African journalism. 5 APRIL 2025 | SPECIAL EDITION

The Continent

The Museum of Stolen History

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

Welcome to the Museum of Stolen History

Typically, journalists think that their job is to tell you what is happening now. History is yesterday's news. And yet: whenever *The Continent* asks its readers what they want more of, "history" is one of the top answers.

In response, over the course of eight editions at the beginning of 2025, *The Continent* profiled eight historical artefacts from every corner of Africa. Curated by journalist and filmmaker Shola Lawal (p3), each was accompanied by an original illustration commissioned by art director Wynona Mutisi (p4).

We called the series the Museum of Stolen History, in recognition of the fact that much of Africa's history has been looted or erased.

This week we present the eight-part package in a special edition. Consider it a gift from us, to say thank you for helping us reach 30,000 subscribers this season.

It is also to make the histories that this series illuminates, the people and the places that it illustrates, accessible to a wider audience. Please do share it widely, especially with schools and learning institutions. As Kwame Nkrumah said: "In the new African renaissance, we place great emphasis on the presentation of history." This is our small contribution.

Our team is taking a publishing break to focus on our plans for world domination. We need your help in this – for our 200th edition we want to launch our very own merch, and we want that edition to be all about you. Lend us your brain, and five minutes.

NOTE TO SCHOOLS:

The Museum of Stolen History is freely available to be used for teaching purposes. If you are a teacher or student and you do find this useful, we would be grateful if you could let us know on read@thecontinent.org – this will help to enable us to do more of this kind of work.

Inside:

Holding what we can't have back yet

African history is ours to celebrate even when it remains hidden from us.

Shola Lawal

The deep scars of colonisation on African communities have been covered over in some ways but not on the sparsely filled shelves of museums on the continent. Art historians estimate about 90% of the artwork stolen from Africa during the colonial era is still being held in Europe or the United States. The empty shelves here contrast sharply with European art institutions bursting at the seams with detained wooden queens or masks.

Across the length and breadth of the continent, the theft of those works often involved violence. On the occasions when European collectors paid for the art they collected, they grossly underpaid. As this series, the Museum of Stolen History, reveals – the takers went on to treat sacred objects as decorations to be gawked at while communities deprived of deeply meaningful symbols, some of which were spiritual intercessors, grieved.

Today, parts of Europe are reckoning with that sacrilegious legacy and are opening the door for restitution. But some, like the United Kingdom, have remained obnoxiously rigid, allowing old laws to hinder a total return, and instead "loaning" the works back to the descendants of their legitimate owners. A digital museum such as this one is necessary to help us hold space in our memories until the time comes when those works are finally, and completely, home.

Bringing the past to life

Zimbabwean artist Wynona Mutisi has drawn many of The Continent*'s most iconic covers and her aesthetic talent is essential to the paper's look and feel every week. As art director of the Museum of Stolen History project, she commissioned an original illustration from an artist in each artefact's country of origin, with this brief.*

Project name: Museum of Stolen History
Project type: Full page illustration
Dimensions: 12cm x 18cm (300ppi)

Directions: Many African countries are requesting the repatriation of stolen historical artefacts from former colonial powers. That is because many Africans may never get the privilege to see these artefacts in person, nor experience their rich history and the stories attached to them. In this series, we aim to explore these objects, their history, where they belong and what it would look like to see them in their home.

Some of the objects were made to be worn, to be performed in. Others were made as devotional objects. The idea is to let you, the illustrator, engage with the object with the context you carry as a local. What stories have been told about it? What connection, if any, do you have to it? And how do you imagine that the object would look if it was to be drawn in situ?

These artefacts may never be used again in the way they were created for – but we hope to give them a new life in your illustration.

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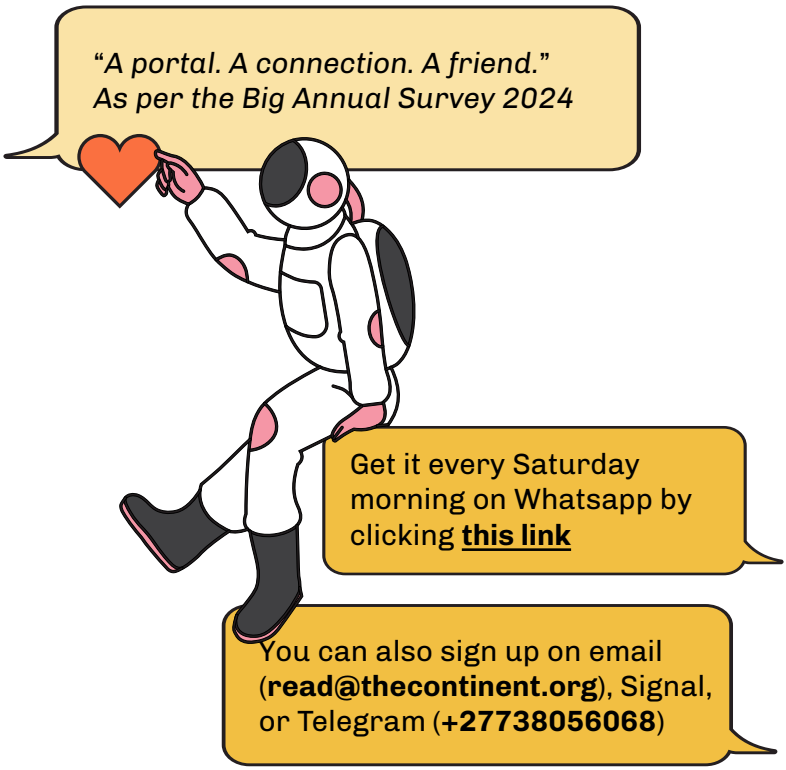

