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Abdul-Alim Farook

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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Challenges of Repatriation:  
Asante artifact in American Museum of Natural History

by

ABDUL-ALIM FAROOK

A master's capstone Project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,  
The City University of New York

2021



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Challenges of Repatriation:

Asante artifact in American Museum of Natural History

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Abdul-Alim Farook

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Capstone Project Advisor

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Date

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Challenges of Repatriation:

Ashanti artifact in American Museum of Natural History

by

Abdul-Alim Farook

Advisor: Matthew Reilly

Inspired by calls for the repatriation of famous artifacts like the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles, for this capstone project, I have analyzed and catalogued 250 sampled Asante artifacts at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Through this analysis, I discuss the many ways museums in North America acquired their collections. By doing so, I explore the difficulties that arise in debates surrounding repatriation due to the manner in which these artifacts were acquired. I argue that due to the many different types of donors of the Asante artifacts to the American Museum of Natural History, the Asante objects at the museum represent a challenging case for repatriation if the Asante kingdom was to ask for their return. This paper is accompanied by a website created through the CUNY Academic Commons, which is accessible here: <https://ashantiobjects.common.gc.cuny.edu/>. The website offers a digital representation of repatriation issue, images of the cataloged Ashanti objects at the American Museum of Natural History, and historical background on the Anglo-Ashanti war.

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## DIGITAL MANIFEST

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- II. WARC File
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- III. Project Website
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## Introduction

The move for the return of many artifacts from the Global South held in North American and European Museums has been ongoing for decades. Recently, the movement for the return of objects such as the Benin Bronzes has intensified with institution such as the University of Aberdeen promising to return artifacts that were, according to the head of the institution, Neil Curtis, “blatantly looted”. Museums are an important part of our educational system — it is where the most important pieces of art are studied and displayed for every visitor. While the importance of museums is well understood, museums such as the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other European and North American Museums have come under scrutiny for some of their collections.

This capstone, by analyzing the ways in which the American Museum of Natural History acquired their Asante collection, hopes to broaden the understanding on general museum collecting habits. The website<sup>1</sup> will offer a visual representation of repatriation and the cataloged Asante objects discussed in this paper. Considering the main reasons for the request for many contested items such as the Benin Bronzes is based on the manner in which they were acquired, this project will demonstrate that while the manner in which artifacts were acquired tends to trigger discussion about why they should be returned, the complexity of the movement of such objects can serve as the obstacle for their return. While the Asante collection at the American Museum of Natural History lacks the kind of details we have related to the Benin Bronzes, the acquisition of these artifacts shows us other ways in which museums in Europe and North America acquired some objects. By understanding the ways in which a museum such as the American Museum of Natural

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<sup>1</sup> The website is accessible through this link: <https://ashantiobjects.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>

History obtain their collections, this project gives an insight into the broader theme of collecting and colonialism and why museums are in a desperate for decolonization.

In my earlier studies in archaeology, one of the most fulfilling acts as a student was visiting museums, walking down the halls with a facial expression of an explorer looking for his/her next big discovery. And during such visits, hardly had I ever contemplated the journey in which any of the precious artifacts displayed in a well-lit glass case took to reach their final destination. For many visitors, having the chance to see these artifacts is the most important, but for others who are well aware of the controversies surrounding museum collections, they can leave the museum with more questions. In fact, all the major cities in the world have a significant museum that attracts tourists from all over the world, from the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Clearly, museums are a big component of what makes a big city. In the United States alone, there are 35,000 estimated active museums across the country (Institute of Museums and Library Services 2014). According to a 1998 report, as much as \$5 billion had been spent just in the United States alone either on building or renovating museums (Conn, 2010).

While the majority of repatriation debates are mostly with well-established museums such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others, hundreds and thousands of museums around the United States and Europe equally have objects collected during the colonial rule in Africa. According to Alain Godonou, Director of UNESCO's Division of Cultural Objects and Intangible Heritage, 95 percent of cultural property of various African countries has been lost, presumably to European and North American institutions. That is, in order to truly comprehend the scope of the material movement from African to European and North American institutions, projects such as this — which analyzes the various ways in which artifacts left their home nation -

greatly contribute to the course of finally decolonizing museums in Europe and specifically, in this case, North America.

