access for WHO?

a podcast zine by
Open Restitution Africa

(also available in French & German)

ABOUT THE PODCAST

'**Access For Who?**' is a four part mini-series that looks to begin a conversation on digitisation of collections of African heritage.

This series of discussions attempts to unpack the necessary care and ethics required when seeking to digitise African heritage, particularly in the age of restitution.

While digitisation is often considered a strategy for future oriented safe keeping, distribution and greater engagement, we ask – for who? And for what purposes? And are we making decisions about digitisation that ensure these objectives are met in ethical, equitable ways?

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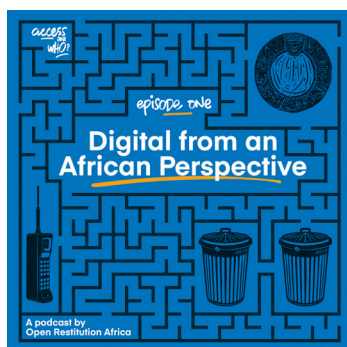**CC BY-NC-ND**

Introduction Section
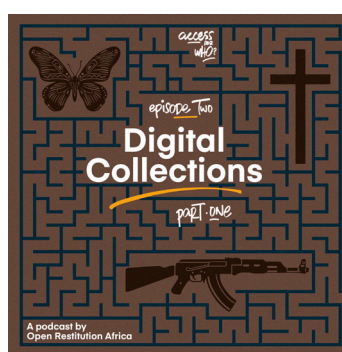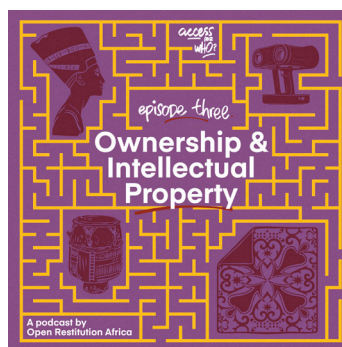
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Episode 4

MEET THE HOSTS

CHAO TAYIANA MAINA

Chao Tayiana is a co-founder of Open Restitution Africa, she is also the founder of African Digital Heritage and a co-founder of the Museum of British Colonialism. As a digital heritage specialist and digital humanities scholar she is primarily interested in exploring the ways in which technology is shaping the preservation, documentation and dissemination of African cultural heritage. She holds an MSc in International Heritage Visualization from the University of Glasgow/Glasgow School of Art and is a Google Anita Borg Scholar.

MOLEMO MOILOA

Molemo Moiloa is the co-founder of Open Restitution Africa and leads research at Andani.Africa. Based in Johannesburg, she has been involved in various projects engaging with museum practice within her role at Andani.Africa and prior.

She currently works on notions of ungovernability, social infrastructures of cultural organizing, and relationships to nature. She is one half of the artist collaborative MADEYOULOOK.

MEET THE GUESTS

NOTHANDO MIGOGO

Nothando holds an LLB and LLM from Wits university (Johannesburg). She is currently an executive director and co-founder of Sosela, a business strategy and legal advisory company that specializes in the entertainment and media sectors. She is also executive director of the 1020 Group of Companies (1020 Cartel and 1020 Management), a Johannesburg-based record label and music agency. Nothando holds non-executive board positions at Copyright Clearance Center (USA) and Gallo Music Investments (SA). Previous roles: CEO Southern African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO), President CISAC Africa Committee, CEO Composers, Authors and Publishers Association (CAPASSO), MD Dramatic Artistic & Literary Rights Orgnisation (DALRO)

TEMI ODUMOSU

Temi Odumosu is an art historian, curator, and assistant professor at University of Washington Information School. Her research and curatorial interests include colonial visual cultures, archives and archival praxis, postmemorial art and performance, digitization of cultural heritage, and ethics-of-care in representation. She currently teaches on gender and race in information technology, and Afrofuturisms.

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GOLDA HA-EIROS

Ms. Golda Ha-Eiros, is the Curator for the National Museum of Namibia (NMN) responsible for the Anthropology collection. She was previously the curator for Liberation Heritage under the Office of Veterans Affairs responsible for preserving and documenting the history of Namibia's National Liberation Struggle and at the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAGN) as Collections Curator.

In 2019, she was guest researcher at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin where she researched the historical collection from Namibia and co-curated an exhibition on the collaborative research process at the Humboldt Forum.

ANDREA WALLACE

Andrea is a Senior Lecturer in Law (Education & Research) teaching Art and Law, Internet Law, Legal Foundations, and Torts. Her research focuses on intersections of art and cultural heritage law with the digital realm and digital heritage management. She is a co-director of the GLAM-E Lab (Law School and Digital Humanities) established in partnership with the Engelberg Center on Innovation Law and Policy (NYU Law School).

Andrea previously received an LLM in European Business Law from Radboud University in the Netherlands, a JD from DePaul University College of Law in Chicago, and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is also a registered attorney with the Illinois State Bar.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌSÚN

Kọlá Túbọ̀sún is a Nigerian writer, teacher, and linguist. He is the author of two collections of poetry: Edwardsville by Heart (2018) and Ìgbà Èwe (2021), a Yorùbá dictionary of names at YorubaName.com, and several works in translation between English and Yorùbá. He is a Fulbright Scholar (2009) and, until recently, a Chevening Research Fellow at the British Library in London (2019/2020). His work has been published in African Writer, Aké Review, Brittle Paper, International Literary Quarterly, Enkare Review, Maple Tree Literary Supplement, PEN Transmissions, Jalada, Popula, Saraba Magazine, The Guardian (Nigerian and UK), among others. His work in language advocacy earned him the Premio Ostana Special Prize in Italy in 2016. He's currently the African co-editor of The Best Translations Anthology, and the publisher of OlongoAfrica.com. He lives in Lagos and at www.kolatubosun. com.

MULENGA KAPWEPWE

Mulenga Kapwepwe is a Zambian artist and author. She is the chairperson of the National Arts Council, the founder of the Lusaka Youth Orchestra, and is known for her work as a playright and arts activist, building libraries to help young Zambian children educate themselves. She has been featured as a TEDx speaker and patron of the arts by CNN.

NEEMA IYER

Neema Iyer is an artist and a technologist. She is the founder of Pollicy, an award-winning feminist civic technology collective based in Kampala, Uganda, is the co-host of the Terms and Conditions podcast, a Senior Fellow on Trustworthy AI with Mozilla Foundation and is on Facebook/Meta's Global Women's Safety Advisory Board. She was also recently a Practitioner Fellow at Stanford's Digital Civil Society Lab. Social media handles: @pollicyorg @neemaiyer. Links: archive. pollicy.org/feministdata/ and archive. pollicy.org/digitalextractivism/

MINNE ATAIRU

Minne is an interdisciplinary Artist, and doctoral student at Columbia University. Through the use of Artificial Intelligence (StyleGAN, GPT-3), Minne recombines historical fragments, sculptures, texts, images and sounds to generate synthetic Benin Bronzes which often hinge on questions of repatriation, and post-repatriation. Minne's work has been exhibited at The Harvard Art Museums in Boston, Markk Museum in Hamburg, SOAS Brunei Gallery University of London, and Microscope Gallery in New York. She is the recipient of the 2021 Lumen Prize for Art and Technology (Global South Award).

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SAMBA YONGA

Samba Yonga is a Zambian journalist and media consultant. She is the Founder of Ku-Atenga Media, a media consultancy firm and was named one of Destiny's "Power of 40" most influential women in Africa in 2017 and one of Quartz Africa's 2019 innovators. She is a TEDx speaker on the topic of the Blueprint for an African Superhero Curriculum.

ANGELA OKUNE

Angela studies data practices and research infrastructures to explore broader questions of equitable knowledge production and socio-economic development. Angela received her doctorate in Anthropology from the University of California, Irvine. From 2010 – 2015, as co-founder of the research department at iHub, Nairobi's innovation hub for the tech community, Angela provided strategic guidance for the growth of tech research in Kenya. She was a Network Coordinator for the Open and Collaborative Science in Development Network (2014 – 2018). She currently works as a Senior Program Manager at Code for Science and Society. Angela is an Associate Editor on a collective editorial team for the Open Access journal, Engaging Science, Technology, and Society and a founding member of the experimental, open ethnographic data portal called Research Data Share (www. researchdatashare.org).