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The Bangwa Queen

This iconic, regal figure got its name – *Bangwa Queen* – from one of its possessors, Harry Franklin, who obtained her in 1966. But to her true owners, the Lebang of the rolling Bangwa grasslands in southwestern Cameroon, she is Ngwi Ndem, the divine spouse who intercedes for those seeking fertility, bountiful harvests, and protection against evil.

The wooden sculpture, at 82cm tall, is

striking. She has an expressive face and a body in motion, perhaps dancing or singing, with a rattle in her one good arm. The predator tooth necklace and the brass bangles on her wrists and ankles denote a woman of nobility among the Bangwa.

Ngwi Ndem was sent to Europe by Gustav Conrau, a German trader and colonial agent. In 1898, Conrau was the first European to visit the Bangwa Mountains, where he sought trading contacts, as well as manual labour – slaves – for the deadly rubber and palm oil plantations of the then German-held Kamerun. Conrau was also mapping out the country, reporting potential banks of resources and hinterlands for future conquest by Berlin.

Conrau settled for several months with the Lebang. Their fon, or chief, Fontem Asonganyi, welcomed him at first. Some accounts have it that Asonganyi gifted or sold the wooden sculpture and several other artefacts to Conrau at this time.

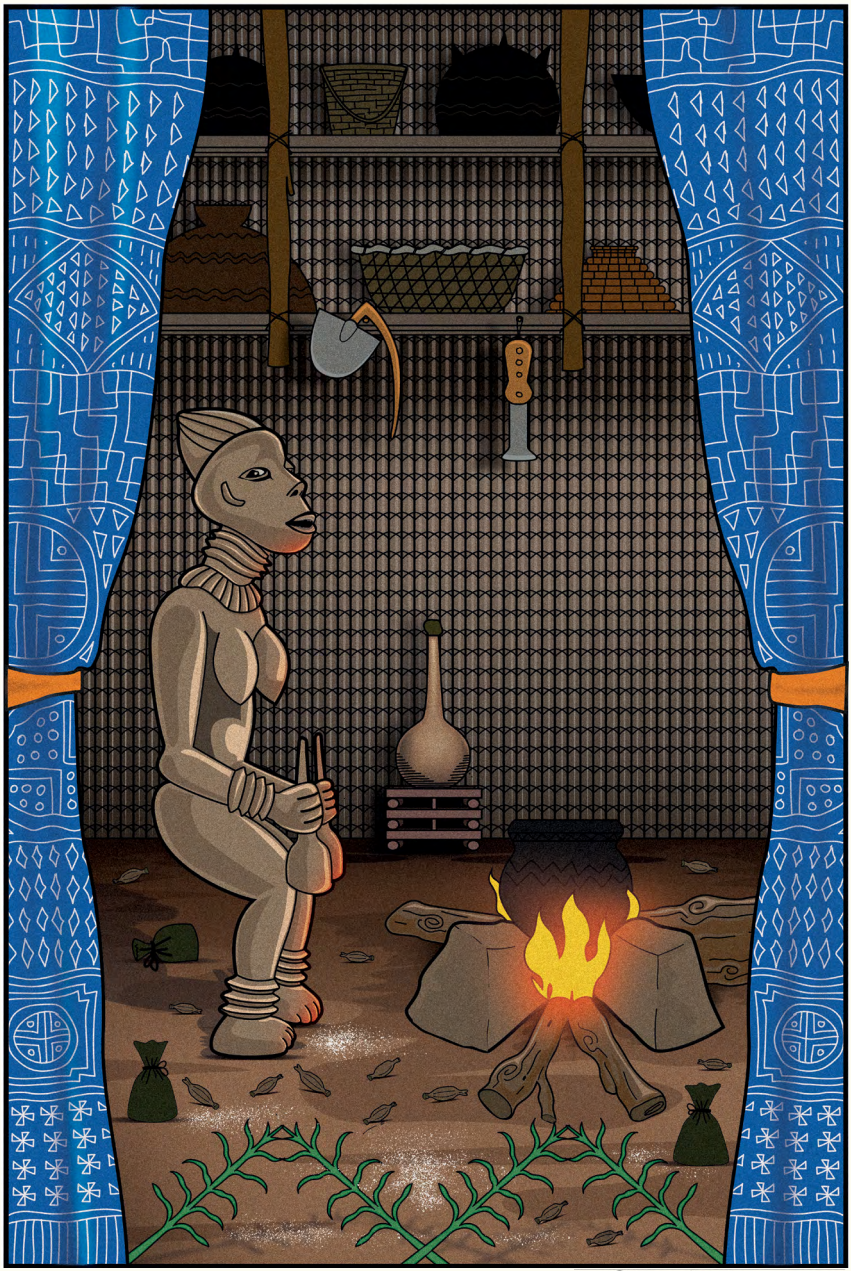
But Chief Charles Taku, Asonganyi's great-grandson and a lead counsel at the International Criminal Court, told *The Continent* that Conrau stole the sculpture, along with dozens of others, from a sacred forest called Lefem. Conrau returned to Bangwa a few months later in search of more labourers. But the fon grew angry, insisting the first group return first. In his notes, Conrau describes himself as being taken prisoner. He died by suicide in December 1899.