Due to the Asantes' rich history with colonial Britain, objects from the Asante Kingdom can be found in many museums worldwide. In New York alone, the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the American Museum of Natural History all have collections of Asante artifacts. While Great Britain is the primary focus in this paper in terms of European contact, it is important to note that the Asantes have had prior contact and traded with the Dutch and Portuguese as early as the fourteenth century (T. Green, 2019: 269). The idea for this project started in January of 2020 when I visited the Manhyia Palace Museum in Kumasi, Ghana. Among some of the "priceless" artifacts you see at the museum is an old refrigerator, an old TV, and an old telephone. For a culture with rich history, it was quite disappointing considering the Head of Karikari, the largest surviving gold work of art from Sub-Saharan Africa, is the cast of an Ashanti king, Kofi Karikari (Baily, 2018). This truly priceless piece of art, which holds tremendous social and cultural significance in Ghana, is currently 7891 km (4903.24 miles) away from its home in the Wallace Collection in London. This project will therefore briefly explore the Manhyia Palace Museum's capabilities if they are to receive any of the objects currently housed at the AMNH (images of the new model for the new Manhyia palace museum can be found on the website), but my primary focus will be to indicate the various means the Asante collection came to the American Museum of Natural History and why these complex phases of acquisition are the main obstacles of repatriation, should the Asante kingdom seek their return. To properly understand the movement of Asante artifacts from their homeland and to the American Museum of Natural History, we have to examine the actions that destabilized the Asante Kingdom. The following sections will discuss the museum in general — the controversies surrounding museums, their history, and the foundation of

the American Museum of Natural history.

## Museum Collections

We need to open and excavate our institutions, dig up our ongoing pasts, with all the archaeological tools that can be brought to hand, sometimes a teaspoon and tooth-brush, other times a pick-axe or jack-hammer.

Dan Hicks, 2020:7

This project, which will analyze how objects moved from what is now Ghana to the American Museum of Natural History, is by no means a criticism of one particular museum but an analysis of the museums' complex collecting history in general. Through this analysis, I hope to demonstrate the importance of the museum and why it is essentially to have a conversation about its past. To do so, it is the duty of all people involved in the museum world to face the issues surrounding the museum institution in order for it to serve its purpose — "to collect, preserve, and exhibit our heritage" (Vitali 2016:100). Based on this definition of the basic function of a museum, their importance should be welcome worldwide, and the "heritage" to which they protect should be the duty of all. For decades, governments in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana and other Africa countries have advocated for the return of artifacts that were looted and used to adorn the museums across Europe and North America.

Recently, there have been a rapid growth among African activists aggressively leading the case for repatriation. In June 2020, Mwazulu Diyabanza, a Congolese activist, together with several of his colleagues, removed a 19<sup>th</sup>-century funeral post from the Quai Branly Museum in Paris. The funeral post that belongs to the Bari people of Chad was taken by the activists while shouting "We're taking it home". The Yanku Nku, which translate to Unity, Dignity and Courage, is a movement led by Diyabanza, have embarked on a mission, which according to Diyabanza, to

recover all African Artifacts “Wherever the riches of our heritage and culture have been stolen” (the Guardian, 2021). Diyabanza and his fellow activists were all arrested and fined for the incident after the funeral post was recovered. Subsequently, the Yanku Nku have attempted similar actions in the Netherlands and promised to take their actions all the way to the British Museum. These actions taken by Diyabanza and his fellow activists is deeply rooted in the idea that, if these artifacts were “stolen” and thus they are simply taking back what belongs to them.

Perhaps the most notable and hotly debated instance in which the manner of acquisition is used as the main argument for repatriation is the Benin Bronzes. The story of the Benin Bronzes has caused many issues to come to the surface for the British Museum and the other museums that house similar collections. In his book *The Brutish Museum*, Dan Hicks (2020) detailed the gruesome events in the Kingdom of Benin that led to the Benin Bronzes' acquisition. Ransacked and pillaged, the British forces also burnt the Benin Kingdom to the ground, while plaques that adorned the king's palace, and many other objects that the locals displayed as part of their shrine, were taken. Today, the looted objects from the British expedition in Benin City in 1897 are displayed in an estimated 161 museums and galleries in Europe and North America (Hicks 2020: 26). As they did to the Asantes, the British labeled the people of Benin as savages and tried justifying their expedition by claiming the British forces' actions were an act of revenge for the massacre of British citizens on a political mission in Benin (Hicks, 2020: 26).

Another way European and North American museums have acquired objects is through donations by individuals who may have had objects passed on from their family members, or from art collectors. While these donations can be commended as acts of generosity, we are faced with questions surrounding how they were acquired. Art dealing is an essential part of museum work and perhaps archaeology as a whole. Individuals with an innate desire to acquire precious artifacts end up donating such objects to the museums with little to no information of provenance or cultural

significance. According to UNESCO, 70 percent of objects examined in major collections were described "in a vague or insufficient way" (UNESCO, 2011). This is probably because in earlier museum history, most of the collection were donated by wealthy aristocrats, missionaries, and art dealers who were much interested in collecting and less about its context. Professor of Art and Museum studies, Christopher Steiner, in his book, *The taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness*, details how local traders sometimes misled anthropologist Frederick Starr. That is, they will sometimes alter an object's look to his preference before bringing the object to Starr (Steiner, 2002: 142). Cases like the one with Starr could lead to objects acquired out of context, since the aim of the locals is to sell it; hence, objects end up being tailored to the collectors taste rather than what they really are. As I will later show in the Ashanti collection at the American Museum of Natural History, individual collectors, researchers, and businessmen accrued many artifacts which they later gifted to the museum.

