners.

The framework of this study proposes a hybrid museology. It decenters the Eurocentric custodianship of African collections but supports the opinion that national museums can also be used as repositories just like source communities. It theorizes a model of complementary decolonial stewardship where indigenous communities and national insti-

tutions can serve as destinations where post-restitution care can be achieved. The model goes further to explain that national repositories do not alienate the community from their objects; rather, it is a civic space where the objects are secured, and indigenous care and metaphysical activity also take place as the need arises. The theoretical framework of this study is hinged on Bhabha's (1994) Postcolonial Hybridity and Clifford's (1997) concept of the museum as a 'Contact Zone'.

Contemporary debates on the restitution of African cultural heritage can sometimes present conservation as a choice between two apparently oppositions: the preservation-oriented models associated with the Global North museums and approaches rooted in indigenous community practice. This paper argues that post-restitution repatriation should move beyond this binary. The return of an object from a Global North institution does not automatically decolonize its subsequent care if the receiving institution simply reproduces externally developed conservation practices without considering local knowledge, cultural values, and environmental realities.

The central proposition of this paper is therefore that decolonization through restitution should be accompanied by decolonization of conservation practice. This does not require rejecting conventional conservation knowledge. Instead, it requires determining through dialogue with source communities and professional expertise which approaches are appropriate for peculiar objects and contexts. Hybrid museology is proposed as a framework for this process. It allows conventional conservation knowledge and indigenous knowledge to interact, adapt, and complement one another while recognizing the authorities of source communities over the appropriate meanings and care of their heritage.

Under this model, national museums can function as repositories without necessarily reproducing colonial custodianship. Where communities consent to museum custody, the museum can provide a secure institutional environment while remaining accessible to source communities and responsive to their knowledge, values, and conservation practices. With this, repatriation becomes not just a transfer of physical possession but an opportunity to renegotiate custodianship, conservation authority, and relations between museums and communities.

2.3.2. Bhabha's Third Space and the Hybrid Model of Care

Bhabha (1994) argued that cultural identities and postcolonial institutions do not exist in rigid, pure binaries (such as the "Colonizer" versus the "Colonized"); rather, they emerge within an intermediate, ambivalent zone which he termed the "Third Space." According to him, the Third Space is a site of cultural translation, negotiation, and hybridity where dominant colonial structures can be dismantled and recontextualized by the formerly colonized.

Applying Bhabha's theory to the post-restitution landscape, the National Museum, Lagos serves as the Third Space. The findings suggest that particular conservation practices at the National Museum, Lagos can function as a Third Space in which conventional and indigenous knowledge systems interact. It is a museum that was modeled on Western conservation methods, but it operates within the realities of the Nigerian context. In this framework, the indigenous methods used in conserving repatriated heritage in source communities are introduced to the museums, and the communities are given access to the heritage objects. By incorporating local methods into the conservation protocols of the museum, the museum becomes a 'Third Space' where the binary perspectives of 'sole' Western approach and 'sole' indigenous methods are subsumed, and the hybrid museology emerges.

Following this theory, when conservators respect the active living nature of an object, such as leaving ritual libations intact rather than removing them with chemicals, they are

operating within this Third Space. They are validating local conservation realities and proving that preservation is a contextual practice, rather than a purely technical one.

2.3.3. Museums as Contact Zones: Negotiating Consent and Multi-Sited Stewardship

James Clifford stated that "a Contact Zone is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect." (Clifford 1997, p. 192). In this concept, James Clifford argued that the museum as a "Contact Zone" is a space where museum professionals, source communities, and heritage objects interact through dialogue, negotiations, and collaborations. In this space, colonial legacies are contested, and source communities can engage with their heritage objects.

In the context of this study, the Contact Zone is concretized through encounters between source communities, museum professionals, and heritage objects following their return. These encounters may take place through community access, consultation, interpretation, conservation discussions, and knowledge exchange. As such, the museum provides a contemporary site where groups previously separated by geographical and historical circumstances can interact around returned heritage.