EPISODE ONE
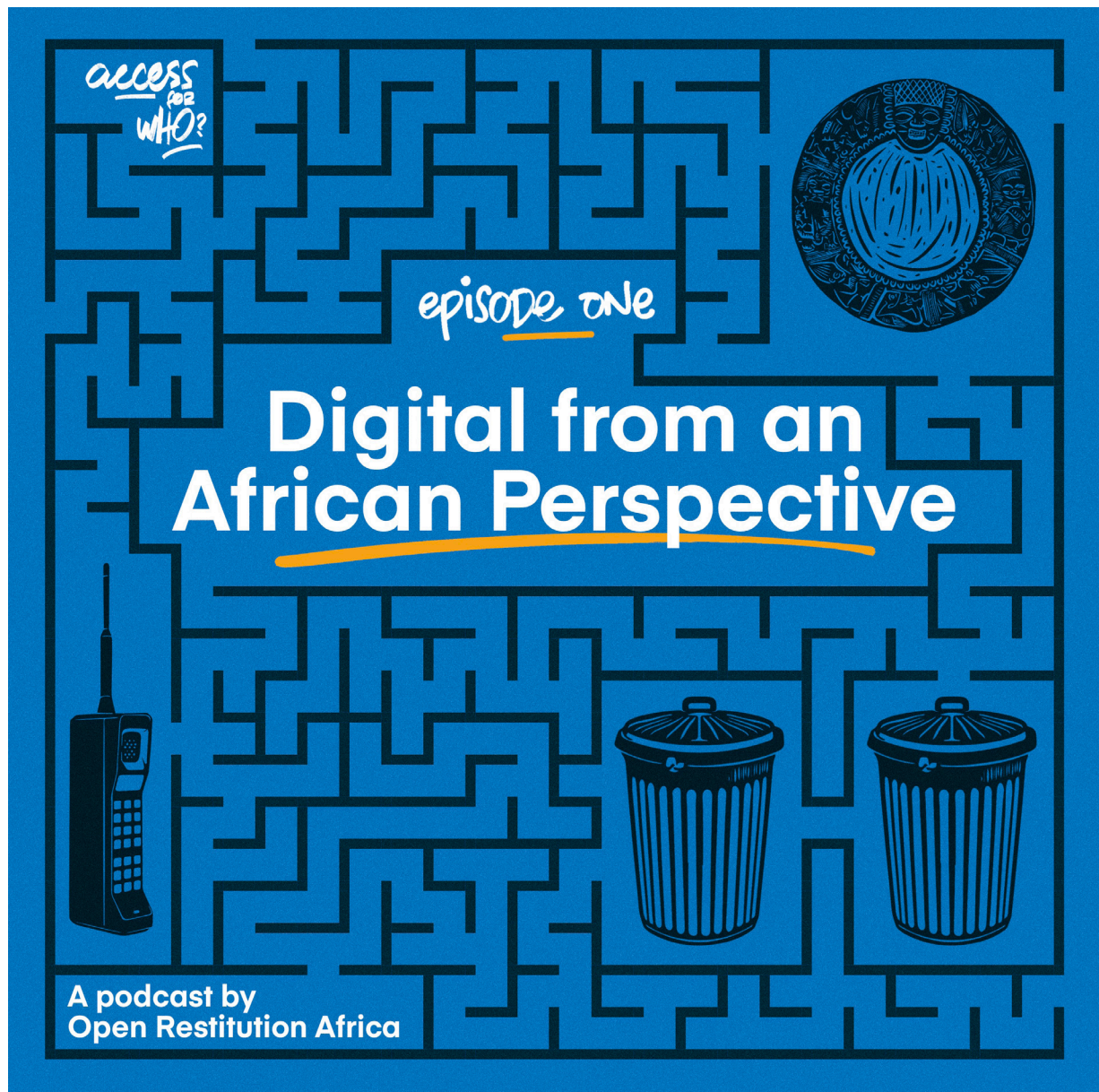
SYNOPSIS

In this episode we begin by reflecting on the opportunities that digital technology presents for African societies while confronting the inequalities and biases it entrenches. We explore notions of digital access and digital neutrality in the context of African languages, histories and knowledge systems as we reflect on what it means to create equitable digital futures within and outside museum spaces.

SPEAKERS

Temi Odumosu, Molemo Moiloa, Kọlá Túbọ̀sún, Mulenga Kapwepwe, Neema Iyer, Chao T. Maina

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EPISODE ONE TRANSCRIPT

Chao T. Maina 00:26

Welcome to the Access for Who? podcast, a four-part miniseries that looks to begin a conversation on the digitization of collections of African heritage. This series of discussions, attempts to unpack the necessary care and ethics required when seeking to digitize African heritage, particularly in the age of restitution. While digitization is often considered a strategy for future oriented safekeeping, distribution, and greater engagement, we ask for who? and for what purposes? And are we making decisions about digitization that ensure these objectives are met in ethical, equitable ways? I'm your host, Chao Tayiana Maina.

Molemo Moiloa 01:08

And Molemo Moiloa of Open Restitution Africa. Let's talk about access for who? for what?

Chao T. Maina 01:14

Four years ago, Molemo and I met at a conference exploring the future of museums in Africa. Now several emails, WhatsApp messages and a ton of Zoom calls later, we started a project called Open Restitution Africa. The project seeks to make data on the restitution of African cultural heritage accessible, because we believe that the question of data is so so critical to the restitution discussion. How is it critical? We believe, again, that making data accessible creates more public awareness. It enables practitioners to collaborate across countries and regions, and it also facilitates knowledge sharing.

Molemo Moiloa 01:58

So as part of Open Restitution, we began looking into the question of digital collections and digital restitution. The digital age is advancing rapidly in museums and cultural institutions are innovating in this direction. While this presents several opportunities, there are also several complexities that we need to be aware of.

Chao T. Maina 02:15

We're so excited that you're joining us for this four-part journey. We see it as a beginning and an invitation to ask ourselves and each other the important questions. We definitely don't have all the answers, but it's really vital that we've begun looking for them.

Molemo Moiloa 02:31

Exactly. This first episode really sets the grounding. We'll be discussing some definitions, introduce you to some ideas, but also try to understand how the main themes of this podcast really manifest within the context of African heritage and African realities in particular.

Chao T. Maina 02:48

We'll be speaking with some very, very inspiring minds, who will help us get on the right footing, and really lay the groundwork for the upcoming episodes, in which we delve deeper into various aspects of restitution and digital collections.

Molemo Moiloa 03:03

So speaking of inspiring minds, I think the right place to start is probably with some definitions, right. Understanding where we all kind of come together and understand the same perspective. So first and foremost, we turned to Neema Iyer.

Neema Iyer 03:21

So my name is Neema Iyer. I am an artist, I'm a technologist and also the founder of Policy, which is a feminist collective civic tech organisation based in Kampala, Uganda. I also run a podcast called Terms&Conditions, which looks at digital cultures across Africa. And yeah, there's more to me, but I will leave it there. So I actually looked it up in terms of digital, so apparently, digital comes from digits, which comes from fingers, which comes from counting, which is, you know, when you think about it, it's like, you know, zeros and ones, it's a string of numbers, but I don't really, I know that that's like the back end. That's how it looks and that's how it works. But for me, I feel like it's this kind of intangible visualization of our physical world. So for me, it feels very intangible, like you need a device to interact with this other world. So you need your phone, or you need a laptop or a computer, any kind of device that of course, you know, converts those strings into something that we can see and visualize. And I think it's interesting in that it's how, like, for example, like, take the example of like the floppy disk, right? And that has become the universal symbol for saving. And so that's just how we visualize it now and it's become a symbol and it's probably people I mean, many young people walking around I've never seen a physical floppy disk, but they know when they look at it little icon that it means to save and that's how we have chosen to visualize the word save in a digital space.

And the other thing I think about digital is, for example, I don't know if you've ever met someone that you see on Twitter all the time. This happens to me all the time. Like, I'll see people who are online and you know, they might be super vocal online, and then you meet them in person, and they're just a very different person. It's not at all what you expected, they're very quiet. And it also makes me think that people have a, like a different digital manifestation of themselves in online spaces. So for me, it's almost just like a parallel world where anything can happen. Anyone can exist in different forms as well. So maybe it's more in line, I guess with what Meta is trying to do, with what Meta was, but it's just a different parallel world that exists and it's powered by ones and zeros, which feels like magic.

Molemo Moiloa 05:42

I think this point that Neema makes about ones and zeros being like magic is a really important one, because it points to the kind of way that the digital has become so ubiquitous to our lives. But at the same time remains this slightly mystical thing, that we don't fully connect to our everyday lives or becomes the kind of other version of our everyday lives. But it also highlights a serious limitation of how we've historically approached the digital, which is this kind of space of possibility, and magic and wonderfulness. And I think that this kind of, even though we've come to maybe understand it differently, still remains with us. We still see it as this magical space. I don't know what you think?

Chao T. Maina 06:26

You know, it's so interesting, because I remember when I first encountered computers. This was in high school, and I was taking a class in computer studies. And the way in which we learned about the internet was that it was this space, that was kind of like an equalizer in a space that unified everyone and everything. What we believed about the internet, at that time, was that as long as you're on the internet, we all had equal opportunities. And while this may be true, you know, to some extent, we now are seeing that in very many spaces, the internet in itself has been a space that is replicating a lot of harm, a lot of bias and a lot of inequality. And it's become very clear that this notion that you know, digital is neutral, and digital is for everyone is false. And yes, there are ways in which this is being unpacked, but not to the extent that we can sit back and look at digital spaces as spaces that serve us all equally. Now, as we take a closer look at digital technologies, we need to unpack them, we need to understand how they affect us as Africans, as people of African descent. And so it's really interesting to have this space that provides so many opportunities, and so many inequalities at the same time. But the question for us is, you know, how do we make this magic work? How does this magic of digital technology become more of a blessing instead of a curse?

Molemo Moiloa 07:58

Absolutely. I love that. How do we make this magic work for us? And we'll obviously discuss this a little bit more over the next couple of episodes. This idea of this space of access and this space of openness that is the digital remains one of the kind of central tenets of digitizing collections and museums, and digitizing kind of collections of African heritage. And so it becomes vital that we begin to question this and unpack it a little bit. So that as you say, we can make the magic work for us.

Chao T. Maina 08:31

So at this point, we'd really like to unpack the realities of how this plays out these complexities and biases and nuances that we're talking about. How do they show up in the real world? What are they? Where are they? And especially what ways do they manifest from an African perspective? And we'll have Neema unpack this for us.

Neema Iyer 08:52

I think looking from you know, a physical infrastructure point of view, the way digital is right now structured is very exclusive in that many people don't have basic connectivity. So that is the first problem that we run into is that people just don't have access. The second point is cost. So for example, in Uganda, we have the highest internet costs of you know, all of East Africa. And that is a major barrier. We also have some pretty regressive laws that make the internet even more expensive, and more out of reach for a lot of people. And from our research, we've seen that, you know, generally women tend to earn less and so they have less income available to spend on things such as data bundles. So they tend to be excluded from these online spaces. So the very structure, their infrastructure, is set up in a way that it can be exclusive of people who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are women who are marginalized in any other way, that they cannot afford to be in this digital space. And that's very concerning, because a lot of our lives are moving into this parallel digital space and what does it mean for all these people who get left behind from the conversation?

And then if we go more to the intangible, so in terms of the content that is online, most of it is in, I would say, colonial languages. So a lot of content is in English, it's in Spanish, French. Now more so there's more content in, for example, Mandarin and Hindi, like that has come in the past few years. But that remains a major barrier in how people can basically use the internet. So if you log on to a platform, and all the instructions are in English, or you know, French, or Spanish that basically serves to exclude you from those kinds of platforms. And that really like English is the lingua franca of the whole world, but especially it has been of the internet. So it's quite exclusionary in that way.

Chao T. Maina 10:46

This question on infrastructure is a really interesting point. Because we often talk about access from the perspective that accessibility is uniform for everyone. And the ways in which Neema speaks to both the physical infrastructure and also, crucially, the financial infrastructure that you need to get data is really important in this discussion within the African context. One of the things that we've talked about between Molemo and I are the parallels between information that sits on the internet and information that doesn't sit on the internet. And just because something is not on the internet doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. And so this brings forth the notion that the internet is a place where everything exists. And if you fall outside those realms or boundaries, then you're not legitimate. I'm really interested by the ways in which Neema speaks to this in a way, you know.