Believing Conrau was murdered, German authorities declared war on the Lebang. Their troops attacked communities and looted more sculptures. Asonganyi was captured several years later, and banished from the area.

Ngwi Ndem was recorded as a new addition to the National Ethnological Museum of Berlin in 1899. She has changed hands several times since, becoming a pop culture icon in 1935 after renowned artist Man Ray photographed her with a nude model for an edition of *Paris* magazine. She made news again in 1999 when she was auctioned a last time for a whopping $3.8-million. The purchase, by the Paris-based Dapper Foundation, which once ran a museum, made Ngwi Ndem the most valuable African artwork at the time.

She is still in the Dapper Foundation's possession. Since 2017, Chief Taku has been writing to the organisation, seeking the queen's freedom from what he says is enslavement. The Dapper Foundation has continued to assert its right of ownership, he says. The foundation did not respond to a request for comment.

***Illustration note, by Cameroonian artist Eric Takukam**: This artwork (next page) depicts the queen in her natural and original environment, far from the hostile and cold European climate. In the Grassfields region, we call her* Magne*, the mother of twins – a symbol of fertility. I have given her a fire to warm her, and restored her left hand, missing from the sculpture. The Ndop fabric in the foreground is often worn by nobles, and the clay pot symbolises the spirit of sharing: the mother of twins traditionally cooks twice a day, to feed all those who come to witness God's grace upon her. Colonialism eroded these traditions, and modernity is doing the rest: traditional building materials, like the bamboo raffia of the wall and chair, are in short supply due to aggressive agriculture. With their disappearance, some of the essence of Bamileke heritage disappears too.*



Eric Takukam 2025

The Golden Crown

This gold crown with stunningly delicate filigree belonged to Emperor Tewodros II, the King of Kings of Abyssinia. It was the most remarkable artefact looted during the British Army's 1868 siege of Maqdala, the king's hilltop fortress capital.

The crown, made of three ornamented tiers, has been on "permanent" display at London's Victoria and Albert Museum since 1872. Its topmost tier is a domed cylinder embossed with depictions of the Biblical disciples Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Depictions of the 12 apostles are also woven in intricate lattice.

Tewodros was a powerful monarch who conquered many parts of Ethiopia and aimed to unite warring lords into a modern state. He too seized treasures on his many conquests. The Golden Crown was likely taken from the Church of Our Lady of Qwesqwam in northern Gondar. The Church had been given the crown from a former ruler.

Tewodros' collection in Maqdala was, in a sense, Ethiopia's first national museum, according to Alula Pankhurst, a member of Ethiopia's National Heritage Restitution Committee.

Historians described the king as graceful and courteous to nobles and paupers alike, but Tewodros also had a terrible rage. After his first wife, Tewabech Ali, died in 1858, more of that ferocious nature emerged. The king, for example, ordered a massacre after John Bell, his

European friend and trusted adviser, was killed during a military campaign.

Around the same time, Tewodros' kingdom increasingly came under threat from invading Ottoman Turks and internal rivals. His rule and army shrank. In 1863, Tewodros wrote to England's Queen Victoria, seeking help against the Muslim Turks from a fellow Christian monarch. But his letter, sent through the British Consul in Ethiopia, was ignored because England had allied with the Ottomans. Insulted, Tewodros imprisoned the consul and several other Europeans. When the British Foreign Office sent a diplomatic mission to plead for their release, Tewodros seized them too.

A massive British Army unit dispatched from India descended on Maqdala on 9 April 1868. The force comprised 13,000 troops, supported by an auxiliary force of almost 40,000 more, and was armed with a barrage of modern weaponry drawn by 44 elephants. Regional warlords aided the long march into the Ethiopian highlands.

Many of Tewodros' 4,000 soldiers were massacred as the British approached the fortress. In a final act of defiance, Tewodros shot himself with a pistol that had been a gift from Queen Victoria herself. Contemporary accounts say that a ghost of a smile lingered on his face when his body was found.

The Brits plundered Maqdala, taking much of Tewodros' collection, even locks of his hair and the robe he wore. Then they burned the fortress compound, which consisted of about 3,000 buildings. A government archaeologist embedded in the army took possession of the crown, a gold chalice, and hundreds of treasures like manuscripts, crosses and tabots (wooden tablets bearing replicas of the Ark of the Covenant, allowed to be seen only by priests). Those items ended up in several British museums and castles.

Tewodros' wife, Empress Tiruwork Wube, and their son, Prince Alemayehu, were captured. The empress died before reaching England. Queen Victoria is said to have liked the prince and sent him to prestigious schools. However, he grew unhappy and sick and passed away in 1879 at age 19. The British royal family refuses to return his remains, because exhuming him would "disturb" others buried at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle.