Adopting this concept for the National Museum, Lagos positions the museum as a potential civic space in which dialogue, access, and negotiated forms of stewardship can be developed around repatriated heritage. This enables it to serve as a 'civic space' where repatriated objects are kept with the consent of the source community, illustrating a multi-site approach in post-repatriation landscapes. It means that repatriated cultural property must not be kept in the source community but can be kept at any other place the owners approve. The intent of keeping the returned heritage in the museum is not to perpetuate colonial legacies or to alienate them from the owners; instead, this can be performed with the purpose of keeping them safe. Heritage owners are given access to the objects and are allowed to express how they should be interpreted, conserved, and exhibited. As a Contact Zone, National Museum, Lagos becomes a public space where knowledge is exchanged, experiences shared, and indigenous knowledge applied in the museum.

2.3.4. The Synthesis: Operationalizing Hybrid Museology

With the concept of 'Contact Zone', the National Museum, Lagos is transformed into a civic space where repatriated collections are kept with the permission of indigenous communities. It is also no longer perceived as a place with colonial-centered museology; rather, it becomes a safe space where indigenous communities can discuss and dialogue with museum professionals. This concept enables the implementation of Bhabha's theory of Third Space. Community members come to the museum to explain the best practices for conservation of their cultural property and their interpretation. The adoption of both models in a hybrid manner harmonizes their use and replaces the mutual exclusivity of Western conservation and local conservation.

2.3.5. Theoretical Contribution: From Collaboration to Post-Restitution Responsibility

The theoretical contribution of this study lies not only in applying Bhabha's Third Space and Clifford's Contact Zone to the museum context, but in synthesizing these concepts into a framework for post-restitution responsibility. The proposed hybrid museology responds to a gap between restitution discourse, which tends to concentrate on the return of cultural property, and conservation discourse, which often concentrates on the technical preservation of the returned object.

Existing collaborative and participatory approaches to museum practice emphasize dialogue, community participation, shared interpretation, and the inclusion of source communities in decision-making (Peers and Brown 2003; Krouse 2006). Although these ap-

proaches are important, the hybrid museology proposed in this study extends collaboration into the specific domain of post-restitution conservation response.

It asks not only who has the right to determine the destination of the returned object, but also who should participate in determining how the object is cared for, what constitutes acceptable intervention, where it should be kept, where indigenous conservation knowledge should be incorporated, and under what circumstances the former holding institution may continue to give technical support.

The model therefore moves beyond a simple transfer of custody from a Western institution to an African institution. It conceptualizes restitution as the establishment of a relational and potentially multi-sited stewardship network. Responsibility is distributed according to the cultural significance of the object, how the source community wants the conservation work to be performed, the conservation requirements of the object, and the capacities of the institution involved.

In essence, the originality of the model lies in connecting four dimensions that are usually treated differently: (1) restitution as reparative justice, (2) conservation as post-restitution responsibility, (3) indigenous knowledge as legitimate conservation knowledge, and (4) museums as negotiated spaces of shared stewardship. Hybrid museology reframes the museum from a passive recipient of returned objects into an active site of negotiation, care, knowledge exchange, and shared responsibility. The model does not propose that indigenous methods should replace scientific conservation, nor does it suggest that Western conservation methods should be rejected completely. On the contrary, it proposes that the selection of conservation approaches should be contextual, negotiated, and responsive to the material, cultural, and social value of the heritage concerned.

From this perspective, hybridity is not merely the combination of techniques; rather, it is a negotiated mode of conservation governance. Hybrid museology is therefore proposed as a conceptual framework for understanding how responsibility for a returned heritage can be negotiated among source communities, receiving museums and former holding institutions after restitution.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed three broad patterns across the interviews: (1) recognition of the capacity of the National Museum, Lagos to care for repatriated heritage despite resource limitations; (2) concerns about the limitations of some conventional conservation approaches in the Nigerian context; and (3) support for combining professional conservation knowledge with locally situated knowledge and community perspectives. While conservation generally emphasized material stability and practical conservation challenges, curators and ethnographers placed greater emphasis on cultural meaning, context, and community relationships. These areas of convergence and difference informed the development of the hybrid conservation approach discussed.