Molemo Moiloa 11:41

Yeah, in a sense, I think you can almost speak to, sort of, two sides of the same coin in what Neema references. So on the one hand is this physical access, which is this kind of financial/device/data, even like the speed of internet kind of concern, which is like physical access. And on the other side is a more kind of conceptual or epistemic access, which is this question of things like language, or other kinds of more conceptual relationships to this place called the internet. That when you don't have physical access, even the idea of how you engage with the internet shifts and can be really difficult to even imagine connecting with. And I think that part of what Neema is pointing to, is the fact that the internet, in many ways, isn't a place for Africans. Hasn't necessarily been made for Africans, hasn't necessarily been made for most of the world, to be honest. As she points out English is the lingua franca of the internet. And that has a particular impact in how you relate to the internet, right? And how you use it and what it's for, particularly, as I suppose the physical access question is such a massive one on the African continent. So even though we have quite a lot of mobile internet use, I think we have one of the highest numbers of like mobile internet users in the world, because so many Africans have more than one phone. But that's quite limited to like people in the cities, or it's quite limited to certain sort of class access, gender access. And the way that you use the internet from your mobile is also very specific to certain kinds of services and platforms, right? I think someone like Ḳọlá really speaks to some of these relationships between the kind of physical access question, and then the epistemic access question.

Kọlá Túbọ̀sún 13:43

My name is Kọlá Túbọ̀sún, I am a linguist. That's the first thing that comes to mind when I think of what I do. But I'm also a creative writer and have done some work in teaching some journalism in the past. But my focus, my attention, over the last decade or so, has been in finding ways to improve the presence of African languages and technology. Just finding ways to help African language survive, and to deal with the current century. I'll take you back to 2000, when I first got into university as a first year student. A year later, I think I got my first computer, which was kind of a secondhand computer I managed to buy somewhere. And I remember trying to write my name on the system and having it underlined in Microsoft Word. It still does it now actually, for things that the software doesn't recognize as English. And it does that because English was the basis for the software. And it's an American software company. Computers were things made by Microsoft and Apple. Everybody was expected to use and fit it. So you would write in a paragraph and because there's my name there and everything, it underlines it and everything else looks, you know, everything else is normal.

But then I also realized the thing that when I was writing other Yorùbá expressions like, because Yorùbá is a tone language, so we use diacritics, which are marks on top of the vowels or under the vowels to show the vowel quality or tone. So a word like, ọwọ́, is written differently from owó, is written differently from, ọwọ̀, etc. Because tone marks differentiate these things and you can say something totatlly different if you don't properly mark it when you write it. So I realized that this tool to mark didn't exist in Microsoft Word at all. And many of my professors who wanted to write in Nigerian languages often had to buy software to use. Sometimes they didn't have it, some languages don't have scripts, or some languages don't have the scripts incorporated into Unicode, which is the computer system that powers the typing of languages online. So I started realizing that, you know, without us having a presence there on the internet, we are being excluded gradually. Most of the languages on the internet are in English, Wikipedia entries are in English, Google searches are in English. If you search for something in Yorùbá, if you didn't put the marks, you wouldn't get the right results. Sometimes you put the marks, you didn't get them, either.

Molemo Moiloa 16:29

Kọlá's speaking from the perspective of a linguist, really, I think, unpacks some of these complexities around epistemic access, but also how, you know, your first relationship with the digital is, is saying that you're wrong, somehow, you know, this, this idea of your name being underlined, I mean, we've all experienced that. And I think it's a really useful way of sort of just marking your initial experience with even the most basic programme like Microsoft Word. And even though he's coming from more of a literary background, I think really starts to point to the kinds of limitations of the internet more broadly, and how African knowledge systems, heritage, histories fit into it or don't, right. And I think Kọlá has developed some really interesting strategies of how to deal with this. And we'll definitely come back to those just now but also later on in the episodes of this podcast. But what I think is really important that he points to here is just these kind of, for lack of a better word, quirks in the system, that make the digital and digitizing incredibly difficult and really quite unreliable within the space of the kind of connection of African heritage and the digital space.

Chao T. Maina 17:52

You know, it's really vital that we begin to see these things as not just small things, and the ways in which you can keep hearing, for instance, over and over again, but you're wrong, the computer can't understand that this or that. But when it's happening, you know, when you're writing something, you tend to think that it's insignificant in the grand scheme of things. But really, when we see this at a larger scale, you know, what kind of implications does it have when these little quirks as you mentioned, Molemo, when they build up, and many of us know the stories of machine learning or artificial intelligence being based on large quantities of problematic data. More and more, we've seen this, I think there's a whole Netflix show on it, actually. And therefore we are building datasets, we're building systems out of data that is problematic, sexist, racist, and biased. And what happens when these systems become embedded in everyday life, you know. Now, within the heritage space or the museum space, and as people who work in arts and culture, we are saying that we're not immune to this. And so much of the knowledge on African history, the written works on Africa, that is now being turned into digitized data is still subjected to this very long drawn out process of the inaccuracies, the gaps, the limitation, the racism that we are seeing in other datasets as well.

Molemo Moiloa 19:18

Absolutely, absolutely. As you say, it can feel like small little quirks. But in the bigger scheme of things, when we start to look at it at scale, we really start to see the implications. And I think what's so important about what you're saying is we also have to recognize our role in in kind of contributing to that broader scale of data and the potential results that emerge out of the way our technologies are shifting and how Africans play a role in kind of what goes in but then are also quite affected by what comes out. Kọlá also speak to this a bit, he kind of speaks to this phrase, which I think comes from the machine learning space and the kind of tech space of garbage in, garbage out.

Kọlá Túbọ̀sún 20:05

So one of the things we created in the beginning was a free tool marking software which people could download and use to be able to write in Yorùbá, because we believe that writing in Yorùbá properly with the markings is a very important way of writing the language. In any case it has also helped the translation machines that we eventually develop because, it's called garbage in, garbage out, if we have enough properly written text on the internet, then there will be proper translation output when the machines gather those texts and use them.

Chao T. Maina 20:38

It's very interesting to look at it from the perspective of knowledge systems. And we are so excited to be joined by Temi Odumosu, who is a historian and an academic. She speaks to the ways in which this limited field of knowledge sharing according to particular systems, and according to particular rules, how it affects how we create knowledge, and how we share knowledge. When we speak about African history, in particular, what are the silences that we have and the gaps that we have. And furthermore, what happens when these silences are being replicated over and over again, within the digital sphere.

Temi Odumosu 21:21

I'm an art historian by training, and I've spent a long time sort of embroiled in the archives of slavery and colonialism. But one of the things I learned whilst being there, in the physical archives and in the process of my research transforming as things became more readily available online, is the extent to which the things that were unfinished and unprocessed, the emotions, the affects, the ways in which histories have not been told, fully, partially fragmented, that there were many silences in the archive. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, the Haitian historian. And so there are all of these gaps, silences, omissions, places of deep pain, trauma, ambiguity, in a confrontation with the original archive, if you can call it, all the evidential documents that came direct from planters' records and so on. And then realizing that that unfinishedness kind of migrated when institutions decided to open up collections, make them more readily available, primarily in the name of accessibility.

Chao T. Maina 22:42

I really, really love this point that Temi brings up when she speaks in the name of "accessibility". Because what does it mean to access something that is inherently flawed, to reproduce it over and over again? And you know, this whole podcast is about challenging and exploring notions around access. For me as a historian, this is one of my favorite parts, because she speaks very beautifully to the kind of unfinished nature of archives, that even when their whole, you know, when you walk into an archive or library and you encounter a record, it in itself is an unfinished record of the past. And sometimes these archives are reproducing the perspective of the people who created them, and therefore are traumatic in many ways, are biased in many ways. And now, Temi has spent a lot of time working with records relating particularly to the periods of slavery. And what she asks is that when we come to this material, you know, as Africans, as people who are directly connected to such traumatic pasts, we can't really separate what happens when we encounter them, whether they're physical or digital, you know, the digital still carries with it the same affects as the physical records.

Molemo Moiloa 24:05

Absolutely. I mean, you know that this just speaks so much to many of the things that I've been concerned with, ever since I first sort of stepped into a European museum's African collection, and the book of records of the different objects was opened in front of me, and I realized it was pretty much empty. It was such a stark shock for me to see that, you know, that the average page particularly sort of in the colonial period, when museums were collecting, en masse at a speed they could barely keep up with. The average page of this record book has a drawing of the object, the name of the person who brought it in, so usually a white male collector, maybe the name of the people who it was collected from but sometimes that would just be replaced with some racial slur instead. And then some measurements of the size, a little bit about the material it's made of, and a number. And I mean that's not information, right, that's information about a museum. That's not an information about an object, an artefact, it's not information about a people. It's not information about a ritual, a practice, a life. And so recognizing that that's the information they have. And then when they're digitizing these collections, they're literally repeating the same absences, the same silences, the same

information that they claim is about the object. But is actually much more about western collecting and museum practice than it is about any African history. Right?

Chao T. Maina 25:29

So, so true. And we talk about digital collections in the next episode, and I'm excited to get to it. But you know, this point on the replication of violence is something that you and I have both encountered as practitioners, you know, just traveling around the world, and around Africa and seeing the kind of ways in which collections are described particularly colonial collections, and we have several examples of this, can be really traumatizing. And it's interesting to me, because you go to these collections, you know, looking for answers. But you actually end up leaving with more questions. And I'm sure you can relate to that as well.

Molemo Moiloa 26:35

Absolutely. And I think Temi speaks to this really well, when she refers to the kind of promise of abundance. But as you say, we're just left with a lot more questions.

Temi Odumosu 26:49

And I think digitization brought with it a kind of promise of abundance. And it's like, oh, we we can share more from what is in the basement. And we can also allow people to kind of engage with it in a much more diverse way. Because of course, when you put things online, that you know, things become networked, right? They have a social kind of life. Of course, what it also means, especially in terms of institutional mindset, is that there was a kind of there is a kind of, how would I describe it, a kind of strange gap. On the one hand, it's digitization, sharing cultural heritage for all. On the other hand, it's digitization, so that now that it's online, we don't have to think about it too much. We're gonna have to think about the collections too much. We can allow for things to just do things in the world. And we can carry on with the business of looking after originals.

Molemo Moiloa 27:52

I think that Temi's point around getting on with the originals is a vital one here. Because often within the space of how African heritage is being digitized and particularly within the museum, and sort of archive space, this digital part of the work is done as a kind of extra, as something of an aside that is intended to create more access, is intended to ensure a kind of keeping up with the futuristic needs of any institution, and not getting left behind by technology. But it's not necessarily kind of a central practice in and of itself. I think both of us have found this in our experience with museums. And so what you often have is people who are really concerned with the originals, engaging in a digitization process that is seen as a blank and neutral kind of copy, secondary to the authenticity of an original object. But in doing so I often feel like there isn't enough of a recognition and expertise or even just a study and understanding of the complexity of this whole new beast that you're producing in the digital realm.