Britain rejected a formal request from Ethiopia to return all the loot but has "gifted" back a few items, including a silver crown in 1925 and a lock of Tewodro's hair in 2019. As for the Golden Crown, the Victoria and Albert Museum says it could consider a long-term "loan" to Ethiopia, because British law restricts the permanent return of historical artefacts.

***Illustration note, by Ethiopian illustrator Yemsrach Yetneberk**: The Golden Crown is most famously associated with Emperor Tewodros II, but this artefact also had a previous life, existing for nearly a century before he seized it. It's that life which I chose to reimagine. This illustration (next page) conjures up the occasion on which the nobles who commissioned the crown – Empress Mentewab and her son, King Iyyasu II – gave it to the priests of the Church of Our Lady of Qwesqwam. Mentewab had recently lost a son and the crown, adorned with important biblical figures, was given to the priests to remind them to diligently pray for the prince's departed soul.*

Illustration: Yemsrach Yetneberk

Rosetta Stone

In July 1799, French soldiers seized control of Rashid, a port town in Egypt. The French call it Rosetta. One of the first things they did was to rebuild the town's old fort. That's when they found it, in the construction rubble: a large fragment of stone inscribed with writing in three different scripts.

This stone, known now as the Rosetta Stone, was the key to deciphering Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics – and, in so doing, unlocked the lost history of that civilisation.

The dark, granite-like slab is a fragment of a larger stele – a standing inscription stone, about 2m tall, used to document written information. This one was a copy of a Royal Decree, issued on 27 March in

196 BCE. The decree commemorates the coronation of a new pharoah, Ptolemy V, and raises him to the status of the gods. It exalts the new pharoah – a boy of just 13 years – as "the mighty one of twofold strength, the establisher of the Two Lands".

Crucially, the decree is written in three different scripts: hieroglyphics, Ancient Greek, and Demotic. Linguists' knowledge of Ancient Greek allowed them to translate the 14 lines of hieroglyphics that were legible on the stone. This was the key breakthrough in the development of a hieroglyphics dictionary, which allowed historians to read the text on countless other artefacts from Ancient Egypt.

Even when the Rosetta Stone was inscribed, more than 2,000 years ago, hieroglyphics was a dying script. Only priests used it and then only for official decrees. Greek had become the administrative language. Hieroglyphics is unlike most modern scripts in that it uses a combination of images rather than letters to represent meaning. For example,  means "in the hand of", and  means "at the back of".

When British troops displaced the French in Egypt, they took the artefacts too. The British Museum received the Rosetta Stone in 1802, where it has since become its most-visited object. Weighing 760kg – equivalent to about six baby elephants – the slab was so heavy that the museum's grounds could not bear the weight, and special structures were built to house it.

Twenty-eight more copies of the stele with nearly the same version of the decree have since been discovered.

Egyptian government officials and individuals have campaigned for years for the return of what they call the Rashid Stone, but without success. The United Kingdom claims it owns it under agreements signed by France and the Ottomans and that Egypt has other copies.

However, renowned archaeologist and former antiquities minister Zahi Hawass tells *The Continent* that the Rashid Stone is the icon of the Egyptian civilisation and, thus, should be displayed at the new Grand Museum in Cairo.

Among the histories the Rashid Stone unlocked is that of Ptolemy V himself. The pharaoh was an aggressive ruler, conquering territory that had been previously lost by the Ptolemaic Empire. He was also celebrated for lowering taxes.

But it is his tragic backstory that has captivated historians. Both of his parents died when he was five: his father, Ptolemy IV, in a palace fire; his mother in mysterious circumstances. He first ruled with the help of guardians, before being crowned when he turned 13 and came of age. It was then that the decree on the Rashid Stone was issued – and, because it was literally written in stone, we are still talking about it today.

A note on the illustration: *Egyptian illustrator Alia Wahby restored the Rashid Stone to its original state – and to its original location, thought to be inside a temple in the city of Sais, known today as Sa El-Hagar. The stone is flanked by two priests, who even back then were the only people who could read its hieroglyphics. One priest is in a pose of worship and the other holds an ankh, or 'key of life' – an ancient Egyptian symbol representing eternal life.*

Illustration: Alia Wahby

Photo: Field Museum of Natural History

Ghost and Darkness

British colonists were scrambling to dominate the entire Great Lakes region before the Germans. They needed to transfer soldiers, munitions, and other supplies inland. But how? Their answer: a colossal 530km railroad that would snake through the rugged wilderness and link Mombasa to Lake Victoria.

The year was 1898. So began the Uganda Railway project. It was quickly nicknamed "The Lunatic Express" because of its vast expense in both lives and money.

More than 30,000 Sikhs were shipped in from Britain's colony in India to work on the project – thousands died from disease and sheer exhaustion. When the project got to the wild plains around the Tsavo River, a pair of enormous, maneless lions began attacking workers in their tent camps at night, seizing sleeping workers and dragging their screaming victims off into the bush. Those left behind were terrified.

It was odd: Lions attack humans out of desperate hunger or to defend themselves, but they don't actively hunt us. Some speculate that the plentiful dead bodies of railway workers had fuelled their appetite for humans. In the camps, rumours spread they were ancient spirits furious about construction on sacred land. Camp workers named them Ghost and Darkness.