3.1. Confronting the Retention Narrative: Realities of Capacity at the National Museum, Lagos

Data obtained during institutional observation and from interviews challenged the retention narrative of Western museums and the claim that African museums do not have the capacity to care for their cultural heritage objects if they are returned. Assessment of the storage areas and the galleries revealed that although the facilities are not ideal, they can still serve in the care of repatriated heritage. National Museum, Lagos, does not possess the scale of technological infrastructure found in Global North museums, but it has tangible facilities and practices that support collection care. These include a conservation laboratory with basic conservation materials and tools, environmental monitoring equipment (not a 24 h datalogger), and Integrated Pest Management practices. The museum also has

trained conservators, curators, and ethnographers who undertake preventive conservation, interventive conservation, documentation, preparation of objects for loans and exhibition, and collection management. The storage area is organized through ICCROM REORG's training. These facilities and professional resources demonstrate an existing institutional capacity for collections care, even though the museum requires further investment in analytical equipment. Moreover, there may be no ideal museums in the West, as every museum has its peculiar challenges in the care and protection of cultural heritage. The non-provision of HVAC in storage areas of African museums is one of the technical reasons used to refuse the return of cultural property. One of the interviewed conservators explained that even though HVAC is used in Western museums, it is not needed in Nigerian museums. She said:

> 'The collections at National Museum, Lagos have been in the museum since its inception and have never been preserved with a 24-h HVAC, yet, they have been stable at the prevailing climatic conditions of the storage areas except for the occasions when an agent of deterioration not related to climatic conditions is present. Our ancestors who made and used these heritage objects never kept them in HVAC-controlled rooms, they used them for many years passing them from one generation to the next and they have survived for centuries. Conservation is contextual.'

This passive method of managing indoor climatic conditions used in the museum is sustainable and is recommended in ICOM-CC and IIC Environmental Guidelines (IIC and ICOM-CC 2014). It does not contribute to climate change, and the process is at no cost to the museum. The storage area was well-organized and structured. All the conservators and curators confirmed that the organized storage area was the outcome of the ICCROM REORG training conducted by ICCROM for the conservators and curators at the National Museum, Lagos.

The conservation laboratory in the museum does not have the high-tech equipment that is found in holding institutions, but it has the simple conservation materials needed for preservation of cultural heritage. A conservator confirmed that the laboratory in the museum has served its purpose in the preservation of material but that a new laboratory equipped with advanced equipment is needed for research and advanced conservation strategies. Some of the respondents also expressed their competence in caring for repatriated objects. The response given by interviewees showed that some of them have received various training both locally and internationally, in their various professional fields. The knowledge and skills which they acquired were applied in the conservation of the objects at the National Museum, Lagos (ICCROM 2015). One of the conservators responded on the issue of professionalism, saying:

> 'We prepare the ethnographic collections at National Museum, Lagos for international loans and exhibition whenever the request is made. We work in collaboration with the curators and ethnographers to ensure that the aims of such projects are achieved. Why then should our professionalism be questionable with regards to conserving repatriated objects which are ethnographic objects, too?'

The findings indicate that the National Museum, Lagos has existing professionals, infrastructural and knowledge capacities that can support the conservation of repatriated heritage, although further investment and capacity building are required. Holding institutions should no longer use 'capacity defense' as an excuse not to return the cultural property in their possession. The responses of the interviewed museum staff made it clear that their reason is unjustified.

3.2. Limitations of the Western Conservation Paradigm

The Western method of conservation was introduced in the National Museum, Lagos, at the inception of the museum during the colonial era and has been practiced in the museum to this day. All the conservators that were interviewed said that they have challenges in using some of the methods introduced by the Global North colonialists. One of the problems mentioned is the toxicity of some of the chemicals used in remedial conservation; such chemicals include xylene, acetone, toluene, sodium hydroxide, organochlorides, and naphthalene. A conservator said

> "I experienced repiratory disotders whenever an organochloride is idded to the solution used in treating insect-infested museum object. I am glad that the museum no longer uses them."

These chemicals are toxic to human beings, affecting their health when inhaled; they are threats to the environment where they persist as residues; and some of the chemicals cause aesthetic damage when applied to heritage materials. Some of the chemicals have been banned for use in the conservation of cultural heritage (Sterflinger and Piñar 2013; Arndt 2022). The conservators also informed the authors that some conservation materials such as fish glue, Paraloid B-72, Japanese tissue paper, and benzotriazole are not available in the local shops. Using them for conservation purposes implies placing an order for their supply, which can delay urgent conservation work, and the museum may not be able to afford the cost of such transactions, too. The conservators went further to explain that, in addition to the challenges encountered in the use of the chemicals, they are expensive and the museum cannot afford them.