Chao T. Maina 29:06

And too often this means that people who are dealing with originals are also expected to take on the digital realm. And what we're seeing with museums and this whole rush to digitize is that the staff and the people who take care of the original (the curators,

the researchers, the conservators) are expected to oversee the digitization process in itself, with very little support and awareness on what the technology entails, what it could do, and the potential damages that it could bring. And so what we're seeing here is really a problem of two worlds communicating with each other. Because as a techie myself and understanding the ways in which data can seem the same. You know, from a tech perspective, whether it's data on agriculture, data on culture, data on money, it can seem like the same thing. Data is data, you know, if you look at it from that perspective. But what damages does it bring when this is not challenged from a heritage point of view? Now, it's not all gloom and doom. There are some people who are working on strategies for enabling ways that digital technology can support African needs. And also African heritage needs because this is also a complex issue on its own. I speak to this a lot in my work, because I believe that African heritage and the complexities that we have faced as a people in accessing heritage, in coming to a heritage, these complexities still need to be accounted for when we digitize and when we talk about digital collections. And so for me, digitization is not just an opportunity to provide access, it's a way of completely reimagining and radically, almost reimagining what access actually means.

Neema Iyer 30:58

And one thing that I feel, often that happens is, we are very clear on what we don't want, right? We don't want AI systems that are biased against us or we don't want an internet that's exclusive or we don't want online violence. But I think where we struggle is okay, what exactly do we want?

Molemo Moiloa 31:20

I think what Neema really points to in this sort of catch-22 situation is the need to begin to imagine what our alternatives can be and what can be created. So we need to be able to understand the limitations of the technology we have and recognize that we cannot simply assume that we're not replicating long held social injustices. But also not leave technology in that space and sort of give up on it, I suppose, but rather recognize that if dealt with in thoughtful and careful and brave ways we might be able to move beyond these kinds of limitations. Someone like Ḳọlá, who we heard from before, really challenges us to think through ways we can make this technology bend to our will, make this magic work for us, as you said Chao, with an example of a project he's developed over many years, which looks to address a social concern, first and foremost for African practitioners and their heritage. But also, I think, really importantly, begins to build data frameworks and infrastructures that have potential for future needs as well.

Ḳọlá Túbọ̀sún 32:28

YorubaName.com dictionary is an open source project, which means that all the code is available on GitHub, and people can use it to create their own project. From the database itself of Yorùbá names, from the very beginning I've known that names, I don't own it you know, it doesn't belong to me specifically. It belongs to a culture, belongs to a people, which was why we made it open crowdsource as well, by which I mean that all the names they're editable. Anybody who finds a name and finds a medium can click on a button and say, well, this name is wrong, or the meaning is not complete, or there's a story I have about my name that I think you might be interested in, and I can

put it there and then we can add it so more people can see it. One of the things we also hoped to do is to incorporate social media elements, so people can have discussions on their names and initiate stories and stuff like that. So when we're working with African cultural traditions, legacies and things like this of cultural value, it's important to note that you don't own it. What we're trying to do really is to facilitate access to other people to have access to it, especially Africans who own this cultural heritage.

There are people I've spoken to who don't know the meaning of the names, but their own names, you know, they never ask their parents or their parents passed away, whatever. Well, they go to dictionary and they find somebody who has similar name that has a story that can help them connect to their own heritage, which is exactly what my plan was at the beginning, just to create a space, just like Google has done for most of humanity, the space of Facebook or Twitter, where we can find a way to collaborate and share knowledge in a space that is trustworthy, and find ways to connect with each other through our cultural heritage.

Chao T. Maina 34:24

Another group that is reimagining ways of using the digital for African heritage, for African data, is the Women's History Museum of Zambia. Now, Molemo and I are huge fans of the work that founders Samba and Mulenga are doing. They are working with digital museum collections to reconnect communities with their heritage. And using this point of reconnection, essentially as a methodology for research into what makes digital forms accessible for Africans and people of African descent who want to encounter their history online. Mulenga shares how they do this.

Mulenga Kapwepwe 35:05

Part of the workshop and the workshop in that what we're doing with the villages, was to find out from them, how to design the platform, so they can access it. So we were also asking them about how many devices, you know, they have in the in the village, what is the connectivity, you know, things like that. What is the literacy rate in the village, if they have to put information onto the platform who can do it, and the people in the village actually came up with their own solutions, you know, which was really gratifying, because sometimes we tend to think that, oh, this is impossible, but the people themselves who appreciate who appreciated this, and so the idea is something that they could actually jump onto and be participants in. They came up with their own solutions on how they can use that platform, as people in the village with limited devices, or limited connectivity, you know, or limited literacy. So they gave us those ideas as well like, okay, if we are going to use this, from this village, which has only so many devices, and so much connectivity, we will do it like this. So we also wanted to explore that, that aspect of digital restitution, if you want to digital that, is it possible? And you know, in the African sense is because sometimes I think we Africans sometimes limit ourselves by just thinking, well, we don't have that much coverage, people don't have this, people don't have that. So it won't, you know, but sometimes the solutions are actually with the people themselves, who you are working with. And we got a lot of solutions.

Chao T. Maina 36:40

And so what Samba and Mulenga are doing at the Women's History Museum really shows us there are ways of addressing the limitations. Because if we stop at the limitations themselves, then we are ignoring the reality that this information, this data is still very, very vital to us. This idea that we have a lot of our own solutions is a very powerful one. It enables us to begin approaching technical questions from a sense of ownership, which is very important. How does technology intersect with our capacities, with our infrastructure, with our knowledge? This is what Neema Iyer calls conceptualizing our own data futures. I love it. For Kọ́lá, some of this might live within our own heritage to begin with.

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún 37:28

So I don't know if I have a diagnostic question, but I'm hoping that more of us think specifically yes, outside of the colonial spaces, using our indigenous knowledges. Ifa is one of them, which is a binary you know, kind of corpus. Many people say it is a source of, you know, many things I mentioned, again in computer systems. But we never developed it into that, you know, system to be fair. We had it and other people learned from it, and then used it to create stuff. So the question is, what do we do with the knowledge we have that has not yet been capital play and commodified? And how do we make sure they can work for us to better encode our knowledge systems, better empower us to be able to deal with the realities of modern existence and better enhance our way of life? You know, I don't have the answer, but I am looking as well.

Molemo Moiloa 38:31

In this amazing statement, Kọ́lá refers to the Ifa divination systems, which for those of us less familiar with them, are largely understood to be one of the earliest binary code systems that mirror some elements of today's computing. For many, and as Kọ́lá argues here, Ifa divination points to just one of the many ways Africans might source knowledge from existing heritage. As you said, Chao, having the knowledge ourselves and knowing what to do ourselves, maybe from contemporary knowledges, but also from historical and traditional ones, such as Ifa, to define our own data futures. Part of what we will do over the next couple of episodes, is to attempt to explore this, to really try to unpack what knowledge we do have, what is available to us to reimagine the way that so far things have been moving, and to try and find strategies for kind of better ways of doing it in the future.

Temi Odumosu 39:28

I mean, there is something liberatory about the digital when it's removed conceptually from either the internet of things, so apps, right, or whether it's removed from like, these kind of clunky ways in which the digital space is just seen as a way to make things happen faster, quicker, more efficiently, and with less human interaction. Because that's

also the way that the digital is kind of mobilized in our lives, but I also see it as I don't know, I see it as a space of potential. Also, in its capacity to reformulate, shift forms very quickly. I mean, now I'm thinking of this in terms of art and aesthetic practices. And also thinking generatively with glitches and errors, how do glitches and errors intervene in ways that are actually generative, right? So that a mistake online actually takes you elsewhere? Like, there's something about if you're a curious person, the digital space is like, it's like an endless kind of, you know, space of treasures and like places where you can travel down roads and take left turns that maybe you wouldn't do in your actual life. But you can do online because the user interface is so much easier.

I think about the ways in which, you know, within this space of 10 years, I mean, you know, we have grandparents who are on WhatsApp, sharing the strangest things and you're like, oh, wait, that wouldn't have happened a decade ago, right? They'd be like, what is this thing? What is this website? They're taking it, they're reformulating it, they're re educating us about culture, they're sending, you know, visual to and this is the interesting thing is how WhatsApp and Twitter and all these other places are being used to distribute stories, colonial stories, but also family stories in a new way to gather people around the things that have been in the basement and you take a quick photograph, you send it to the WhatsApp group. Okay, so not everybody has a copy. And now we're looking at it, now we're thinking about the family history together in a new way. So I think there's something about, you know, we have to continuously think about what more speed and more data means in terms of the nervous system. That said, I think there's also something interesting that it does in terms of connecting people and keeping people creative, and thinking about clever ways of sharing and coming together.

Molemo Moiloa 42:10

We are going to try to be honest and critical and upfront about the problematic ways that African heritage is being addressed in the digital realm. But we also really want to invite you to imagine together with us, to explore, to ask questions, to learn from committed clever people doing really amazing work. Because when we ask access for who? for what? we begin a journey of repairing old wounds of deep care for our long dismissed histories, of creating anew. So please, join us, continue with us on this journey and follow us for the upcoming episodes. This podcast is brought to you by Open Restitution Africa, a collaboration between African Digital Heritage and Andani. Africa. The podcast is produced by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa with Phumzile Nombuso Twala and Lethabolaka Gumede on research. Thank you to Josh Chiundiza for the music, Karugu Maina on design, and Annelien Van Heymbeeck on editing.