Ghost and Darkness caused nine months of nightly horror. Thick walls of whistling thorns did not stop the beasts from penetrating the camps and seizing one victim from the hospital. A local warrior dispatched to hunt them unfortunately arrived after nightfall and was attacked and killed by the pair. The death toll grew so alarming that workers threatened to flee. Construction was suspended.

With the fate of the empire hanging on his shoulders, Lieutenant Colonel John Henry Patterson, the army officer in charge, took matters into his own hands. An experienced tiger hunter, he resolved to kill the lions.

According to his own account, *The Man-eaters of Tsavo* – published in 1907 – the effort nearly killed him. At one point, believing he could lure the beasts with animal carcasses, the lions ignored the trap and circled his location.

He finally managed to kill one from a tree top. The second proved much tougher, and would not die despite several encounters where the animal was shot and wounded. In their final meeting, the beast charged straight at Patterson, coming mere steps away before it collapsed from a barrage of bullets. Eight men carried each carcass back to the camps.

In February 1899, the rail line was finished.

At least three movies are based on Patterson's tale, including the 1996 thriller *The Ghost and the Darkness*. No one knows exactly how many workers the lions killed. Patterson's book said "no less than 28 Indians and Africans". In subsequent writings, he raised the number to 135 deaths, saying that African workers were not officially documented. Using hairballs stuck in the cavities of their teeth, expert analysis concluded they killed 35 humans.

In 1925, Patterson sold the lions' skulls and skin – which he had turned into rugs – to the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History for $5,000. Specialists restored the carcasses by stuffing them and then mounted them on display.

Analysis of the pairs' jaws helped reveal the two were brothers, and that one lion had a tooth abscess that must have been excruciatingly painful. It was likely, experts concluded, that they both hunted humans because our species is easier to hunt and chew than other animals.

In 2009, Kenya's museum authorities began advocating for the repatriation of the remains. However, it is not clear if a formal request was ever made.

Fredrick Manthi, director of Antiquities at National Museums of Kenya, told *The Continent* that Kenyans want to own and showcase their history in their country. The people of Kenya and Tsavo have the right to this resource, he said.

Illustration note, by Kenyan artist Geoffrey Gichuhi Muikia: *"Beware brothers, the devils are coming. Beware the ghosts are here," the workmen would warn each other in their native tongue. Nothing was more nerve-racking than the deep roars of these dreadful monsters, growing gradually nearer and nearer, letting one know that they were doomed.*

Illustration: Geoffrey Gichuhi Muikia

Photo: Kola Sulaimon/AFP

Okukor

The rooster stood for over 114 years in the dining hall of Jesus College, part of Cambridge University, whose official crest is also a cockerel. *Okukor* was returned to Nigeria in 2021, after students at the college campaigned for its removal.

The bronze sculpture was among thousands of artefacts Britain plundered from the ancient Benin Kingdom in 1897. Officially, 2,500 items were stolen. Historians suggest the number was higher.

Benin Kingdom, in present-day Edo State, was known for its opulence, engineering, and legendary artistry. Benin carvers used bas-relief style to create solemn, life-sized head and bust sculptures of obas (traditional rulers) and members of the royal court; or plaques depicting historical events in brass, ivory, terracotta, and wood. The royal palace was adorned with many such pieces, but the sculptures were also important for rituals. *Okukor*

is believed to pay homage to the Iyoba or queen mother, referred to as "the cockerel that crows at the head of the harem".

Benin's advancement is credited to Oba Ewuare the Great (1440-1473), who oversaw the development of an ordered city of roads and gates, and ruled from Lagos to the Niger. Perhaps the greatest of Ewuare's feats was the massive wall built around Benin to deter invaders. Historians think it stretched over 10,000km, with nine gates that opened and shut daily.

Benin's wealth came from trade, including the horrifying sale of people as chattel. In exchange for weapons and brass ingots from Portuguese traders, Benin sold slaves, artwork, pepper, and ivory.

By the late 19th century, following the abolition of slavery, kingdoms surrounding Benin had been annexed by Britain. Still, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi enjoyed sovereignty and monopoly over palm oil and rubber trade in the region, and taxed traders passing through – including the British. That greatly annoyed London.

James Robert Phillips, a British consular officer, decided to petition the oba himself in January 1897. The oba said he would not be available because of important annual rituals that forbade entertaining guests. However, Phillips's entourage from the Oil Rivers protectorate (now the Niger Delta) still advanced. It included a number of Britons and hundreds of local porters. Suspicious, the oba's generals unilaterally ordered an ambush that killed nearly every member of the entourage, including Phillips. Only two colonial officers survived the attack.

In retaliation, a 1,200-strong British force invaded Benin with orders to execute the oba. Benin's army was no match for the invading force, which came by land and sea with cannons.

Within days, the British reached the palace – but Oba Ovonramwen had escaped. The invaders looted the palace before razing it. The oba was later captured and exiled to Calabar with two of his 80 wives. The Kingdom of Benin was put fully under British control.

The plundered bronzes, meanwhile, were carted to London where they were given to officers or auctioned. Many made their way to museums in Britain and Germany. *Okukor* was donated to Jesus College in 1905 by a soldier who was part of the Benin expedition, whose son attended the school.

