Restitution and the Future of Heritage in Tanzania

By *Bernard Ntahondi*

From 7 to 9 October 2026, I participated in Futuring Thing–Relations: Affect and Materiality Across the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Dar es Salaam. The conference brought scholars, artists and heritage practitioners into conversation about how people relate to objects, places and the histories they carry. For me, its strongest connection was between restitution and the work of restoring relationships with our past. What happens when cultural belongings are separated from the people who give them meaning? And what must change when those belongings return?

These questions connected closely with my contribution, Walking the City and Its Futures: Architectural Heritage, Memory, and Moving Images in Dar es Salaam. My paper brought city history walking tours into dialogue with audiovisual archives and community cinema. Although my focus was urban heritage, the restitution discussions opened a shared concern: who has the authority to interpret history, and how can communities participate in shaping the futures of their heritage?

The conference was organised through collaboration involving the University of Dar es Salaam, Freie Universität Berlin's CRC Affective Societies, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the University of Hamburg. Its programme connected colonial collections with community knowledge, historical landscapes, environmental harm, care and digital life. This range made it possible to approach restitution within a wider conversation about power, belonging and responsibility.

Restitution as the restoration of relationships

Ciraj Rassool's opening keynote, Museums, Deobjectification and Rehumanization, provided an important starting point. His abstract challenged the museum practices through which ancestors and belongings became classified as human remains and objects. He framed restitution as work that must also confront the systems of knowledge and authority that made these transformations possible.

This distinction matters. Moving a collection from one institution to another can leave its inherited categories intact. Rassool's argument asks us to consider a deeper transformation: recognising the people, social relationships and forms of personhood that museum classification has obscured. His emphasis on deobjectification and rehumanisation places the repair of relationships at the centre of restitution.

For me, this raises a practical question about return. Who decides how a returned belonging will be named, cared for or encountered? If the community remains excluded from those decisions, an important part of the work is unfinished. I understand restitution here as a process that requires changes in authority as well as changes in location.

Colonial collections and the knowledge they displaced

The panel on Colonial Collections, Archives and Provenance gave this discussion concrete contexts. Amani Abeid's contribution, Objects Torn from Their Worlds: Affect, Materiality, and Unfinished Futures, addressed work on the Bukerebe collection, described in his abstract as having been taken by force under German colonial rule. He considered how artistic practice, exhibitions and

multisensory approaches might engage with the grief and interrupted possibilities carried by displaced belongings.

His contribution offers a way to think about the scale of loss. A collection's removal can interrupt practices, relationships and the transmission of knowledge. An inventory may record what entered a museum without explaining what its absence meant to those left behind. Artistic work can help make that absence perceptible and open questions that a catalogue alone cannot answer.

Maike Schimanowski's examination of the African holdings of the Berlin Mission Society addressed the difficulties of tracing such histories. Her abstract described fragmentary documentation, missing provenance information and misclassified cultural belongings. Some locations had been recorded only as "Africa". Her research combined examination of the belongings with archival work on mission stations, exhibitions and the routes through which materials entered the collection.

The implications for restitution are substantial. Provenance research involves recovering circumstances of acquisition, but it also requires attention to the limitations of the records themselves. A vague entry cannot represent the full history of a belonging. Collaboration with researchers and communities in Tanzania and South Africa, identified in Schimanowski's abstract, offers a way to question and extend what institutional records can tell us.

Jimson S. Sanga's paper brought the discussion to indigenous healing knowledge among the Hehe, Kinga and Bena of southern Tanzania. His research used photographs of medical objects held in German museums in encounters with healers, clan elders and community leaders. The abstract described how these encounters could prompt recognition, memories, spiritual meanings and historical narratives.

This approach gives communities a role as interpreters and co-curators. It also suggests how knowledge and relationships can begin to reconnect while belongings remain geographically distant. My reading is that photographic access can support restitution work, while the questions of physical return and community authority still require their own answers.

Community authority includes the right to set limits

Halima Geuya's contribution, Umekutaje huko? complicated any assumption that understanding a collection simply requires making all its knowledge publicly accessible. Drawing on Nyaturu women's material and embodied knowledge, she examined d'aghwa and murimu. Her abstract distinguished knowledge sustained through movement, exchange and care from knowledge maintained through restriction, selective transmission and refusal.