Chao T. Maina 43:21

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EPISODE ONE RESOURCES

Neema:
feminist collective civic tech organisation: Pollicy - [*https://pollicy.org/*](https://pollicy.org/)
[*archive.pollicy.org/feministdata/*](archive.pollicy.org/feministdata/)
[*archive.pollicy.org/digitalextractivism/*](archive.pollicy.org/digitalextractivism/)
Terms & Conditions Podcast - [*https://twitter.com/tcafricapodcast*](https://twitter.com/tcafricapodcast)

** Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún** *-* [*kolatubosun.com*](kolatubosun.com)

YorubaName.com *is an online intervention to preserve and document all Yoruba names in a multimedia format. It is part of a long-term project to document all types of African cultural experiences on the internet as a way of ensuring the survival of African identities in their various expressions.*
[*https://www.yorubaname.com/*](https://www.yorubaname.com/)

Temi Odumosu *-* [*https://www.temiodumosu.com/*](https://www.temiodumosu.com/)

The Women's History Museum Zambia *-* [*https://www.whmzambia.org/*](https://www.whmzambia.org/)

EPISODE TWO - PART ONE
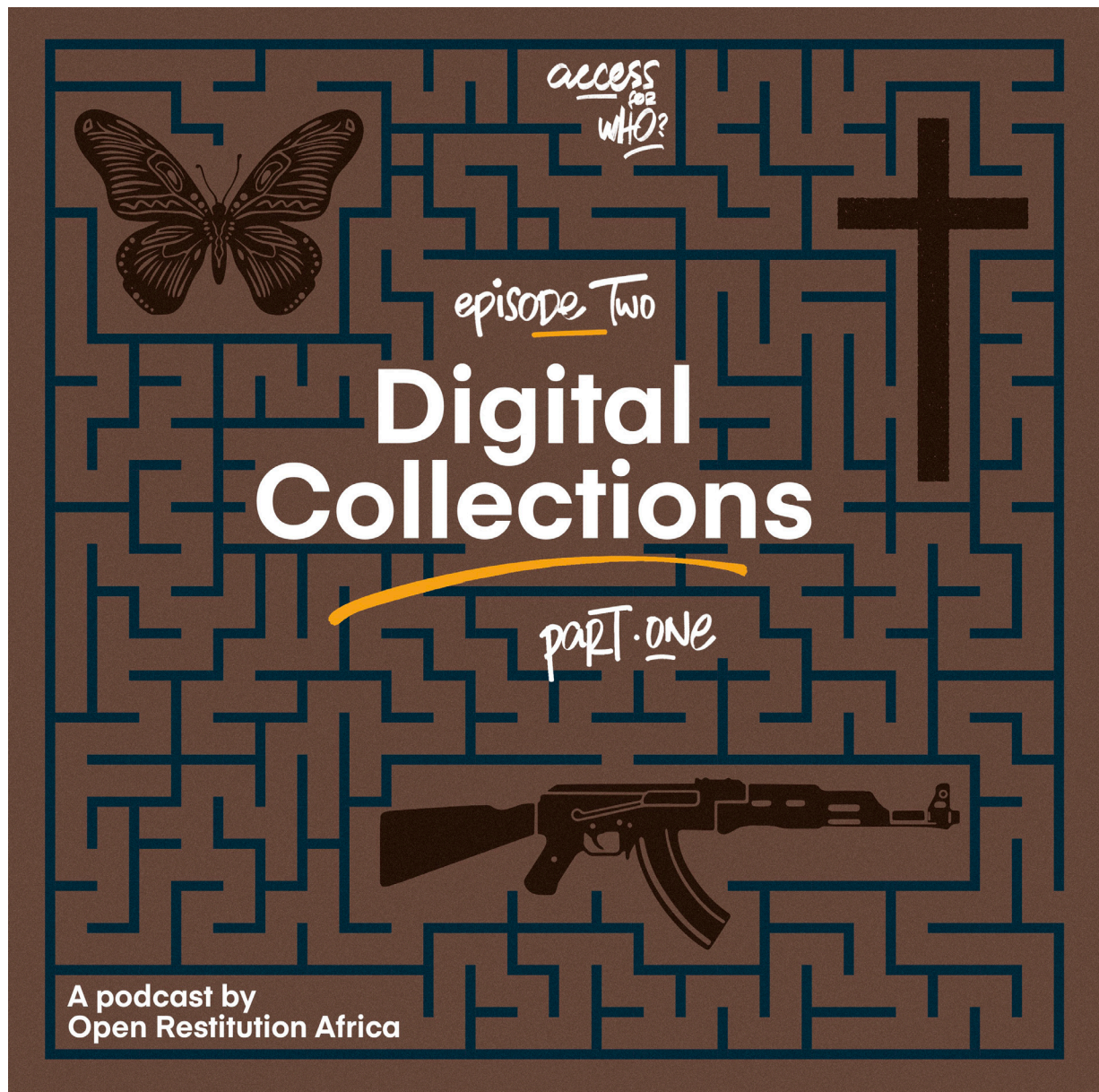
SYNOPSIS

This episode takes a deep dive into the origins of museum practice and the colonial origins of museum collections. How did Western museums end up amassing hundreds of thousands of objects? How does this legacy influence digitisation today? We explore ways in which African museum practitioners are going beyond these entrenched legacies to create innovative approaches that center indigenous knowledge and prioritize people over objects.

SPEAKERS

Temi Odumosu, Molemo Moiloa, Golda Ha-Eiros, Samba Yonga, Mulenga Kapwepwe, Chao T. Maina

EPISODE TWO (PART ONE) TRANSCRIPT

Chao T. Maina 00:26

Hello everyone, and welcome to episode two of the Access for Who? podcast. I'm your host Chao, and I'm joined by my colleague Molemo. And today we will be talking about digital collections, we will be looking at what it means to digitize the things that we have in museums, what it means to access them, to share them with communities, and also to look at the absences that we have in our knowledge, and the ways we interact with history and culture as a whole. Molemo is going to do an introduction to museums. But before we begin, I'd just like to say that we will start with a deep dive into the definitions that we need for today's episode. So these are terms around museum practice, research, and everything that sets the stage for the wonderful speakers that we have with us today.

Molemo Moiloa 01:18

Yes as you say, Chao, the speakers who're speaking about collections and museum practice, really do kind of give us an amazing introduction and kind of whirlwind tour of some key issues that are core to the questions of museum practice today, but also to collections practice today, and inherently, therefore, to restitution as a core issue. And so we thought we would ask you to indulge us as we kind of just give you some key words to work with. And these will come up all through the episode today, but also in episodes in future.

So I suppose the first thing is really just to give a bit of an introduction to what we mean when we say collections within the space of the museum. So collections refer to what are often called artefacts, which are the things that you go see when you go and visit a museum. Most museums show less than 10% of the artefacts, the collections, that they have in their museums, most of them are kept in the storerooms. And of course, the big question is how they've come to be there. And that's, that's really become the big question around restitution, and the kind of global discussion around restitution. And so it's helpful to have a little bit of a sense of how they've gotten there.

And many authors, and I think we will put some further reading lists into the podcast notes for this podcast, if you would like. But many authors sort of cite the origins of contemporary museums, and what we understand to be museums in the idea of the cabinet of curiosities, which was this concept that emerged, particularly in the period when Europe was discovering, and I use the word discovering in scare quotes, because it's not true. Discovering the rest of the world, and were really interested in studying all of this newness and this exotic kind of human beings, geographies, landscapes, plants, animals, etc. and bringing those things back and putting them in what were called cabinets of curiosities. And of course, the word curiosities really marks the sense of exoticization of what this meant. And these were usually quite wealthy people, often royal families. And the collections were happening by scientists, botanists, but also missionaries who were being sent all around the world to spread Christianity, as well as within war situations by soldiers, who would then bring these objects back and they would be collected within this kind of scope of objects indicating a person's wealth, but also a person's expertise and knowledge about things beyond the borders of Europe. And that cabinet of curiosities idea is kind of the foundation of

what then expands into what we come to understand as the museum which of course, has changed substantially since then.

Chao T. Maina 04:23

Absolutely. And, you know, we can cite examples of different museums in the world that really have been founded on this, this kind of idea that other cultures are there to be observed and looked at. So the other thing that we want to define is this concept around western museum development. And when we talk about this, we're referring particularly to the ways in which western museums relate to other parts of the world vis-à-vis the ways in which material was collected, as Molemo has explained, was gathered by different agents of imperialism, of colonialism, and put in certain spaces to observe the people. So for example, there's a museum in Brussels, in Tervuren. But this museum was basically set up by King Leopold, at the time when he had considered Congo or Congo Free State as part of his private property. And the museum was set up to basically display to the Belgian people and the Europeans, what Congo was like, you know, the people and the culture and the environment and the nature, you know. So this museum, I think, in its foundation really speaks to that idea that museums are not set up initially also to preserve culture; they were set up to observe. And it's important because when we begin to look through this collection, when we begin to unpack what it means to have hundreds of 1000s of objects kept in basements with very little context, with incorrect information, it ties directly both to like western museum development and expansion, as well as the foundation of the cabinets of curiosities as Molemo introduced us to.

Molemo Moiloa 06:21

And of course, today, we think of museums and artefacts in slightly different terms. Today museums are often referred to in the framework of knowledge, creation of care for cultures, of sharing cultures, and different places in the world, or even the history of one's own place, with a public. And that idea of care really emerges a bit later in the imagination of the western museum. But it's still very much centred around the idea of the object. And so the object and the authentic object remains kind of pivotal to how museums think about themselves. That has shifted a bit, we have education programmes, we have more and more social engagement strategies, museum professionals increasingly have a much more complex role to play in how museums kind of interact with society. But the object kind of remains the centre of that. And that's, of course, important for our discussion around the digital as part of this podcast, and is also important, I think, in relation to, and maybe this is more of a personal opinion, but in relation to a kind of Western interest in collecting, gathering, hoarding, objects, things, as opposed to maybe the way other parts of the world relate to history, in relation to oral histories or other kinds of ways of thinking about memory.

And that's, that's important, because, of course, within the colonial framework, many museums were actually built in colonial contexts. And so we also have the inheritance of museums in contexts like my own South Africa, or Chao's Kenya, and many others, which remain in postcolonial spaces as these kinds of remnants of this logic of the object. And which are very much based on the tradition of the ethnographic or anthropological museum, which in the western context now is often referred to as museums of world cultures, or museums of culture and peoples. But were historically about learning about as you said Chao, observing others, right. And we have these

museums based on that foundation in our own contexts, which obviously have quite a complex role in terms of how we memorialize, make knowledge about and learn about ourselves and our own cultures historically, and contemporarily. And you'll hear people referring to local museum practice within formerly colonial contexts throughout this podcast and in other episodes as well.

Chao T. Maina 07:09

Absolutely. And what you've just said, is interesting, because, you know, right now, based on you know, the way in which we have inherited the concept of museums, and this object centred approach, it's easy to think that this is how history can exist. It's the only way for history to exist, and it's the only way for history to be preserved. But at the same time, what is important for us to keep in mind is that different societies, different cultures, have had their own completely separate way of understanding their history, of understanding the environment, of preserving knowledge, that do not sit within the idea that for knowledge to be preserved, it has to be written or for history to be preserved, it has to be kept in a basement under temperature controlled conditions.