Following *Okukor*'s return to the Edo capital, Benin City, another 20 bronzes were returned by Germany in 2022.

Every object taken away represented an ancestor in captivity, Theophilus Umogbai, director of Benin City National Museum, told the *Associated Press* at the time. It was as though the people had been vandalised, he said, adding that their return now will help fill many gaps.

Illustration note, by Nigerian artist Daniel Oluwale: *Generations of queens have come and gone without the voice of Okukor, caged in glass and deprived of purpose, to greet them. Of what use is an indoor cockerel, who cannot tell day or night? Freed from that place at last and set on a familiar roost alongside his brethren and recognisable faces, he faced the sun once more. Although Okukor did not crow, his voice was felt across the land, celebrating a new dawn.*

Illustration: Daniel Oluwale

Photo: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

The Cullinan Diamond

Can one be accused of stealing an object if it was received as a "gift"?

Weighing in at 3,106 carats (that's 621 grams), the mighty Cullinan Diamond is the largest rough diamond ever found in Africa – or anywhere else. It was discovered in 1905 in the small mining town of Cullinan in colonial-era South Africa. Now it lives on as several pieces, most of which are embedded in Britain's Crown Jewels.

Following its discovery by the Premier Mining Company, the stone was put up for sale in Cape Town for several months. No buyer could be found. It was decided the gem would be sent to London for sale. To transport it, the company faked a ceremonial entourage that travelled with a steamboat complete with a security detail. The real diamond was not on board: it arrived quietly in London via post. Unfortunately, it couldn't sell there either.

In 1907, the Afrikaner government of the then-Transvaal Province, led by Louis Botha, decided to buy and gift the diamond to Britain's King Edward VII. They paid 150,000 pounds for the privilege, about $24-million today.

Botha had reason to splash out: the Second Boer War with the British (1899-1902) had just ended, leaving the Transvaal and the similarly Boer-led Orange Free State occupied and devastated. British soldiers had employed guerilla tactics, killing civilians indiscriminately, destroying farms and other food sources, and interning women and children in concentration camps.

Although the war was often seen as a "White Man's war", historians note that Black Africans, who had themselves been enslaved by the Boers, were either conscripted or volunteered to fight for one side or the other, often as scouts. At least 25,000 Afrikaners and 12,000 Black Africans died in the war.

Eventually, the Transvaal agreed to become a British colony in the Treaty of Vereeniging (1902), officially ending the war, and laying the foundations for the union that would become today's Republic of South Africa. As Transvaal's leader, Botha needed the Crown's good favour – and funds – to rebuild the Colony and return it to self-rule.

The Amsterdam-based jeweller Joseph Asscher was commissioned to cleave the stone. It is rumoured that he fainted upon successfully splitting the diamond, due to days-long anxious pre-examination of how best to cut it without damage, using the limited technologies of the time. In the end, nine big stones emerged from the diamond, and about 90 fragments. The biggest, the Great Star of Africa or Cullinan I, was embedded in the King's Sceptre with Cross. The second-biggest, the Second Star, was embedded in the Imperial State Crown.

Cullinans III through IX are part of brooches or other jewellery used by members of the royal family.

Amid a continent-wide push for stolen art to be repatriated by former colonial powers, South Africans too are demanding that the diamonds be returned to the country. Those demands heated up during King Charles' coronation in May 2023. But it's complicated, says Wits University's Roger Southall: the Cullinan was given by the government of the day, not looted in the traditional sense.

Lawyer Mothusi Kamanga, who campaigns on social media for the diamonds to be returned, disagrees. The gem was sent to the UK as a gift by settler colonialists who had illegally occupied South Africa, Kamanga told *The Continent*. Those colonists did not receive consent from Black Africans, the true owners, therefore they could not have gifted it to the king, he said.

Illustration note, by South African artist Chris J. Sassman: *Precolonial Africa never placed value on diamonds or gold. Instead, value was rooted in things that fostered community and connection to the land – animal husbandry, livestock, craft trade and agriculture. A diamond may have been a novelty, but it was never truly valuable. A bead necklace may have had more sentimental value than a diamond. In this artwork, I chose to depict a young Ndebele child (the Ndebele were the first recorded inhabitants of the Pretoria region where the diamond was found, after the San people) playing with the Cullinan Diamond as if it were just a paperweight. Nonetheless, I think Britain should return the diamonds: not because of their monetary value, but rather as redress for the injustices which surrounded its acquisition.*

Illustration: Chris J. Sassman

Kakuungu

If its puffed cheeks, exaggerated chin, and pouted lips provoke instant fear in the observer, then the *Kakuungu* mask is doing exactly what it is meant to do.

The rare artefact, made of wood, raffia, and tortoise shell, was one of hundreds of items bought by ethnographist Albert Maesen for only a few dollars on behalf of Belgium's Royal Museum of Central Africa. The mask is 1.5m tall and weighs about 10kg. There are about nine other such masks – and none remains in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This reflects just how intensely that country's heritage has been looted and hoarded.

Kakuungu, originally a dance mask from the Suku people in the southwestern Kwango region, was worn during rituals to initiate boys into manhood. Its fierce appearance was meant to instil fear, obedience and respect, and ward off threats to initiates. After the rituals, the

boys would take new names to mark their adulthood. The Suku believe the mask can cure sterility, calm the weather, and intervene in times of crisis.