## The American Museum of Natural History

The creation of American museums was in many ways similar to other major museums built in North America or Europe; that is, with the help of some rich patrons and the use of public funds (Freed 2012). Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-American naturalist, believed that to study zoology and botany effectively in the United States, Natural History Museums such as those in Europe were needed. Agassiz would go on to open the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Harvard (MCZ) in 1859. Following a similar strategy from Agassiz, Albert S. Bickmore, a student of Agassiz, in collaboration with Andrew H. Green, William Marcy, and Joseph H. Choate, helped create the then American Museum known today as the American Museum of Natural History in 1869 (Freed 2012). Standing between two of New York's most noticeable landmarks: the Hudson River and the Central Park, the American Museum of Natural History is placed in an area where visitors in New

York and worldwide could visit the museum and have a walk in the park before or after. Unlike the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is built purposely for displaying art and history, the Museum of Natural History has everything for every visitor — well known for its dinosaur fossils, the museum also has various halls dedicated to many sciences, including a planetarium space theatre.

In recent years, and intensified by the Black Lives Movement, the American Museum of Natural History came under severe scrutiny for its main monument, which stands at the museum's main entrance. The statue features former president Theodore Roosevelt on a horse flanked by a half-clothed African male on his left and a Native American on his right. The public has criticized the statue that stood at the museum since 1940; the image that was meant to celebrate the achievements of Roosevelt inevitably also indicates a racial hierarchy that has continued to be an issue around the world. After a much-deliberated discussion and a request from the museum itself for the statue to be removed, New York Mayor, Bill de Blasio announced that the statue would be brought down (AMNH website). The readiness of the museum to adhere to the public outcry, in this case, should serve as an encouragement to many others who are seeking to redress the many objects inside the museum. In addition to housing problematic collections associated with colonial atrocities, the exhibitions in the museum reflect a similarly stark link to colonial economics and ideas about racial hierarchies.

Currently, the American Museum of Natural History has 39,328 African artifacts, and the museum has been collecting African objects from the year it was founded (Freed, 2012). The Hall of African Peoples may not be one of the exhibitions that draw the most visitors to the museum, but it is one of the most important, especially in the context of repatriation or museum collection habits. The African continent was crucial to the development of Europe. With its natural resources, the continent was the ideal place for the extraction of riches and power that gave rise to European modernity while simultaneously crippling African societies (Rodney 1972). Among the African

Peoples hall collection, there are objects purchased by Richard Douglas, a trader who lived in southern Africa for 15 years (AMNH library). The Hall of African people did not come without controversies. Since its opening in 1968, the museum has been dealing with questions surrounding the portrayal of African people in the hall and what message the hall conveyed to visitors. Colin Turnbull, the first curator of the African Ethnology at the AMNH first opened the "Man in Africa Hall" in 1968 (Schildkrout and Lacey, 2017). Throughout its time, the hall has had many criticisms, including the name. Originally titled Collection from Africa, the hall changed to Hall of African Ethnology in 1939 but later changed to Man in Africa. Finally, it was named the Hall of African Peoples, in what Freed called a "nod to political correctness." However, changing the title of a hall to properly represent the African continent with a fraught relationship with museums in Europe and North America is more than just symbolism but rather an essential way of redressing the past. Unfortunately, while there have been some small changes to the hall, it largely remains the same, to the disappointment of many museum staff and outsiders (Schildkrout and Lacey, 2017). Perhaps the most disturbing objects from the African ethnography collection are the objects from the Congo, which were gifted to the museum by the Belgium government, specifically King Leopold II (some of which are seen in Fig.15,16, and 17 on the Museum Collection page on the website).

The colonial past of Africa is plagued with horrendous injustice and death, from slavery to the genocide of its people spread across the continent. One of the most vicious examples is the genocide of the people of the Congo (Hochschild, 1999). In his book *King Leopold Ghost: A story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild describes the atrocities of the Belgium rule of the Congo in that "the men who seized the Congo often trumpeted their killing, bragging about them in books and newspaper articles" (Hochschild, 1999, 15). Today historians and students of history tend to point to the action in the Congo as a prime example of Europe's dark

imperialistic past. While extracting raw materials through forced labor, the Belgium King, Leopold II, sponsored several "collecting exhibitions," which were later gifted to the museum in 1906 (Freed, 2012). The late Stanley A. Freed, in his book, *Anthropology Unmasked*, classified these collections as the "most productive of all the African collecting activities" in the African collection. The Congo collection further indicates the relationship between museums and colonialism. In 1930, the museum dedicated an entire hall on the third floor to King Leopold and his son Albert (AMNH Annual Report, 1930). While it is undeniable that the history of museum's collections can be deeply concerning, museums have to offer visitors the other side of the story, particularly how the museum acquired its collections. A similarly complex colonial history unfolded in the Gold Coast, which would come to affect how the AMNH acquired many of its Asante items.