And so this brings me to my next definition which is around something that you'll hear throughout the episode. And these are the three words that I love to hear: indigenous knowledge systems. I'll say it again, indigenous knowledge systems. And when we talk about indigenous knowledge systems, we are referring to a wide range of things, which include, but are not limited to the understanding, the kind of philosophies, the skills, and the ways in which different societies have had very long histories and very long interactions with the environment and their surroundings, and have come up with ways of connecting multiple things, you know. So from dance, to music, to language, to food, to the ways in which human beings express themselves, express themselves in relation to the environment. And indigenous knowledge is also very holistic in terms of looking at everything, as being connected, as the food being connected to expression being connected to dance, being connected to language, and other ethos of it being connected to the fact that you are a human being. And you are centred in an environment, and you are not just separate from the environment, but a part of the environment.

And so the key word here is also system. Because the system is complex, it comprises of different things. We're not just talking about one thing, so we say indigenous knowledge systems, because we are looking at multiple aspects of human life, of social interaction, and the ways in which knowledge has been preserved for generations and generations in different places. This is especially important, take your notes at this point, because when we begin the discussion on intellectual property, and copyright, we will talk about indigenous knowledge systems. And so this will come up again in the next episode. But for now, one of the things that we also want to talk about is the idea and the concept of provenance research. Maybe you've heard of it, maybe you haven't. But Molemo is going to give us an introduction to that as well.

Molemo Moiloa 12:08

First, I should say, Chao, great definition of indigenous knowledge systems, that's not a very easy thing to explain. Good job. Our last key word, and then we will stop is provenance research. And provenance research has become a kind of central key

word for restitution issues in Europe, and has a kind of complex role that it's playing in restitution concerns. But we won't go into that complexity now. Instead, we will just explain that provenance research refers to particularly museum professionals, but also other researchers, finding out how artefact, object, part of material culture has arrived in the museum. And that usually means tracking the process of collection, because often, museums bought objects directly from the person who collected them. But in other cases, they will have bought them from someone else who would have bought them from someone else, who would have bought them from someone else, etc, etc. And one of the key things of provenance research is how objective material culture has ended up in European hands in general. So understanding that some objects were given as gifts, some objects were perhaps sold, though objects being sold is a complex issue and of course, we'll come back to this. But of course, there are also cases where objects were stolen. Objects were acquired through war and violence.

And so provenance research tries to identify what that story has been. And this is often referred to as object biographies, which is really telling the story of the object, and the word biography is obviously important in the sense of trying to give that object life, which is vital also to indigenous knowledge systems and thinking about our material culture as having life and not just being dead representations of something else in a museum. Just to quickly mention, of course, that provenance research has a very complex role in that some of its primary basis has been in trying to determine the right to keep objects by museums, and that a lot of European funding has gone into provenance research as a kind of foundational concern of restitution. However, increasingly, museums have shifted to a much more collaborative approach to provenance research and a much more knowledge oriented, like learning more about museums, about collecting practices, and of course, about the material culture held in museums, working often with what is often referred to people of source communities, or individuals from formerly colonized or sort of Global South majority world environments. So provenance research itself has gone through different ways of thinking about it.

Chao T. Maina 15:03

I'm going to throw Molemo under the bus here. But I just had a question. Is it correct to say that provenance research is the research on how the objects got into the museum or came to the museum? Like where it's come from? And to the point where it enters a museum collection? Or does it start like, even after it's gone into the museum,

Molemo Moiloa 15:24

After it's gone into the museum in the sense of?

Chao T. Maina 15:28

So is it like the research of how the object came to the museum purely, and then that's where it ends? So it's like it came from Kenya and then it went somewhere to

Switzerland, and then Belgium, and then the UK, and then now it's in France. And that's the entirety of its provenance?

Molemo Moiloa 15:49

Yeah, I mean, my, I think my understanding of provenance research is the primary understanding is how it left African hands or hands of the original person, and entered into a museum. An interesting example, is one of the largest provenance projects, which was developed in Germany, I'm going to forget the name of it. It's named after a Greek god based on an object in the collection. But it's an example of an early provenance research project done within a museum, about its collection on the basis that the collection actually came from a German royal family. And they needed, due to requests for return by the royal family, they needed to understand how the royal family's objects had entered into their collection and the terms by which those objects had entered into collection. I think part of that is also understanding how those objects entered into the hands of the original peoples as well, and what the significance of them would have been. So for example, it's important to understand if an object from a specific context and Africa had really major ritual significance, because then you would be able to understand that this wouldn't have just been sold, right? It would have been something that was precious. And so that's important to understand as part of provenance research, as well. And so in this German example, they needed to understand for example, if objects were of deep family significance and had been handed down from one queen to another, in which case, a family might have rights to have that returned from the museum collection. And I think it's interesting thinking of this European, European to European example, to also shift some of the complex assumptions that emerged in provenance research and the power dynamics in the African context as well.

Chao T. Maina 17:48

Thank you. I mean, it's very interesting in itself in and of itself, it can sound very complex. But I think when you distil it into the ways in which you've talked about, how an object got there, what it was used for, and that being part of, of the research in itself, it really does speak to the nature of the complexity that goes into the work that museums do. So based on our early discussion, I think you can tell that Molemo and I are crazy about museums, we've done, we've spent a lot of time, maybe even an unhealthy amount of time thinking about museums. But we don't necessarily work in a museum at the moment, as of the production of this podcast. So we will begin after the heavy set of introductions that you have just had. We start off with Golda, who works at the National Museum of Namibia, and who will tell us firsthand, and directly, what it means and what it looks like to work for a national museum on the African continent.

Golda Ha-Eiros 18:53

Hi Molemo and Chao, thank you for having me. I'm Golda Ha-Eiros. I currently work as a senior curator at the National Museum of Namibia. And I work in the anthropology collection. And I also worked, or served as a guest researcher in Berlin museums, their collection with Namibia, with Namibian cultural objects. Maybe to start off with I mean, the project initially aimed to preserve Namibian material and immaterial cultural heritage, you know, as a means to unblock the creative potential of the colonial collections from Namibia that are housed in Berlin. I think the main aim is also to kind

of reconnect the collections with each other in terms of the collection that the National Museum has, and collections that are overseas. Kind of reconnecting them as well as reconnecting them to their heritage communities, you know, and researchers and artists and the entire public in Namibia, as it seeks to build Namibian capacity to conserve and curate collections in Namibia.

So even today, when you think about provenance research, from my perspective, I wouldn't exactly know, where do I go start? And I think it's also this whole notion of adapting words. And I'm always just like, why can't we see provenance research as object biographies? Where we talk about the historical significance of this specific object, cultural understanding, social meaning, of this object, you know. So I think, looking at these objects, investigating whether they were acquired violently, or they had consent, because, I mean, you have to be honest to say, also, it wasn't only war, but they were missionaries also that were living amongst communities, some were gifted, some objects were traded. So you need to look into that as well. And being able to handle these objects and engage in an in depth research process, I think that's what we were doing, gave us the opportunity to really unlock a portal into our past. And to realize that, you know what, these objects in the collection, they gained a different value, a different significance that was previously lost, because it kind of lost his identity when it it became, what do you call it, an antique in the museum. Whereas for us, it's an object with a purpose, and you know, and that's what it was for, and you use it , and the lifespan kind of intercepts.

Chao T. Maina 21:48

So Golda speaks to the ways in which collections and making collections accessible, really can be a path to reconnection. But what's interesting to me, because this episode is about digital collections, after all, is that a lot of this work around documenting objects, finding out what they are, you know, where they're from, it's happening online, it's happening across countries, it's happening across borders, and continents. And when we speak about digital, you know, sometimes it's very easy to speak, or rather to think of the highest tech stuff, you know, the biggest cameras and the biggest scanners and the biggest, most complex databases. But in our conversation with Golda, I was really struck by the ways in which she views particularly the ways, technology has helped bring this discussion on objects and collections closer to home. And she really gives us an understanding of the fact that technology does not have to have complexity for it to have impact. It just needs to be familiar.

Golda Ha-Eiros 22:56

I recall at that time, I think it was a colleague of mine, I mean, on the project, I think there were two of them. And we were looking at these objects. And I was like, do I know this object? I've seen it because my grandmother used to have a glass cabinet in her sitting room where she would have like champagne bottles from her wedding. Like little ornaments, tortoise shells, leather sacks, similar items that were in the museum that she had treasured and kept. I'm guessing they were passed down. And she just kept them in that glass cabinet. So initially, as we sat there we were like, okay, now we need to WhatsApp people, because we don't, I can't think to email because who has an email address on the phone? No one. And then even with WhatsApp, it was so tricky because I had to WhatsApp an aunt, I had to WhatsApp my father, he had to make a trip to Okombahe which is like, from the capital, it's about a four hour drive to show the

pictures. So it was about taking pictures, WhatsApping them to back home and asking, have you guys seen this object? What do you know about this object? What can you tell me about this object?

And because on the team, each one of our we tried to be I think they tried to be very representative of the Namibian community. So it was from each ethnic group. So my colleague is there trying to contact her family, and I'm here contacting my family. And it was all done digitally through our phones. There was really no other way to do it. Like I was saying, the museum just has the object, but the knowledge is not there. And the knowledge is with the people, but the people were back at home. So I think that was our only way of communicating with each other. So it was, and I think that's why we also called it a network of knowledge. I think as African practitioners, we don't necessarily have a legacy to uphold. I think we are taking from what didn't work. We're taking that along and going forward. But we're also not reinventing per se, but we have a chance to create something new and exciting. You know, and sometimes what I struggle most with digitizing is the access and I know just how troublesome internet can be in the region, you know. If you honestly speaking, who's gonna see this, if I put it if I'm only focused on digitising my collection, but how else are people going to have access to my collection?

Molemo Moiloa 25:42

Golda makes such an important point when she states that African practitioners don't necessarily have a legacy, pick a museum legacy to uphold, but rather working from what didn't work before. And I think this is such a vital statement because it really speaks to, I think, a whole new generation of museum workers who are committed to thinking about what museum practice in, particularly formerly colonial museums within formerly colonial contexts, are having to address and to rethink what the museum can really do. And Golda also points out the question of what digitization could possibly do within the space of collections within those contexts. And the challenges of thinking about technology and the digital as simply ways of digitizing collections and putting them out in the world as opposed to technologies, ways of connecting and creating knowledge as she describes in the case of the project that she was working on. What I think this points to is really the museum as much more a space of reclaiming knowledge, of ensuring that forms of memory and forms of history are made present within the space of institution that has historically been about objects. So she is going out she's using WhatsApp, because she's interested in what are these objects about? What do they mean? And she's recognized that there is a gap of that information in western collections that have the objects, right, in this project that she's working on. But she is more rightly committed to the stories and the people behind the objects than the objects. And I think this is what she's pointing about, like not being dedicated to the legacy of objectness, even though of course, care for objects remains the role of any museum worker, but really, reshifting into the museum as a social space and as a space of social histories. And I suppose to a degree, really working with the traditions and cultures of oral history that are so vital and grounding to the way a lot of African history operates.

