

DIGNIFIED REPARATORY REPATRIATION AND REST

POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY



March 2025

‘Our family will only experience true healing, peace and closure when the remains of our ancestor are repatriated to us and we give him a dignified burial according to our tradition, culture and norms, at his place of birth to connect his soul and remains for peaceful and eternal rest.’

‘As descendants we are totally excluded from the repatriation and reparation discussions about our ancestors and our slogan is ANYTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US IS AGAINST US.’

‘As descendants of the Nama and VaHerero who died as a result of the brutal genocide by the Germans, we are entitled to reparations for the years the remains of our ancestors have been kept in foreign hands and lands, as well as for the loss of cattle and land. How are we expected to develop without our land and wealth in the form of cattle and other valuable looted cultural property?’

Quotes from interviewees

Front page picture: A statue of spiritual medium Mbuya Nehanda, an icon of resistance against British imperialism, was unveiled in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2021. Her skull, and other remains and spiritual items, were shipped in a sack to England as trophies of conquest. They have never been recovered.

Letter of welcome

In the spirit of respect for and honouring of dead ancestors, we share with you this policy brief, *Dignified Reparatory Repatriation and Rest*, developed by African Museums and Heritage Restitution (AFRIMUHERE) in collaboration with its UK-based partners, the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) and Decolonise the Archives (DTA), on behalf of the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Afrikan Reparations (APPG-AR).

There are thousands, if not millions, of African human remains in western museums and collections. These were looted from the continent after leaders and the general populace were killed as they resisted colonisation, being used as slave labour, having money extorted from them through dubious taxes (such as hut tax), or the looting of their natural resources, land, cattle and cultural property. In the case of Zimbabwe, most of its first Chimurenga (1st uprising) heroes such as Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi were killed by the British and their remains taken away. In the case of Namibia, an execution order was issued against the Nama and VaHerero which led to the first 20th Century genocide and the death of an estimated 75,000 people between 1904-07.

From the time the ancestral remains were looted, their relatives and descendants have been searching for their whereabouts and calling for their return to the communities of origin. In the last 10 years, some human remains have been repatriated back to Namibia, but have not been buried as they are currently stored in the museum. For Zimbabwe, none of its 1st Chimurenga heroes have been repatriated. Some human remains originating from Zimbabwe were identified in the UK during the last three years, with the majority in the Natural History Museum, but no repatriation has taken place yet.

AFRIMUHERE undertook an in-depth study in both Zimbabwe and Namibia to unravel the factors currently besetting the repatriation of African human remains from the UK and Germany to Zimbabwe and Namibia respectively. Information was gathered through key informant interviews of important stakeholders, including academics, museum practitioners, community stakeholders and activists. The study revealed that many factors are impeding repatriations, including lack of political will, absence of enabling legal frameworks such as policies and guidelines, lack of community consultations and lack of ethical considerations.

During the interviews, we were greatly pained as we witnessed two descendants (one from Zimbabwe and one from Namibia) literally crying as they narrated how their ancestors were killed and how the absence of their remains have affected their families. These incidents provided an insight into how much the descendants have suffered and are still traumatised by the absence of the skulls of their ancestors taken more than a century ago.

This policy brief provides recommendations that can help smooth and accelerate repatriations to bring much-needed closure to the descendants. AFRIMUHERE will be greatly honoured to present it to APPG-AR colleagues on the 12th March 2025 in London.

Warm regards,

Rudo Sithole

CEO, African Museums and Heritage Restitution (AFRIMUHERE)

Executive summary

This policy brief addresses the ethical, legal and political challenges surrounding the repatriation of African ancestral remains and cultural artefacts from European institutions, with a specific focus on Zimbabwean and Namibian remains held in the UK and German institutions respectively. The document explores the historical injustices rooted in colonial violence, where these remains were taken as trophies or for pseudoscientific studies during periods of conflict and genocide. Drawing from experiences in Namibia and Zimbabwe, this brief aims to facilitate the respectful repatriation of African ancestral remains and their dignified burial in line with traditional norms and practices, thereby ending more than a century of suffering, cultural insensitivity and restoring the dignity of the communities.

Drawing on a broad consultation with academics, museum practitioners, community stakeholders and activists, this policy brief outlines actionable recommendations. The goal is to address issues of national identity, cultural heritage restoration and postcolonial justice, non-consensual possession and use, and achieving the repatriation of these remains to their rightful communities or countries of origin to facilitate the completion of burial rights and bring closure and healing to the descendants.

Key issues

During consultations in Zimbabwe and Namibia, AFRIMUHERE identified these key issues.