## The Anglo-Ashanti War

In the nineteenth century, the British Empire occupied most of modern-day Ghana. Previously called the Gold Coast, Ghana was a hot spot for trading in West Africa. Among many commodities like gold and diamonds, the Gold Coast served as the final point of departure to the New World for many enslaved or captive Africans. As it was common during this period, Europeans named various African countries based on the resources abundant to a particular region — that is, Liberia was the Grain Coast, Ghana was named as the Gold Coast, and on the west of Ghana, the Ivory Coast (Green, 2010: 257). Although the trade in enslaved people officially ended in 1807, the British and many other European countries such as France and Belgium continued to exploit their colonies in Africa, including the Gold Coast. This is, however, by no means a change in colonial governance as the transatlantic economy started mainly by focusing on the extraction of gold, but later shifted its focus to the trade in enslaved people, and finally reverted back to the sole

extraction of various goods (Stahl, 2004). The trade in gold both pre- and post-abolishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade will be discussed later in this paper.

While most of the coastal part of the Gold Coast was captured and incorporated into the British Empire, the Asante territories became a daunting challenge for the British forces (Ward, 1974). Having endured seven invasions of the coastal Fanteland (coast of Ghana) by the Asante, the British Empire eventually signed a treaty with the Asante Kingdom. Officially known as the Treaty of Fomena (1874), the treaty was for the Asante king (Asantehene) to denounce and vacate disputed territories which were part of the British Gold Coast. In return, the British forces would not invade the Asante capital of Kumasi. The treaty favored the British, since their forces were not a match for the Asante army, who were used to the rough environment and the threat of malaria (Ward 1974). The treaty only lasted till 1900, when the formidable army of the Asante Kingdom was woefully unprepared. After the treaty of Fomena was signed, the British colonial government spent much of its resources weakening the Asante kingdom (Ukpadi 1970). By dividing the various Asante territories, the British gained an advantage because some of the small Asante territories joined the British government or stayed neutral when the war came (Ukpadi 1970).

The war of 1900 is particularly important as it was the battle that finally led to total British control of Kumasi. Before their defeat in 1900, the Asante people had asserted themselves as the dominant culture through military conquest and trade of commodities such as gold in modern-day Ghana. The Asante peoples' conquest of the neighboring tribes strengthened their power around the region; by conquering neighboring territories, the Asantes were able to control trade routes from the North across the Sahara and part of the South to the coast (Arhin, 1967). That is, both the British and the Asante's desire for the control of resources (gold) would eventually lead to the many conflicts between the two states.

The Asantes needed more resources to serve their ever-expanding kingdom. The British needed resources to support development back home and run their colonies in Asia and other parts of the African continent. The British empire did their best to justify their campaign against the Asantes by painting them as “savages” and slave-hungry states whose “barbaric” actions are a great disadvantage to the empire’s trade dealings (Wasserman, 1961). During the occupation of Kumasi in the years after the war of 1900 and the wars before, the British colonial government encourage the looting of cultural property from the region (Eyifa-Dzidzienyo and Nkumbaan, 2020). In fact, it is during one of these occupations that the Golden head of Kofi Karikari was taken by the British forces as spoils of war (the Wallace Collection). Though the ransack and looting of Kumasi is well documented, today, we still have no idea the extent of what was actually lost. While cultural property was taken, many of the chiefs and prominent leaders of the Asante kingdom were also taken as prisoners, including the Asantehene, Prempeh I, who was sent in exile to Seychelles; he would later return to the Asante kingdom on 27 December 1924 and rule his kingdom under the British Colonial government. Subsequently, the British ruled the Asante Kingdom as the sole authority for several years. During these years, the Asante Kingdom lost a lot of its cultural artifacts. On the British Museum's website, the museum labeled these objects as "excavated/found: Royal Palace," further indicating the unwillingness of some museums to acknowledge the wrongs of the past.

## Asante Collection

Of the massive collection of artifacts from Africa, 1,259 are from Ghana or the Gold Coast. Over 1,000 of these objects are cataloged as either "Ashanti" or "Ashanti?", the second indicating the museum was not certain some objects belonged to the Ashanti culture when they were first cataloged. While cataloging the Ashanti collections, I first looked at the entire collection from

modern-day Ghana or the then British colony of the Gold Coast. The majority of the African collection is comprised of artifacts from the central and southern parts of Africa — this includes over 3,000 artifacts gifted to the museum by the Belgian government in 1907 and the Richard Douglas collection purchased by the museum (Freed, 2012). The collection habits of museums and the issues that come with it tend to be attributed to archaeologists and anthropologists. However, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries, explorers, and traders were the main suppliers of museum artifacts (Sarr and Savoy, 2018: 79).