Chao T. Maina 28:02

It's also very, very, very important in a way to see that it's not about just making something accessible, and taking a photo of it. That the chance of connection and

connecting these objects with the photo, the photo to the people, the people to the history, you know, like there is a cycle that is so integral to meaning and to making meaning out of a single photograph. And in this way, I think the practitioners that we speak to in this podcast, who are based in southern Africa, are doing really really amazing things. So from Namibia, we move across the border into Zambia, where Samba and Mulenga from the Women's History Museum, we heard from them in episode one. They have embarked on a project to digitize and make accessible collections on Zambian heritage. And they give us a bit of intro into the why, why are they doing it? And the how, how are they going about digitization within the project?

Mulenga Kapwepwe 29:07

Okay, okay, so my name is Mulenga, the work with the Women's History Museum, I think we meet again, from a point where we felt one isn't enough documentation of women's history in Zambia, but also everywhere, really. We felt, you know, one day over a cup of coffee, that there wasn't enough being done in terms of documenting women's history, you know, as women, you know, women from the past, but also women who are living today that we haven't really done a good job. There's no country of look, we've never really found out that we are not the only ones. Because the first project that we did, which was a partnership with Wikipedia, we discovered that, that it is true of many countries that women's history is actually kind of disappearing, and not being adequately documented. With that, of course, we also understood that women come with a lot of history, but also with a lot of knowledge, especially indigenous knowledge, because women have interacted with the ecosystem, they've interacted in political spaces, they've interacted in many ways. But through the foundation of indigenous knowledge, so we also wanted to kind of explore that and see how we can document that, mainstream it and get it out to people. Our aim is to get history out in a way that people can interact with it and keep it alive, make it a living history, rather than just something that you visit once in a while, when you go to a museum.

Chao T. Maina 30:55

Mulenga speaks to the point of getting history out when the founding premise of museums is really to keep history in. I like to think of digital collections and physical collections as being part of the same ecosystem, in that digital collections do not exist, separate from physical collections, they just exist in a different format and a different world, as you may call it. So it's important for us to ask how can digital tools and the kind of connections that we're making, how do they complement existing forms of knowledge? You know, we spoke about indigenous knowledge systems in the beginning, and it's interesting to see that indigenous knowledge is a part of the digital discussion in itself, yeah?

Molemo Moiloa 31:40

Absolutely, and I think the Women's History Museum, Zambia just does such exciting work in blurring these boundaries, and really testing the possibilities of the idea of museum and idea of collections. And very much, because of a kind of activist position around women's histories, and African women's histories, in particular, are really dedicated to thinking through how this knowledge will then operate in the world, you know, and how do museums have in the sense an activist role in and of themselves, particularly in the African context where so much has been taken from the continent.

Some studies guess as much as 90 percent of Africa's material heritage is outside of the African continent. Or African, historical African material heritage is outside of the African continent. So how do we rebuild? How do we recreate? And how do we do that in ways that really represent and link to indigenous knowledge systems from the continent as well.

Samba Yonga 32:47

The more we had discussions, the more we realized that digital media could actually be a way we could test, how to archive indigenous knowledge systems, how to document them and how to restore them. And I think through continued contact with various players in the field, and outside the field, as what Mulenga has said, we discovered many things, information and you know, structures of use, but also other museum experts. And then we encountered not just from within the museum here in Zambia, but elsewhere as well. And we discovered they had Zambian objects as well. And we started thinking around how to use digital media as a way of interacting with some of these objects, so not just the indigenous knowledge systems, and the oral archives that we were coming into contact with.

Chao T. Maina 33:48

I'd like to spend a little bit of time on this point around digitization and documentation. Because I think that the process of digitization is so crucial to how we encounter digital collections. I also mentioned in the beginning that it's very easy to get lost in the allure of the technicality of things, you know. And what cameras do we need, what rights do we need? But really a lot of the work and a big bulk of what makes a digitization project successful is in the decision making, in the kind of ways in which we prioritize community even before we begin this work. In the kind of ways we say the culture is the most important thing. And so if we're looking at indigenous knowledge systems, what ways does the technology support this? If we're looking at oral history, what ways does the technology support this? As opposed to saying I have this, you know, very expensive piece of tech and I need to use it for something, anything. So we're prioritizing the culture first. And then using the technology to support our needs. Within the culture in, Samba and Mulenga, they really do speak to an approach that is very holistic and is very considerate of what it means to document as Molemo, you said, systems or histories that have been hidden, you know, and digital technology sort of becomes also a place for activism in a way. And so I like asking these questions, because when we think about how we digitize who's going to access the material and where they're going to access it, it really forces us to centre human perspectives within the discussion. What do you think?

Molemo Moiloa 35:35

Absolutely. And I love this phrase that you have of care for the culture first. So much of what the Women's History Museum in Zambia is about is care for the culture first, and this is also vital, because within museums, one of the primary roles within the museum is the curator. The curator is the person who is responsible for the collections, but who also is often responsible for a lot of the knowledge creation and publishing and kind of academic style work that emerges out of museums. And the word curate comes from the word care. It comes from, I think, the Latin word for care. And so the curator is the carer of collections. And yet, what we often see is caring for collections, not caring for the culture, right?

And so I really, I think what you're saying is so vital in the sense of how do we start to completely rethink, again, this obsession with the objects and the collection, as opposed to the culture. And I think really links to what Neema and Ko̩lá were saying, in the last episode, around using technologies for our own purposes, and creating technologies that can really enhance our own needs. And that might even work from our own epistemic or indigenous knowledge systems, which I think is really just such an exciting possibility, and really, is so different to what we see happening currently in museums where there is, in many ways a very well-meaning rush to digitize collections, because there's a feeling that museums need to be ahead of the times, they need to be sort of in line with technology. And so they are rushing to digitize objects under the guise of care, and yet this rush for digitization is done en masse. We've spoken about this a lot, Chao. And as you say, it's really just about, ooh we've got the biggest best machines that can do it the fastest. And then we just digitize, digitize, digitize, digitize. But again, how do you decide what you digitize? How do you digitize when you don't really have much else other than an object and very little information about it? What does it mean to make copies of things you don't understand? Who's going to access this digital material? What is the purpose of this digital material? Where's it going to go? How's it going to be accessed? All these questions that you're saying are so important, become less important than just digitizing en masse.

Chao T. Maina 38:24

And it's really interesting because what Samba and Mulenga and the Women's History Museum and practitioners like Golda are showing us is that it's not really about quantity. You know, it's not just about how much can you digitize in two months. It's about the quality of the work you're producing. It's about the quality of the connections you have with people, the quality of the connection you have with the culture. And that's what really, really speaks to a more I think sustainable and holistic way of approaching digitization. Because as you said Molemo, we're looking at, there's a rush almost to just say, all the 500,000 objects from this collection are now online. But then, that's a lot, you know, I think sometimes we're desensitized by numbers, because we're so used to like data and big data that we don't, we don't imagine what it is. If we had 500,000 objects in a room, I mean, I don't even think they would fit in my house. You know, like we're talking about huge quantities of artefacts and things that are so representative of so much more than their physical embodiment. And Temi Odumosu from our first episode really speaks to the ways in which this kind of mass digitizing or mass production of digital copies of artefacts and archives can be violence in itself.

Temi Odumosu 40:04

So there's something about kind of using, it's kind of like, it's almost like a kind of backing up, you know how you backup your hard drive, right? And you create another replication of it so that, you know, if you lose anything or whatever, there's a copy there. But I think what institutions have been doing is kind of creating a kind of backup that stands in for the collection in the public world, so that then they can just, you know, do other things. And I don't think this is, I don't think this is necessarily a negative thing, except when that digital material is so quickly produced that it loses the context of the collection, of history, of cultural stories, of communities of, of conscience that protect the materials that are being digitized. Then that's where the kind of violence sets in, right? Because when you're digitizing as an institution, it's very rare that you're doing it one by one, right. Except if it's like a really, you know, like, if it's 3D materials, and you're

doing 3D scanning, okay, then it's like a much slower process. But with 2D materials, with photographs or with documents that can be scanned, and so on. These things often happen in batch, which means that the time it's going to take to then, you know, make the collections, make the originals connect with the digital in a meaningful way. It's just more time and resources than institutions often have. And I think in that break, what you have is a lot of open access material that's just sort of floating in digital space, without the necessary context, to give it weight and meaning and the reason why I say weight and meaning is because in the context of the discussion about colonialism, the theft of artefacts and cultural material from different communities around the world. That space of ensuring that the digital artefact speaks some kind of truth about what happened with the original becomes more important.

Molemo Moiloa 42:33

So I think we will just leave what Temi has said with you, for you to unpack that, because I think what you said is just so powerful, and really serves as a great way to round up what we know has been a bit of a deep dive for any of you who aren't really familiar with this material. But I think it's also a really interesting way to enter into a conversation around how some really extraordinary African professionals are thinking about what museums and collections can do in the world.

Chao T. Maina 43:06

So in part two of episode two, we will be looking into more practical ways of dealing with the issues around digitization that we have highlighted in this episode. We'll be looking at the issue of absence, of ways of connecting and reaching audiences, as well as what it means from an African perspective to speak about digital restitution, which is the whole premise behind this podcast. So see you in episode two, part two.

Molemo Moiloa 43:41

This podcast is brought to you by Open Restitution Africa, a collaboration between African Digital Heritage and Andani.Africa. The podcast is produced by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa with Phumzile Nombuso Twala and Lethabolaka Gumede on research. Thank you to Josh Chiundiza for the music, Karugu Maina on design, and Annelien Van Heymbeeck on editing.