- **Lack of political will:** The repatriation of human remains from the UK and Germany to Zimbabwe and Namibia has been hindered by a lack of political will, among many other factors. Despite the historical injustices and ongoing perpetuation of colonial legacies as demonstrated by the retention of African human remains and heritage in European institutions, western governments have been slow to take decisive action. This lack of commitment has resulted in delayed or stalled repatriation efforts, prolonging the pain and injustice experienced by affected communities.
- **Absence of enabling legal frameworks:** The absence of enabling legal frameworks, including policies and guidelines both in holding and source countries, has been a significant obstacle to the repatriation of human remains. Existing laws and regulations in the UK and Germany often prioritise the interests of museums and institutions over those of the communities of origin. Neither Zimbabwe and Namibia have repatriation policies – although they have started the development of these policies, they are still a long way from seeing the light of day. This has led to a lack of clarity and consistency in repatriation processes, making it difficult for communities to navigate and secure the return of their ancestors' remains.
- **Lack of community involvement:** Community involvement is crucial to the repatriation process, yet many communities in Zimbabwe and Namibia have been excluded from decision-making processes. This lack of involvement has resulted in repatriation efforts that are often insensitive to community needs and concerns. Furthermore, the exclusion of communities has perpetuated the historical power imbalance between European institutions and African communities. This lack of community involvement has been well

documented in the case of Namibia where human remains are still stored in the national museum long after their repatriation from Germany.

- **Lack of ethical considerations:** The repatriation of human remains raises complex ethical considerations, yet these have often been overlooked or ignored. European institutions have historically prioritised scientific interests over cultural and spiritual sensitivities, leading to the retention of human remains without proper consent or respect. A more nuanced understanding of ethical considerations is necessary to ensure repatriation efforts are respectful and just.
- **Need for proper reparations:** The repatriation of human remains is only one aspect of a broader process of reparations for historical injustices. Communities in Zimbabwe and Namibia are not only seeking the return of their ancestors' remains but also acknowledgment of the harm inflicted upon them and compensation for the ongoing impacts of colonialism resulting from loss of dignity, cattle, land and being used as slave labour. Proper reparations are necessary to address the historical and ongoing injustices faced by these communities. Nama and VaHerero communities in Namibia are calling for proper direct reparations as they reject the €1.1 billion reparations awarded to the Namibian government in the form of 'development aid' (2021), as exclusionary and non-reparative.
- **Lack of provenance research:** Provenance research is essential to identify and verify the origins of human remains. However, many European institutions have failed to conduct thorough provenance research, making it difficult to determine the cultural affiliation and community of origin for many human remains. This lack of research has hindered repatriation efforts and perpetuated the uncertainty and mistrust surrounding the retention of African human remains in European institutions.
- **Diplomatic tensions:** Diplomatic tensions between European countries and African countries such as Zimbabwe and Namibia have complicated repatriation efforts. Historical grievances, ongoing political tensions and competing interests have created a challenging environment for repatriation and reparation negotiations. Addressing these diplomatic tensions is essential to facilitating cooperation and collaboration between countries and institutions, ultimately ensuring the successful repatriation of human remains and the establishment of new ethical and balanced relationships.

Recommendations

These recommendations are a product of extensive consultations conducted by AFRIMUHERE with museum directors and curators, archivists, other government cultural practitioners, descendant communities and leaders, academics and activists in Zimbabwe and Namibia to try to eliminate current problems besetting the repatriation of ancestral remains from the UK to Zimbabwe and from Germany to Namibia and to smooth the processes.

Legal and policy framework

- Zimbabwe and Namibia should develop national repatriation policies aligned with international standards (such as the International Council of Museums Code of Ethics) and local customary laws, to govern the identification, repatriation, reburial and stewardship of returned heritage.
- The UK and Germany should legally recognise colonial genocide and systemic violence as grounds for reparations under international human rights laws, ensuring binding agreements replace symbolic gestures as colonialism and enslavement are now recognised as crimes and injustices against humanity.
- Germany and Namibia should negotiate a binding agreement with the OvaHerero and Nama representatives, revising the 2021 Joint Declaration and ensuring that Germany's financial commitments are directly tied to compensation for looted ancestral remains and cultural property, as well as appropriated land and cattle. The UK should amend its museum policies to all deaccessioning, so cultural property taken together with the human remains can be repatriated.

Community involvement

- Zimbabwe and Namibia should ensure the inclusion of representatives of descendants as well as lawyers and civil society organisations in all national repatriation committees, in engagement with holding countries' ministries of foreign affairs or culture, museums and other institutions, as well as in the drafting of agreements and the actual repatriation processes.
- This will ensure what has happened in Namibia, where ancestral remains repatriated without descendant community consultations are still stored in the museum, is not repeated. It will also avert descendant communities taking their government to court for making agreements for reparations behind their back.
- Both source and holding countries should embed free, prior and informed consent principles in all repatriation processes, granting descendant communities veto power over decisions affecting the remains of their ancestors.
- Repatriation committees should establish community-led advisory panels reflecting indigenous governance structures to design memorialisation projects (eg. Swakopmund Genocide Museum) and oversee repatriation protocols.
- Countries such as Zimbabwe and Namibia involved in repatriations should create independent oversight committees with VaHerero, Nama and Zimbabwean descendant leaders to audit compliance, prevent tokenism and uphold ethical practices.