Formerly known as the Congo Free State, the DRC suffered through one of the most brutal colonial regimes. Belgian officers coerced local chiefs to sign away their territories in return for alcohol or a piece of cloth. These territories were then claimed in 1885 by Belgium's King Leopold as his personal fiefdom.

Leopold's enforcers made locals work on rubber plantations for long hours to fuel Europe's car and bicycle industry. Punishment for failing to meet quotas or for resisting was severe: severed limbs, or worse, death. Leopold never visited, but the limbs were often set out for his commissioners' viewing pleasure on trips to the domain. Some 10-million people died. Congo became one of the most lucrative occupation projects.

By the late 1880s, word of the atrocities began to filter out, thanks to missionaries visiting the colony. Journalists and activists from fellow colonial European nations began protesting Leopold's brutality in newspapers. They denounced "red rubber", stained with the blood of the Congolese. The king denied any knowledge of the violations. Eventually, the outcry was so great Leopold was forced to hand the region over to the Belgian government in 1908, officially making it a colony.

But conditions remained dire. The Belgian Congo was highly segregated, with locals and Europeans living separately. A deliberate policy of under-education was enforced. Nearly no Congolese people reached university level, and they were never allowed to participate in politics.

Resistance grew, particularly in rural regions where people worked on plantations for little pay. In 1931, in the Kwango district where *Kakuungu* originated, workers revolted against the colonial authorities and refused to pay taxes. The Belgian army took about 500 lives in the crackdown that followed.

When a wave of independence movements swept across Africa in the late 1950s, Belgium too was forced to hand over the country to the Congolese. But there were fewer than 20 university graduates in the country. There was not a single doctor, lawyer, or Congolese army member. It was going to be a fragile independence. The impacts of this fragility are still evident in the country's instability today, the Catholic University of the DRC's Albert Malukisa told *The Continent*.

Belgium is now reckoning with that colonial past. In 2022, *Kakuungu* was one of the first objects the country "loaned" back to the DRC indefinitely, as part of an ongoing decolonisation project of its museum collections. Belgium's King Philippe, on a visit to DRC in June 2022, personally handed the mask to President Félix Tshisekedi. It now sits in the National Museum in Kinshasa.

Illustration note, by Congolese artist Edizon Musavuli: *The* Kakuungu *mask embodied the law and power of the ancestors. Its massive size and grotesque features inspired both fear and respect. In this scene, it towers over the gathering, emphasizing its role as a spiritual judge. The elders observe and the young initiates watch, fully aware of the moment's significance.*