The problems encountered by conservators in the use of Eurocentric conservation methods proved that they are not sustainable and suitable for use in Nigeria. Notably, although these foreign methods do not suit the Nigerian context, they remain effective in the Global North and are still used in conservation practice. The impracticality of some of the Western methods necessitates that alternative sustainable options be sought and adopted by museums.

3.3. Activating the Third Space: The Hybrid Laboratory

The responses of the conservators, curators and ethnographers together with direct institutional observation confirmed that Bhabha's (1994) Third Space is active and practiced in the National Museum, Lagos. A typical example is the conservation of objects termed 'living heritage'. Living heritage refers to heritage objects which have spiritual significance. The communities that own them believe that the spirits of their ancestors live in such objects, and they treat them and handle them with utmost care according to their tradition. The community pours libation on the objects during rituals and festivals. The libation is usually blood, and it is not meant to be removed. According to the belief of the heritage owners, the blood on the object makes the object potent; if it is removed, the object ceases to be potent. A senior conservator at the museum explained to the authors how such an object is conserved. According to him:

> 'From the perspective of conventional conservation, the blood and grime on the object should be cleaned but we do not use this approach to conserve this type of object at National Museum, Lagos. We respect the belief of the community and so we do not clean off the blood and the grime. Moreover, the blood and grime are part of the object's biography and should not be cleaned. However, we endeavor to use Integrated Pest Management, a Western method to manage pests which may be attracted to the object by the grime.'

One of the conservators mentioned that indigenous methods of conservation have been inculcated in the conservation strategy of the museum. She said that:

> 'Dehumidification (Western method) was the method of choice in treating objects made from indigenous leather but has been replaced with an indigenous method. The protocol is based on the use of water and plant-based oil to conserve the leather objects. Indigenous leather craftsmen who preserve leather objects for the community were invited to the museum to show us (the conservators) how to use the method. In adopting the method, conservators included the use of conventional equipment such as spray bottles and magnifying lens.'

The indigenous methods of conservation that are practiced in the museum were supported by the curators and the ethnographers. They were of the opinion that the methods not only portray how the communities care for their heritage but also give them a voice in the museum.

The conservation approaches cited above depict a hybrid conservation. Each method is composed of both Western and indigenous methods; none is used as a standalone method. They reflect the 'Third Space' concept of Bhabha where the methods lose their mutual exclusiveness and become one method. In view of furthering hybrid conservation, the authors recommend a post-repatriation collaboration between holding institutions and National Museum, Lagos with the aim of capacity-building.

3.4. The Museum as a Contact Zone: Multi-Sited Stewardship and Community Engagement

The findings indicate that aspects of practice at National Museum, Lagos can be understood through Clifford's concept of the museum as a 'Contact Zone'. The museum has become a 'civic space where some repatriated cultural heritage is kept on return with the permission of the source community. This does not mean that the heritage objects are alienated from the community that owns them. On the contrary, the community is given access to the museum to view the objects or to communicate with them. A curator explained this, saying:

> 'The indigenous community that owns the repatriated heritage are not denied access to the museum. Their visit is allowed. We also look forward to working with them on the interpretation of the heritage.'

Other museum professionals who were interviewed explained that it is not only source communities that are given access to the objects. The museum is a public space where stakeholders and researchers come together to deliberate and discuss the future of the objects and to exchange knowledge about the objects. One of the curators said

> "During seminars and the museum's social events such as International Museum Day, the museum invites stakeholders to discuss and exchange knowledge on the conservation and exhibition of the museum's collections."

With this status, seminars, workshops, and conferences geared towards sustainable conservation and development should be organized in the museum. National Museum, Lagos, as a repository of repatriated objects, demonstrates a multi-sited approach which can be included in a post-repatriation plan. Returned objects must not be taken back to the indigenous community; they can be kept in the museum, but this must be performed with the consent of the community.