Reparative justice

- Zimbabwe and Namibia should negotiate for reparations under the five-category model of repatriation/restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, measures of satisfaction and guarantees for non-repetition.
- The UK and Germany should award reparations/compensation to Africans who lost their ancestors, land and cattle during colonisation in a manner similar to the way Jewish people are being compensated for their Nazi-era lost art and persecution in concentration camps.
- Germany and Namibia should negotiate with the descendant communities to redirect financial commitment of €1.1 billion pledge towards direct reparations, land restitution and community-controlled initiatives, explicitly excluding the vague 'development aid'.
- The UK and German governments should offer formal apologies to descendants and countries of origin acknowledging colonial violence and genocide as a foundational step toward reconciliation.

Diplomatic and institutional action

- Namibia and Zimbabwe should leverage regional bodies like the African Union, Southern African Development Community (SADC) and continental civil society organisations such as AFRIMUHERE to negotiate bilateral treaties and multilateral frameworks that prioritise restitution over diplomatic concessions.
- In alignment with the five-category reparative model, holding countries such as the UK and Namibia should invest in institutional capacity-building, including modern museum and curatorial infrastructure, joint-provenance research and exhibition development partnerships, and digital cataloguing systems, as part of rehabilitation and measures of satisfaction.
- UK and German institutions should publish digital inventories of looted human remains and associated archives in their museums and institutions, paired with AFRIMUHERE and AFFORD-led audits to track progress and hold stakeholders accountable.

Public engagement and education

- The governments of Zimbabwe and Namibia should integrate colonial histories and restitution narratives into national school curricula and international day museum exhibitions to foster public awareness and solidarity with reparative justice efforts.
- The holding countries should support co-curated exhibitions in their museums that critically contextualise colonial violence, ensuring descendant communities lead narrative control.

Funders and technical partners

- Funders and holding countries should support the development of repatriation policies in African countries using the recently developed South African repatriation policy as a model, starting with Namibia and Zimbabwe.

- Funders, holding countries and technical partners should support the organisation of an international conference for the adoption of African repatriation/restitution principals, similar to the 11 Washington Principles adopted by 43 Jewish art holding countries and 13 non-governmental organisations in 1998.
- During the adoption of the Washington Principles, states holding Nazi-looted art and non-governmental organisations committed to identifying these works of art and to arrive at just and fair solutions with the owners or their heirs. Similarly, states holding African ancestral remains and heritage must commit to identifying and repatriating the ancestral remains and heritage to countries and communities of origin.
- Just as the adoption of the Washington Principles proved pivotal to the restitution of 500,000 of the estimated 600,000 Nazi-looted Jewish art pieces in the last 25 years, the adoption of similar principles by holding countries will greatly facilitate African repatriations and restitutions in the coming years.
- Funders, holding countries and technical partners should facilitate development of joint provenance research and co-curated exhibition partnerships between Zimbabwe and the UK and between Namibia and Germany to accelerate identification of ancestral remains, correct distorted narratives and establish new ethical decolonised relationships between the global south and the global north.
- Funders should support continental civil society organisations such as AFRIMUHERE to conduct international workshops and webinars for raising awareness, share information on emerging best practice and build capacity for the repatriation of African human remains.

African Ancestral Remains Project partners

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Afrikan Reparations (APPG-AR)

APPG-AR brings together parliamentarians, campaigners, communities and other stakeholders to examine issues of African reparations and the restitution of cultural artefacts and ancestral remains. APPG-AR explores policy proposals on reparations and development and how best to redress the legacies of African enslavement and colonialism.

AFFORD The African Foundation for Development (AFFORD)

AFFORD is an international organisation established in 1994, with a mission to expand and enhance the contributions Africans in the diaspora make to African development.

The African Museums and Heritage Restitution (AFRIMUHERE)

AFRIMUHERE was established by the African heritage community in response to calls for a continental heritage and museums association. AFRIMUHERE's mandate is to safeguard, promote and facilitate restitution of African heritage.

Decolonising the Archives (DTA)

DTA is a Pan-African organisation facilitating heritage-based therapeutic interventions for people of African heritage rooted in our archives, cultural principles and technologies.

© APPG-Afrikan Reparation/AFRIMUHERE/
AFFORD
March 2025

Published by AFRIMUHERE. This report was compiled on behalf of the APPG Afrikan Reparations and AFFORD by AFRIMUHERE, with the support of Ifunanya Madufor.

**The media can address inquiries to:
bell.ribeiroaddy.mp@parliament.uk**

**Or contact AFRIMUHERE:
info@afrimuhere.org
[+263774437195](tel:+263774437195)**