To properly understand the various ways the museum acquired its Asante artifacts, I have cataloged a sample of 250 Asante objects. In order to properly represent the different stages of political spectrum of Ghana, the 250 selected are divided into two parts — those acquired before Ghana's independence (1957) and those acquired after. The reason for this selection is to distinguish between the movement of artifacts during British colonial rule and after. According to Jacklyn Lacey, Senior Museum Specialist of the African and Pacific Ethnology Collection, all of the Asante collection was obtained as museum gifts; thus, since we know the donors gifted the collection to the museum, this project will also look at how the donors obtained the objects. Among the 250 sampled objects, donors acquired these objects through gift or purchase, the museum obtained two Asante artifacts through exchange with the Liverpool Museum, and the rest of the objects were bequeathed to the museum. Museums in Europe and North America have for many years relied on gifts from individuals and organizations who donate some collection to the museums (Sarr and Savoy, 2018:58). As I will clearly indicate in the following sections, these individuals donated some of the objects to the museum decades before Ghana gained independence from Britain. These are particularly important because before Ghana gained independence from Britain, the movement of artifacts and other cultural properties solely depended on the British colonial government. In my conversation with the curator of the Manhyia Palace Museum in January 2020,

while discussing the issues of repatriation, Mr. Justice Brobbey was particularly concerned with the fact that during the occupation of Kumasi, and the ransacking of the capital, there is no way of knowing what or how much was taken. This is particularly concerning for all the Asante people seeking the return of objects in European and North American museums. After all, even a well-documented event such as the looting of the Benin Kingdom, there is no exact number of how much was taken; an unknown number are scattered in private collections worldwide (Hicks, 2020:26). The issues regarding private collection and repatriation are complicated and will only be considered briefly in this project; for more on private collection see Braden (2016).

Private collections are very complicated, and, in most cases, we have no idea what is in a private collection. Case in point, in April 2016, the daughter of an art dealer retrieved an object from a bank in London that had been locked in the vault for 63 years. According to a BBC report, the only reason the object (which turned out to be part of the looted Benin objects) came into the news was because the bank (Barclays) was closing its safe boxes, hence the family had to retrieve it. It was later sold for 10 million dollars. These kinds of stories are far too common in the art world, and unless these objects in private collections are either auctioned out to the public or donated to a museum, we simply have no way of knowing what is in a private collection. Similarly, the Dallas Museum has in its collection an impressive set of gold regalia which passed through generations of the collector's family before being gifted to the Dallas Museum of Art. The museum, however, impressively traced the journey the Asante collection went through before reaching the Dallas Museum of Art.

The Asante collection in the following sections is organized in two. First, the purchased and gifted items donated to the museum are organized in one section. The purchased and gifted items as I will subsequently indicate, share similar information and processes. That is both purchased and gifted items are donated to the museums by individuals and corporations for many reasons which

will be discussed in the subsequent sections. Secondly, Bequeathed and exchange objects are different in that they are mostly facilitated by the museum or at the very least came to the museum by different circumstances than the purchased and gifted objects.

## Purchased and Gifted Ashanti Artifacts

Most of the Asante collection catalogued for this study (184 of 250 objects, or 73%), which was gifted to the museum, was purchased by a donor. It is no surprise most of the objects were “purchased” by the donors. Trade was a big part of colonialism, the coastal part of what is today Ghana was a hotspot for trade going back to the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (T. Green, 2019: 269). The purchasing of these objects is not usually the issue; rather, how the seller obtained the objects in the first place can be a point of concern. The antiquity market is filled with objects obtained through illicit means; some have been stolen from homes or forcefully taken as spoils of war (Hicks, 2020:107). That is, the majority of repatriation claims are directly related to objects suspected to have been looted, stolen, or bought in the antiquity market (J. Green, 2017). Moreover, buying antiquities from a place under the colonial rule of an European country such as Great Britain or France does not and should not necessarily be exempted from a dialogue of repatriation. What were the terms of these transactions, and from whom were these items bought? These are questions which holders of cultural artifacts have to answer.

Of the Asante Artifacts at the American Museum of Natural History, purchased objects were largely gifted to the museum by individuals, companies, and institutions. The majority of the purchased artifacts were donated by four different groups. The first three were gifted by an individual named Jakaria Silla, who donated three sets of wooden dolls (locally named Akuaba) in 1967. Anthropologist James B. Christensen also donated 15 Asante objects he purchased during ethnological fieldwork in the Gold Coast in 1951, six years before Ghana attained independence

from Great Britain. The first was a lamp with a male figure holding onto a bowl with animal figures. The other objects contain some brass containers, wooden stool (reminiscent of the Golden Stool), among others (a full list of these objects will be on the website on the home page).

The majority of the purchased items I catalogued, and perhaps most of the Ashanti objects, were donated to the museum by Mr. and Mrs. Goodwin from an anthropological reserve fund. The Goodwins donated a vast amount of gold weight crafted in different figures, human forms, plants, and animals, the displayed gold weight can be seen on the purchase page on the website. This collection is very important for two reasons: first, it represents the Asante culture at the Hall of African Peoples; secondly, it represents the most important aspect of the Asante trade and their way of life. For the Asantes, gold represented far more than an economic form of currency meant for exchange; gold was also a symbol of spiritual powers — gold weights such as the ones displayed in the Hall of African Peoples are believed to hold spiritual powers among Asante families (T. Green, 2019:259). The America Museum of Natural History properly capture these Asante beliefs by displaying the various gold weight with a caption "*Divinity and Authority*" in the Hall of Africa Peoples.