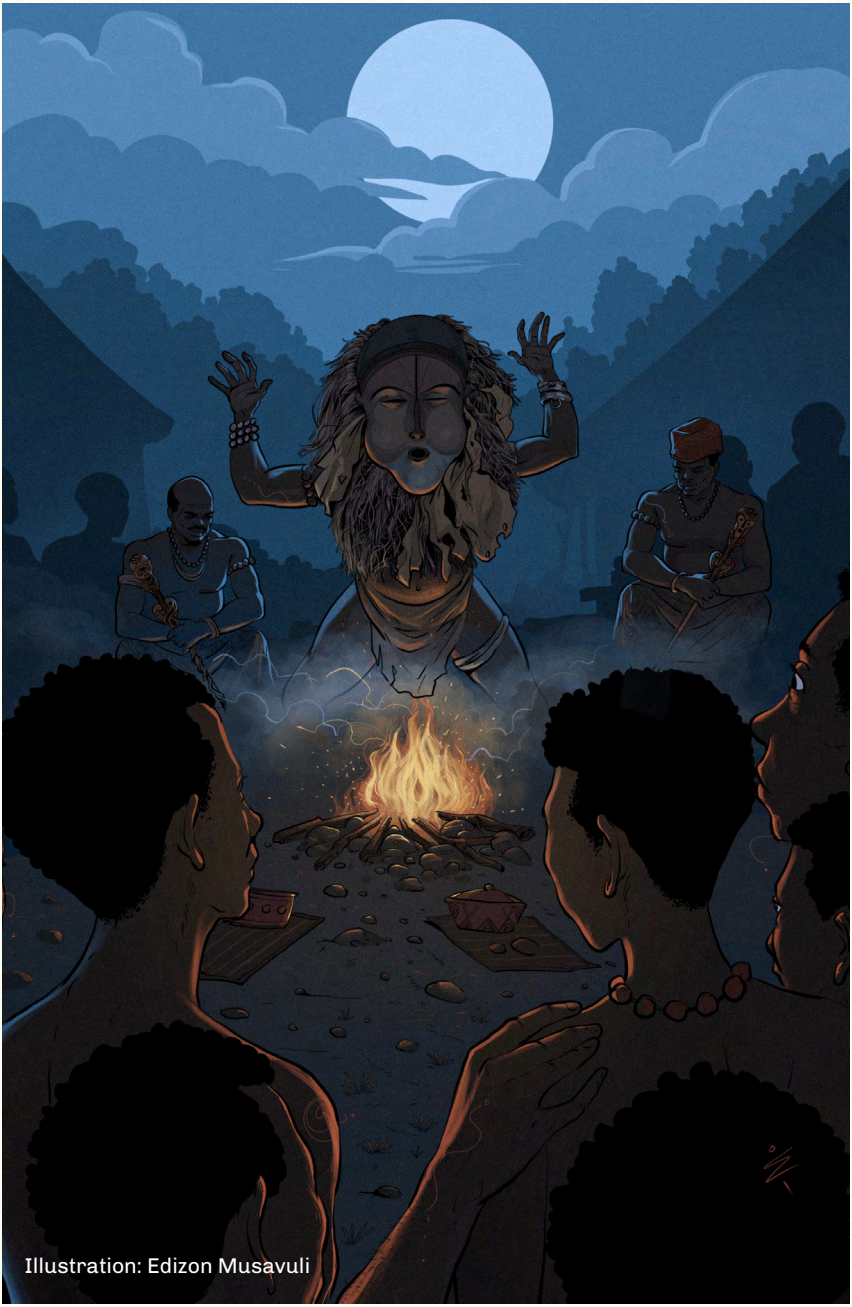


Illustration: Edizon Musavuli

Photo: Museum Burg Mylau

Ekori

The ekori – headgear worn by the nomadic Herero and Himba people in what is now Namibia – scared German missionaries so much that they forbade women from wearing it, and branded it as "devilish".

The ekori is made from leather pieces stitched together and decorated with iron beads or tortoise shells. Usually secured with a band, the pointy ekori was worn to signify a woman's status. At wedding ceremonies, the bride's mother would place on her daughter's head a finely decorated ekori, featuring intricate stitching patterns and pointed flaps that symbolised cow horns. For the semi-pastoralist Herero tribes, cattle were the only real marker of wealth and therefore had particular cultural significance. The ekori paid tribute to that belief.

Despite the restrictions they faced, Herero women would eventually find ways to adapt their fashion, even after a long period of harrowing suffering at the hands of German colonial forces.

It began in January 1904. Herero and Nama leaders led a revolt against German colonial soldiers, killing as many as a hundred men of the German colonial army as tensions around a planned displacement of locals grew. At first, the rebels made quick gains. Then the feared German General, Lothar von Trotha, skilled at subjugating local populations

across the continent, took command and ordered scorched earth policies that changed the course of the war.

By August 1904, the German soldiers were winning, but it was the Battle of Waterberg that would seal the defeat – and the eventual decimation of the Hereros. There, Von Trotha commanded his soldiers to kill every last Herero. German soldiers drove not just the Herero fighters, but also their women and children, into the Omaheke Desert, which cut them off from water supplies. The troops also went a step further to poison water holes in the desert. Tens of thousands would die of dehydration. After that, German soldiers drove the survivors, most of them women, and survivors from the Nama group who had also faced an extermination campaign, into concentration camps.

In the camps, women were "rented" to German industrial companies for labour, or to individuals who often sexually abused them. They were also given horrid tasks, such as scraping skin off the skulls of fallen Herero and Nama soldiers in the war, so soldiers could send them home for "research". By the time the camps were closed in 1907, over half of the Herero and Nama populations had been wiped out.

Although a 1985 United Nations report declared it was an attempt at the first genocide of the 20th century, it was not until 2015 that Germany acknowledged there had been an attempt to exterminate the people of Namibia. Years of trauma have passed down from generation to generation, according to Esther Muinjangue, a Namibian politician and activist, speaking in a 2022 speech in Berlin while advocating for reparations.

In the decade after their freedom from the concentration camp, Herero women began adapting their fashion to their circumstances. Instead of loincloths, they began to wear full-length cloth dresses modeled after the Victorian-style dresses of the missionaries and colonists. The pointy leather ekori was replaced with a flattened, but no less elaborate cloth headgear: the otjikaiva, or "headgear made from fabric". Today, the dress and hat are worn with pride at major events.

Many artefacts and human remains stolen by German colonial officers and German civilians continue to be exhibited in German museums.

One ekori is shown at the Burg Mylau Museum, in Germany's southern Saxony region. It was donated in 1904 by Ernst Bernhard Kandler, a locksmith who sailed to the then-German Southwest Africa looking for a job.

According to the museum, its origins are still unclear, but because the donation date preceded the start of the genocide in 1904, the museum says it can be concluded that this ekori, at least, did not originate specifically from the war of extermination against the Herero.

Illustration note, by Namibian illustrator James Hango: *It is a hot afternoon, and two young Himba women are sitting under a shaded tree. They are helping each other fix their ekori. Community, tradition and custom are important to the Himba people. The ekori, although its form has changed over the years, is part of those traditions, helping to prepare young women for marriage. The green tree in this illustration symbolises the new life that is to come from their marriage.*

Illustration: James Hango

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We now have over 30,000 subscribers. The typical subscriber says they forward the newspaper to four or five people: in church WhatsApp groups, work Slack channels and across Signal and Telegram. That's nearly 150,000 each week getting insight from on-the-ground reporting by our network of over 400 journalists across most of the countries on our continent.

People, not algorithms, decide who gets to read *The Continent*, and our format means they get a fuller picture of their world than they would from piecemeal articles scattered across the internet.

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