This is an essential consideration for restitution and museum collaboration. Communities may have rules about who can encounter a belonging, who can speak about it, and which knowledge should circulate. Respecting those rules requires institutions and researchers to accept limits on their own access. A fuller account of heritage must make room for the authority to withhold knowledge as well as the opportunity to share it.

Laibor Kalanga Moko's contribution examined encounters between communities from northern Tanzania and ethnographic collections in Berlin. His abstract considered how indigenous understandings challenge the colonial ordering embedded in museums, including assumptions about

ownership, materiality and personhood. Philip C. Maligisu's paper similarly addressed the consequences of separating cultural objects from community interaction and the unequal relationships that shape heritage management.

Kisiaya Saruni's research on Maasai women's material instruments of power added another dimension. It considered how authority is exercised through everyday and ritual practices involving material things. Read alongside the restitution papers, this work encourages us to ask whose authority museum descriptions recognise and whose they overlook. Women's knowledge and practices need to be understood within the relationships through which they operate.

Walking the city and reconnecting with memory

My own presentation approached these concerns through Dar es Salaam. Buildings, streets and public spaces are places where memory and belonging are negotiated. Walking, looking and listening allow us to encounter histories embedded in the city, while archival images and film can invite us to see familiar places differently.

I considered the walking tour and the screening as complementary forms of public inquiry. Both can create opportunities to ask whose stories to become visible through heritage practices and whose remain marginal. They also allow historical questions to move beyond academic writing and enter conversations grounded in places people know and use.

The connection I draw with restitution concerns the recovery of relationships and interpretive authority. The loss of access to an object and the erasure of an urban history are distinct experiences, but both raise questions about exclusion from heritage. In my practice, bringing architecture into conversation with moving images offers a way to cultivate collective care and imagine more inclusive futures for Dar es Salaam.

Other contributions widened this understanding of memory. Kristina Mashimi's research examined performance as a bodily archive of German colonial memory in Tanzania. Gesture, movement and voice became ways of narrating and reworking colonial histories. Diana Kamara's work with crochet and household textiles considered how everyday material practices can open conversations about women's lives. Salvatory S. Nyanto's keynote on slavery and memory sites in Tabora brought historical landscapes, oral interviews and community formation into the discussion. Together, these contributions showed the value of attending to knowledge carried through bodies, places and daily practices.

Cinema as a space for public engagement

The conference programme also extended to Ajabu Ajabu through the evening event Bugging the Archive. It paired Apostles of Cinema and Rusted Walls with a discussion listing Jesse Gerard Mpango, Gertrude Malizeni, Habibu Ramadhani Diliwa, joining online, and myself.

The event connected history as it is lived, written and remembered. Apostles of Cinema follows the informal distributors, translators and cinema owners who bring "Maangamizi: The Ancient One" to local audiences through neighbourhood film libraries and live dubbing. Habibu Ramadhani Diliwa's film "Rusted Walls" approaches collective amnesia, neocolonialism and the struggle for identity in relation to historical extraction.

For me, this part of the programme connected directly with the question of cultural access. Films acquire public meaning through the people and spaces that circulate, translate and discuss them. Community cinema can bring historical reflection into shared experience and create room for audiences to take part in interpreting their own cultural worlds. This is also why moving images belong in conversations about restitution, archives and the future of heritage.

Responsibility for the futures we make

The conference's broader themes helped place these heritage questions alongside contemporary struggles. Papers addressed pesticide waste, toxic flows associated with gold mining, maternal care, youth betting, digital technologies and mental wellbeing. Dunstan Matungwa's contribution on Dira 2050 asked whose futures development serves and how its material benefits and burdens are distributed.

These are different fields of inquiry, but I see a useful connection in their attention to unequal power and lived consequences. Who benefits from the movement of resources? Who carries the harm? Who gets to define a desirable future? The restitution discussions bring these questions into the museum and the archive, while the wider programme asks us to consider them across everyday life.

My participation in Futuring Thing–Relations gave me a way to connect my work in walking tours, architectural heritage and cinema with these wider questions of repair. The challenge I take from the conference is to make community participation meaningful in the decisions that shape heritage. That includes recognising local knowledge, respecting restrictions on its use and creating opportunities for people to interpret histories on their own terms.

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