Gold is an important aspect of the Asante culture. It represents the power of the Asante and the wealth of the state. Today, the Asantehene (Ashanti King) is always seen adorned with gold. The Asantes and other local kings traded gold with European settlers for commodities such as guns and ammunition — guns that will later be “used to assert local supremacy” (T. Green, 2019:301). The Asante Kingdom controlled trade routes from all directions by conquering neighboring state such as the Banda, on the North-West of Kumasi (Stahl, 2004). The war among the various local states also benefited European traders. According to Portuguese trader, Joao Rodrigues, war among the local states meant more gold would be traded to the Europeans in order to finance such wars (T. Green,2019:278). While the trade of gold with Europeans was instigated by the high demand for

imported goods, gold was equally important in determining the authorities of a giving community. That is, kings and noblemen and those who wish to gain higher status in their community used gold to gain or maintain power (T. Green,2019:280-281).

Another powerful symbol of the Asante people is the Golden Stool<sup>2</sup> (Sikadwa Kofi). The Golden stool (Fig. 5 on the website) is considered the most powerful "being" in the Asante kingdom, and it is considered to contain the soul of the Asante people (Wasserman, 1963). No person, including the Asantehene, is permitted to sit on the Golden Stool — the Golden Stool has its own chair. The power of the Golden Stool was evident when the British continued their effort to take it from the Asantes even after the fall of Kumasi and the *Asantehene Prempeh I* was exiled to Seychelles. To the Asantes, the king was replaceable, but the Golden Stool was not. In the case displaying the Asante gold weights in the Hall of African Peoples, the curators displayed a stool (gold weight) in the center (Fig. 39. on the purchase page on the website), perhaps indicating the importance of the Golden Stool. Purchased objects such as the gold weights prove difficult for cases of repatriation. Holders of these artifacts, whether it is a museum or an individual, could easily present some sort of document that may legitimize such objects' purchase. However, when these items were acquired during colonial rule, what input did the Asantes have in these transactions? While trade between Europeans and Gold Coast residents have been going on since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, purchasing an item does not necessarily mean objects were acquired from the primary source but rather an object could have been bought from art dealers or private collections, who may have acquired it through illicit means.

The earliest objects donated to the museum are four smoking pipes (Fig. 43,44,45, and 46) made with red clay adorned with intricate patterns. These pipes were gifted to the museum in 1902

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<sup>2</sup> The Golden Stool is said to have been conjured from the cloud by the Priest Okomfo Anokye. See Shokpeka 2005.

by William Demuth. Two of the pipes are crafted in animal form (a bird and what is likely a frog) and the other two in a traditional bowl and tube smoking pipe. William Demuth was a German immigrant who worked in the tobacco importation business (Rapaport, 1999). Demuth collected smoking pipes worldwide, including the Asante pipes gifted to the American Museum of Natural History. In 1862, Demuth founded a tobacco company specializing in carved smoking accessories such as pipes, cigar-store figures, and canes (Rapaport, 1999).

Today, smoking is not a big part of the Asante culture. However, early accounts from German botanist, Paul Erdmann Isert indicates local chiefs smoking tobacco in the Asante Kingdom. Given that tobacco was a crop that arrived in West Africa from the Americas, researchers have not found any tobacco pipes that predate the Atlantic era (Vivian, 2006). The smoking pipes can be seen in many European and North American museums such as the British Museum, Pitt River Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History. The introduction of tobacco in the Ashanti society in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was in line with the British colonial government's colonial campaign. Dan Hicks argues that the global capitalistic system that the British will eventually have in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was primarily driven by the need to acquire slaves and commodities such as tobacco and sugar (Hicks, 2020: 123). While such commodities were the main goal of colonialism, museums such as the Africa Museums in Brussels was used as a propaganda tool to lure investment for the project in the Congo (African Museum). This meant acquisition and adorning the European and North America museums was as important as extracting resources from colonies in Africa. Additional artifacts acquired as gifts from donors are a drum giving to the museum by John Dyneley Prince, a professor at Columbia University, who, according to the museum catalog record, acquired the drum directly from "Africa" in 1902 and donated it to the museum in 1904.