Operationalizing the Hybrid Conservation Framework

The hybrid conservation approach proposed in this study can be operationalized through a participatory protocol involving documentation of indigenous knowledge, joint assessment of objects, evaluation of indigenous and scientific conservation options, shared

decisions on treatment, and subsequent monitoring. Key stakeholders, including conservators, curators, community representatives, and indigenous knowledge holders, should participate in relevant stages of the process. Effectiveness may be assessed through indicators such as object stability, treatment compatibility, sustainability of materials, stakeholder participation and acceptance, and the long-term feasibility of the conservation approach.

The proposed hybrid conservation framework can be operationalized through a participatory process comprising seven interconnected stages as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participatory stages for operationalising the hybrid conservation framework.

Stage	Key Activities	Knowledge/Participants Involved	Expected Outcome
1. Understand and document	Document the object, condition, provenance, history, use, significance and existing conservation history	Conservators, curators, registrars, researchers, community knowledge holders	A comprehensive understanding of the object and its significance
2. Assess risks and needs	Identify material, environmental, biological, handling, storage, display and social/cultural risks	Conservators, scientists, museum staff, community representatives	Prioritised conservation risks and needs
3. Bring knowledge systems together	Compare conventional conservation knowledge with indigenous/local knowledge, practices and materials	Conservators, scientists, traditional practitioners, community knowledge holders	Shared understanding of possible conservation approaches
4. Consult and negotiate	Discuss conservation options, values, restrictions, access, cultural protocols and acceptable interventions	Museum professionals, source communities, custodians and other stakeholders	Agreed conservation principles and boundaries
5. Co-design the conservation approach	Select or adapt preventive and interventive measures using appropriate conventional and indigenous approaches	Multidisciplinary conservation team and knowledge holders	Context-sensitive conservation plan
6. Implement and monitor	Apply agreed measures; document interventions; monitor environmental and material changes	Conservators, museum staff, community representatives where appropriate	Implemented and documented conservation measures
7. Review, learn and adapt	Evaluate outcomes, incorporate community feedback, review risks and modify practices where necessary	All relevant stakeholders	Adaptive conservation practice and continued shared stewardship

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was used for this research. This is because it would enable the authors to observe and understand the realities, possibilities, and limitations of a post-repatriation conservation framework in a real-world context. The qualitative design makes it possible to understand how conservators manage the friction between the Global North method of conservation and indigenous care. Furthermore, it will help in examining the concept of the museum as a neutral public zone. In doing so, it serves as a good analytical tool in unpacking these concepts.

4.2. Case Study and Context

The present study was carried out at the National Museum, Lagos. The museum was established in 1957 and is one of the Federal Government museums managed by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), Nigeria. NCMM is the government agency that regulates and manages the operations of museums in Nigeria. It also represents Nigeria in repatriation dialogues. It ensures that the repatriated objects are kept in an appropriate place and properly conserved and exhibited. Many of the country's repatriated heritage sites, which are ethnographic objects, are kept temporarily or permanently at the National Museum, Lagos. The museum professionals who work in the museum are responsible for caring for the returned cultural property, and they have first-hand experience in using both the Westernized method and indigenous care in conservation of the collections in the museum. The aforementioned criteria made the museum suitable for evaluating the hybrid conservation model.

4.3. Sampling

Purposive sampling was conducted to select the professionals who would be interviewed. Staff whose duties were directly or indirectly involved in the care of the collections in the museum were interviewed. The sample size comprised 8 conservators, 5 curators, and 2 ethnographers. Participants were selected based on their professional knowledge and their direct involvement in the conservation, documentation, interpretation, management, and study of Nigerian cultural heritage collections.

The eight conservators preserve the collections in the museum using preventive and interventive methods of conservation, and they have a professional experience of 15–20 years at the museum. The five curators have worked in the museum for 12–30 years with the responsibility of acquiring, documenting, storing, and exhibiting museum collections. The two ethnographers carry out research in the communities from which museum collections were acquired to study and understand their culture, which is also helpful in the exhibition and interpretation of the museum collections. They have worked in the museum for 25 years and 13 years, respectively. This diversity of professional backgrounds enabled this study to capture perspectives from different disciplinary and professional positions within the museum.

To protect participants' confidentiality, individual names and other identifying information are not disclosed. Participants are instead referred to by professional category and/or participant codes.

4.4. Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews and Direct institutional observation were the methods used in collecting data.

4.4.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview questions were based on the following

- The type of conservation training received by conservators
- The type of conservation materials used in the museum
- Any challenges experienced in using Western conservation methods
- How indigenous methods are integrated into the conventional methods used in the museum
- Challenges encountered with indigenous methods
- Perception of heritage objects as 'living heritage'
- The institutional attitudes towards community access and community engagement
- Capacity constraints in managing repatriated heritage objects.

- Administrative challenges in transforming from a colonial-centered organization to a hybrid repository that shares authority with indigenous creators.

4.4.2. Direct Institutional Observation

The researchers observed day-to-day activities in the conservation laboratory at the National Museum, Lagos. They also went to the storage areas to assess the storage capacity and the environmental conditions.

4.5. Data Analysis: Thematic Framework

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data obtained in the research, while both the deductive and inductive approaches were used for the coding process. This implies that a hybrid approach was used. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework, while the inductive codes were obtained from the experiences of the interviewed staff.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical measures were taken in conducting this study. Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' professional interests. The indigenous knowledge system was discussed with due respect.

4.7. Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study was that empirical data were generated primarily from museum professionals, including conservators, curators, and ethnographers, rather than directly from representatives of source communities or indigenous knowledge holders. Although community participation and indigenous knowledge constitute important components of the conservation framework proposed in this article, the study does not claim to represent community perspective directly. Rather, the framework is informed by the experiences and observations of museum professionals, together with relevant scholarship on participatory and indigenous approaches to heritage conservation.

Furthermore, this study recognizes that its institutional setting and reliance on museum professionals as informants may privilege professional and institutional perspectives and cannot be taken as direct representations of community or indigenous views. It also acknowledges that scientific or community-based conservation approaches may differ in relation to values, acceptable risks, treatment methods, and cultural priorities. The proposed hybrid approach therefore emphasizes dialogue, negotiation, and shared decision-making to address such differences, rather than assuming that the two knowledge systems will always be compatible.

5. Conclusions

There has been more repatriation of cultural heritage in the 21st century with the aim of decolonizing museums in the Global North and for reparative justice. The repatriation process will not be complete if there is no plan for the conservation of cultural heritage. This is because conservation will ensure the care of the heritage. The present study highlights the need to shift the discourse from 'repatriation to responsibility' in post-repatriation care.

The findings support the two-pronged argument. Repatriation can contribute to the decolonization of Global North museums by challenging the continued custodianship of collections acquired through colonial histories. However, the decolonizing process should not end with physical return. It must also extend to the conditions under which returned heritage is conceived and governed in receiving institutions. The evidence from the National Museum, Lagos demonstrates that conservation can incorporate locally appropriate environmental strategies, indigenous knowledge and community perspectives alongside relevant conventional conservation expertise. Decolonization therefore involves not only

changing the location of the object but also renegotiating who has authority to determine its care, meaning and future use.

The empirical findings obtained at the National Museum, Lagos deconstructed the 'capacity defense' used by Western institutions to justify the retention of Africa's heritage in their possession. The results showed that the National Museum, Lagos has the basic facilities and human capacity to care for repatriated objects; nonetheless, the conservators advised that this should be strengthened by capacity building and advanced technologies. Conservation practice at the National Museum, Lagos demonstrated the contextual nature of the conservation profession. The method used in conserving repatriated heritage in holding institutions must not be the method to be used when it is returned, especially when a receiving institution has a method that suits its locality.

In order to bridge the post-repatriation conservation gap, this paper suggests a hybrid museology driven by Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" and James Clifford's "Contact Zone". Formal enactment of the Third Space at the National Museum, Lagos will yield a synergy that is sustainable and effective. National Museum, Lagos, which already has a 'civic space' status, will cease to be perceived as a perpetrator of colonial legacies but as a space accessible to the public, including source communities for knowledge sharing, discussions, and negotiation. This approach in post-repatriation conservation will contribute to the decolonization and inclusion goals of NCMM. It will also give agency to the indigenous communities.

In conclusion, to bridge the post-repatriation conservation gap, it is necessary to include a plan for the conservation of repatriated tangible heritage in repatriation agreements and MoUs. It is recommended that Global North institutions support heritage institutions in source countries in this regard. Introduction and implementation of a hybrid conservation framework will result in sustainable and ethical conservation.

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