Further gifted Ashanti objects were donated to the museum by art dealer Gaston de Havenon. De Havenon's collection is very famous and important when discussing how museums obtained African collections in general. Like fellow donor William Demuth, de Havenon migrated to the United States from Tunis in 1929 and later established a perfume business before opening an art gallery (The New York Times, 1993). De Havenon's collections give us an insight into collection habits in the mid-nineteenth century in that collection of art or cultural properties were not exclusively the domain of anthropologists and archaeologists. Today, Gaston de Havenon's collection can be seen in all of the main museums in New York — the American Museum of Natural History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum. These collections had no details how de Havenon acquired these “gifts” and from whom he got the objects. Finally, in the Asante collection at the AMNH, we see several individuals who donated objects to honor family members. For example, Mrs. Kent Lamont gifted to the museum a wooden stool in 1956 in memory of her father, William Kent. Similarly, psychologist Anne Anastasi Foley donated a series of eighteen wooden dolls (Akuaba) to the museum in memory of her husband, John Porter Foley. In these two examples, we see some personal reasons for donating to a museum that benefits both the museum and the donor. Here we see an art collector (de Havenon), an academic (Foley), donating their art to the museum. This further demonstrates the relationship museums have with private individuals and private collectors of art and cultural property. According to the Sarr and Savoy report, private collectors and colonial officers collected cultural property based on what was available and what was the “taste of the Europeans” (Sarr and Savoy 2018:58). In recent years, the majority of repatriations claim have been mostly directed at objects that have been bought either from private collections or the antiquities market (J. Green, 2017).

## Bequest and Exchange Artifact

Finally, the last two forms of acquisition of the Asante collections by the American Museum of Natural History are through bequest and exchange with the Liverpool Museum. First, Alice K. Bache is well known for accumulating one of the biggest private collections of art worldwide. Although the Asante collection at the American Museum of Natural History was obtained after her death, Bache started gifting some of her collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1967. The bequeathed Asante artifacts to the AMNH comprised of brass masks and various figurines in gold weights and gold dust boxes. The bequest collections of Alice K. Bache are held all across the United States in Museums such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Johnson's Museum of Art at Cornell. Lastly, the museum acquired two Ashanti artifacts (a sword and a gold bead) from Liverpool Museum through an exchange. In recent years, exchanges between museums have been proposed as a good avenue for artifacts' repatriation. However, the majority of these exchange tends to be between museums in Europe and North America, a noticeable example is the return of Euphronious Krater to Italy for similar objects as loans (J. Green, 2017).

## Repatriation Claim

Based on the sample of the Asante collection from the American Museum of Natural History examined in this project, one cannot only see the complex and diverse ways in which cultural property is moved away from its home to various institutions around the world, but also the diverse people involved in the process. On the surface, repatriation may seem like an easy and straightforward solution in what Perez calls “historic injustice” (Perez, 2012). However, there are many obstacles in the way of successfully getting cultural artifacts back to their original homes. In the debate pertaining to repatriation, there are many reasons why a particular country or people will request the return of their cultural property. Equally, scholars such as James Cuno, curator at the

Getty Museum, argues for the importance cosmopolitan museums that showcase the art of the world as a cultural pride and that art is for the world at large (Cuno, 2014). In recent years, proponents of repatriation and those seeking decolonization of museums in Europe and North America have advocated for the return of cultural property (looted or improperly acquired) to redress historic injustices and prosperity of their identity (Björnberg, 2015). Establishing illegal acquisition has been a huge challenge in the debate surrounding repatriation. As we have established in the previous section on the Asante collection, most of the donors are stated to have acquired the artifacts either through gift (or gift exchange) and purchase. In these cases, based on the information we have, the only provable document available alleges a proper and legal transaction between the donor and the museum.

For repatriation to happen in terms of historic justice, Björnberg argues that proponents of a particular artifact must first convincingly argue why individuals today should be held responsible for their ancestors' bad deeds. Secondly, advocates for repatriation must also prove that recipients of a repatriated cultural property are direct descendant of previous owners of the object (Björnberg, 2015). While Björnberg brilliantly shows how to address these two points, it should not be solely upon the seekers of what Björnberg called "corrective justice" to prove their legitimate claim. Rather, the holders of such objects also have to prove that the objects in their possessions are legitimately acquired. While cases such as the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles are at the forefront of the debate, many other objects held in collections are well understood to have been illegally obtained. Based on the continued efforts from advocates of repatriation, such as the Nigerian government, activists, and, crucially, museum staff, institutions such as University of Aberdeen, the church of England, and the government of Germany have all finally made efforts to return the contested Benin Bronzes back to Nigeria. The Asante artifacts at the American Museum of Natural History may not have the same historic injustice associated with them as the Benin

Bronzes, but it's important, however difficult it may be for museums to do their best in giving a full analysis of not only how they acquired their collections but a comprehensive analysis of how the donor either purchased or received such gifts. Many scholars such as Nahshon Perez had argued against what he called "fashionable opinion" — that is to "let bygones be bygones" (Perez, 2012). The mere idea that the current descendant should not redress the past is troubling in many ways.

Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, decreed that "Repatriation is yesterday's question" (Redman, 2007). Advocates of the retention of cultural property tend to subscribe to the world culture's idea — for example, a museum in New York serves the world, not just New Yorkers. MacGregor argued that displaying objects from all over the world in the British Museum is a way of showing Western humility, that is, a new space for the Western world to honor the great cultures of the world (Waxman 2008). However, when the objects are taken away from their homes and displayed thousands of miles away, and in some cases for centuries, surely the descendants of such cultures do not benefit from it. Museums play large economic roles in big cities — they generate large funds for museums and the city through tourism. Studies of North American museums indicate an average of around 2.3 million visits per day, which is why due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, we see many museums struggling (Conn, 2010). Though museums have made progress in confronting their history of colonial past (AMNH acknowledging the issues with the Roosevelt statue), there is a lot of work that needs to be done. Further projects that follow the model presented here, which take a look at museum collecting habits and their complexity will help bring a broader understanding to the task ahead.

In the past, the American Museum of Natural History has worked to build bridges with Ghana. On October 16, 1984, the American Museum of Natural history, in collaboration with the British Museum, opened an exhibition titled Asante: Kingdom of Gold, which featured about 800

artifacts (AMNH Library). In attendance were dignitaries from the Asante Kingdom, including the late Asantehene, Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, and the former New York mayor Ed Koch. These kinds of collaborations are very important, and many advocates of repatriation and decolonization of museums point to these as a positive move for opening up conversations about repatriation. These collaborations, I believe, benefit the descendant of historic injustice, and that is, instead of scholars debating whether descendants are responsible for past injustice but rather descendants working together to ratify the wrongs of the past.

A further objection to repatriation is the belief that if the perpetrators and the victims are long gone, who then receives the items if or when they are sent back? These arguments come in two forms, and just as it is with many repatriation claims, the objections and the reasons for the demands vary from case to case (Björnberg, 2015). For example, in the case of the Elgin Marbles, John Henry Merryman argued against the Greek government's claim based on National Identity as purely sentimental and emotional, and emotional cases, according to Merryman, are "weak on the facts or the law or both" (Merryman, 1985).

Finally, when the above arguments fail, advocates for the retention of cultural property point to the fact that in most cases, such as the Benin Bronzes or the Asante's demand for the return of the Golden Head of Karikari (Kakari), there is no adequate infrastructure to house the contested artifacts. And if the returned artifacts are not properly preserved or they get destroyed, then "people of all cultures will be deprived" (Merryman, 1985). However, this kind of thinking only continues the colonial tropes used by imperialists in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the case of the Asantes, any returned artifact could be housed in the Manhyia Palace Museum situated in the King's Palace in Kumasi. The museum has served the Asante Kingdom for decades. In the

Manhyia Palace Museum, currently, there are artifacts such as the Worasa Head on a Sword<sup>3</sup> from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of inadequate infrastructures and the lack of proper equipment for preserving cultural property cannot be necessarily be applied to the Asante Kingdom. For many centuries Europeans have extracted wealth and resources from the African continent, resources that were used to developed Europe. From the French usage of colonies in Africa such as Senegambia to over extract resources such as peanut to support industries in France while expecting colonies to “pay for themselves” (Richard, 2017). Other examples include the extraction of gold in Ghana, rubber in the Congo, and many other African countries; surely in order to redress the past, Europe can repay the continent by helping build museums in places where resources were crucial in the development of Europe.

Repatriation has been at the forefront of academic debates in recent years. This project, which analyzed a great sample of the Asante collection at the American Museum of Natural History, has shown the different ways the donors of the museum acquired the Asante collection — gift, purchase, and the museum exchange. The website and this paper briefly discussed the Anglo-Asante relation and how British colonial rule is one of the reasons for the fall of the Asante Kingdom, and how the desire for artifacts and cultural property to adorn the museums in Europe and North America precipitated the forceful removal of valuable artifacts in the Asante Kingdom and other places like the Benin Kingdom.

Considering most of the Asante collection in the American Museum of Natural History and other museums such as the British Museum, this project also discussed the importance of gold for the kingdom both economically and spiritually. Understanding how the museum obtained the Ashanti collection will further add to the museum’s current discussion and the need to decolonize

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<sup>3</sup> Worasa was a defeated king of the Banda State (West Central Ghana) during the reign of Nana Osei Kwadwo (1764 – 1777)

them. The complexity of repatriation regarding the ways the American Museum of Natural History obtained its Asante collection was evident in that many of the donors only have their names attached to their donated objects with no information of who they are. Although a small portion of the entire museum collection, the Asante collection indicates the relationship between museums and the antiquity market. We see private art collectors donating some of their collections to the many museums in North America. After understanding the complex ways museums and their donors acquired this collection, it is upon museum staff, scholars, and students to further elevate the debate surrounding repatriation by tracing the stories of these objects. This paper and the website offer an essential step in understanding what collections museums possess, how these collections were acquired, and cataloging them to help future research identify what Asante objects are in North American museums. Repatriation is undoubtedly a complicated issue, but these contested objects have many stories, and it is upon us to tell the stories and right the wrong of the past.

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