Chao T. Maina 44:03

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EPISODE TWO (PART ONE) RESOURCES

Museum history and Cabinets of Curiosity

"To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions" - http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-11912010000200005

"Universal Museums": New Contestations, New Controversies" - https://www.iwgia.org/images/publications/0028_Utimut_heritage.pdf#page=31

"Reinventing Africa: museums, material culture, and popular imagination in late Victorian and Edwardian England" - https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300068900/reinventing-africa/

Africa Museum Tervuren

The origin of the AfricaMuseum dates back to the Brussels International Exposition of 1897. At King Leopold II's behest, the 'Colonial Section' of the exhibition was moved to the Africa Palace (formerly known as the 'Colonial Palace') in Tervuren.
Leopold II saw the museum as a propaganda tool for his colonial project, aimed at attracting investors and winning over the Belgian population. It was in 1898 that the temporary exhibition became the first permanent museum of the Congo. The institute has always served the dual purpose of museum and scientific institute.
https://www.africamuseum.be/en

Daphne: Provenance project of the SKD Museum in Germany

https://www.skd.museum/en/forschung/provenienzforschung/

National Museum of Namibia

https://www.museums.com.na/museums/windhoek/national-museum-of-namibia

EPISODE TWO - PART TWO
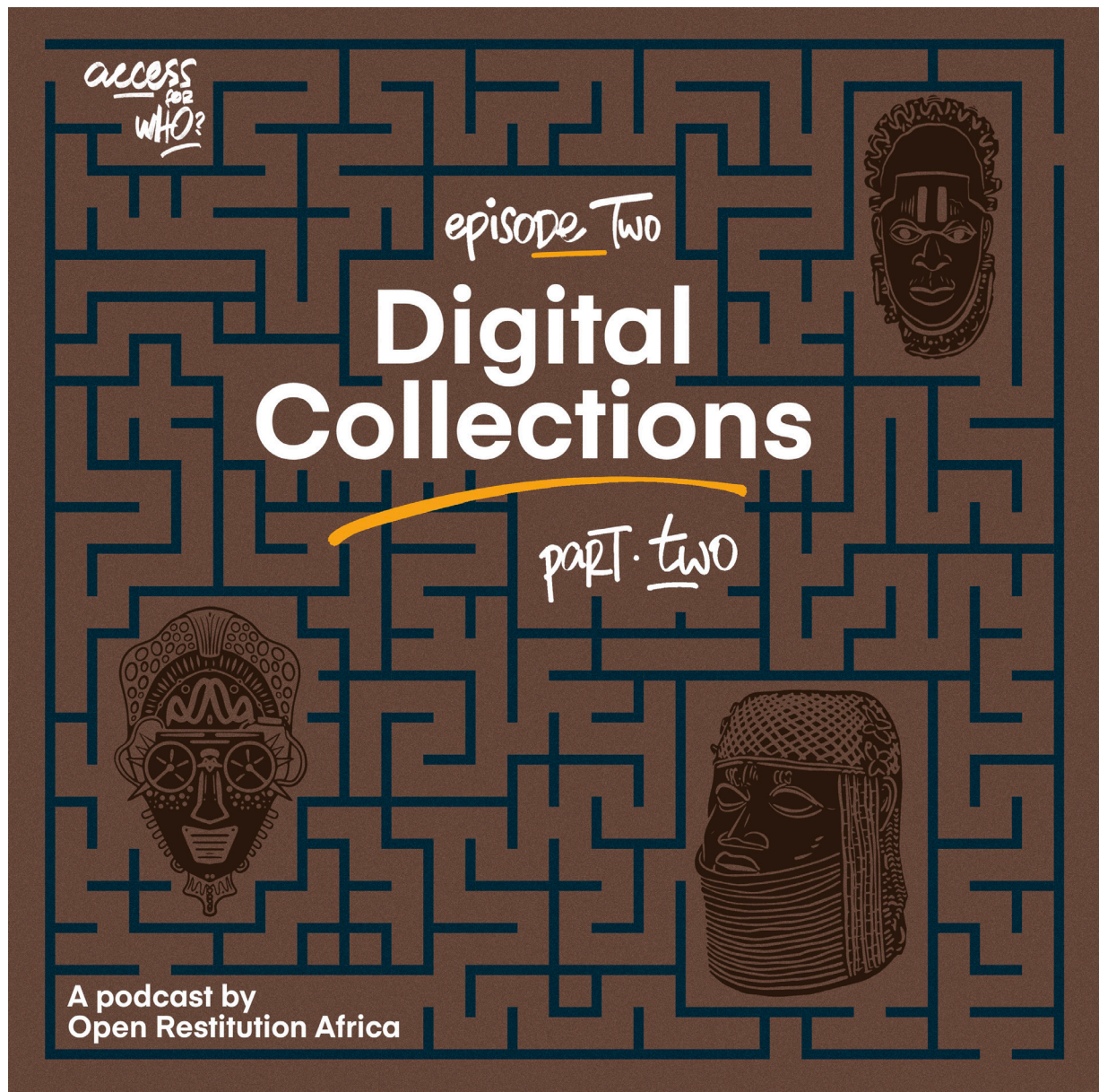
SYNOPSIS

In this episode we reflect on digital practice as a form of repair, care and knowledge creation. Faced with challenges around access to data, absence of archives and physical removal of objects from communities - How are digital collections creating room for new African narratives and imaginations? What potential does digital restitution hold for African heritage? And how can this contribute to the physical return of artifacts?

SPEAKERS

Temi Odumosu, Minne Atairu, Molemo Moiloa, Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún, Samba Yonga, Mulenga Kapwepwe, Neema Iyer, Chao T. Maina

EPISODE TWO (PART TWO) TRANSCRIPT

Temi Odumosu 00:00

And so because of all of those unfinished negotiations with originals, I'm thinking a lot of the work that the digital replicants can do, or the digitized versions can do as being kind of like ambassadorial work, right, which should, of course involve the communities, the kind of steward communities, the original communities. How would we like these reproductions to be shared with humanity online? What kind of stories would we like these reproductions to tell? Are the layers of information that we would like to attach to the digital that will help to tell another kind of story that the museums have failed to do?

Molemo Moiloa 01:13

Welcome back everyone, to the second part of our second episode on digital collections and the history of collecting and how these objects have kind of ended up in the museums of western institutions. And in the first part of it, we really unpacked a lot of that history, tried to understand the kinds of logics and knowledge systems that resulted in large collections of objects in western museums, but also, what some of the issues of that have been. What some of the the kind of absences that have resulted, the losses of knowledge on the African continent that have resulted, the kinds of violences that still exist in these collections, and particularly how we start to think about digitizing them. And so in this second part, we kind of shift into the next phase, which is to think about what it means to then look at these collections in a different kind of way. And I suppose, in a sense, reconstitute our relationship to this history of collecting and to objects from the perspective of Africans thinking about repair, and care, and knowledge creation, thinking about ways of addressing what's been lost, but also really reimagining what becomes possible in the future. And so we are speaking to amazing practitioners who are really getting to grips with some of these questions, and doing super great work.

Chao T. Maina 02:41

Absolutely. Thank you, Molemo for that wonderful intro. You know, when we speak of digital collections, we're not just talking about the data in itself, I really think we're referring to the ways in which this data is collected, the ways in which it's documented, curated, and the whole process of even getting this data online or in a form that people can use. And it's really interesting to see the ways in which different practitioners adapt to both the data itself, but the process of collecting the data and the ways in which we're kind of using digital tools, as you say, as a reparative form of knowledge creation, knowledge seeking, and knowledge sharing. In our first episode, we did speak about magic and you know, this kind of magic that technology brings with it and the ability to create, and our next speaker creates not just from a point of having collections there, but she asked questions around what would it mean to capture a point in time in which objects are lost, in which people are lost, in which culture is lost and transferred into different places? And how do you visualize that you know, so she really looks at absence of collections, but also visualizing the disruption and the ways in which culture would have, could have, might have shifted, if this disruption would not have taken place. Here we have Minne, who's going to introduce her work.

Minne Atairu 04:05

My name is Minne. I am a doctoral student at Columbia University. And I'm very interested in artificial intelligence, especially as it relates to black lives and how that intersects with education in formal and informal spaces like museums, or K-12 classrooms. But to my project Igun AI, which is an ongoing project I started at the end of 2020, really looks at Benin Bronzes and what would happen after they were stolen from Nigeria. So a little bit of context about Benin Bronzes, it's a collection of 3000 cultural objects, which were stolen in 1897 from Benin Kingdom in Nigeria and Benin Kingdom is located in the rainforest area of Nigeria. So I was very interested in looking at what happened after the looting, right, especially in relation to artistic production, because I'm an artist, and I'm an artist from Benin Kingdom. So I was very interested in looking at that.

And one reason I was interested in looking at it is because in 1897, during the punitive expedition, the king, who was considered the sole commissioner of the arts was deposed and exiled from Benin Kingdom. And usually, whenever an artist in the Kingdom was going to make an artwork, they were very dependent on the king to commission them and to say, go and make artworks. But then I was interested in understanding, okay, so what happens when the king is no longer there? How would an artist operate in the absence of a king?

So I started thinking of how artificial intelligence might support my thinking in relation to reimagining artistic works during the 17 year absence, so creating possibilities and it's more like an exercise in imagination, right. And it's very speculative. I think part part of it for me is that I want to tell new stories about Benin Kingdom, because a lot of the official narratives that we have right now is really coming from museums who have for over 100 years, you know, held these objects and exhibited them for so long. And they've created this narrative around the monarchy, and Benin and how it was looted, right? So how do we shift from these narratives that were created by people who really stole our works and continue to hold it. So I was interested in decomposing this narrative and creating new stories, looking for untold stories and things that have not been talked about in the past or even addressed by museum exhibitions.

I think when I started my project a year ago, it was much more challenging to like access images of Benin Bronzes from museums, right, because they have these copyright laws preventing you from reusing the image if you don't get permission from the museum. But today, like given that a lot of museums are starting to think about how to repatriate these bronzes, we'll see now, there is an open access archive, created by this consortium of German museums where you have over 1000 images, and I think you can reuse them, right. But at the time, when I started, I was really like, hard downloading these objects from museum sites really not getting permission from them. And in a sense, it was kind of like a liberatory practice but also resisting the idea that, you know, a museum who stole an object should also own that digital asset. But one interesting thing for me also at the time, was going back to like early publications, like vintage

publications and auction catalogues that had like the listings of Benin Bronzes, because a lot of these objects were documented when they were stolen, right, that was a way of like commodifying, and monetizing them and selling them to museums. So there are a lot of like old catalogues that I bought from like eBay and Etsy that have like a listing of those images, which I also use and cross reference in my dataset, yeah.

Chao T. Maina 08:24

I remember when I first came across Minne's work, I was so excited and I think Molemo can attest to how excited I was to come across the project, but also to engage with the ways in which she's approaching kind of visualizing absence. But at the same time, all these things that we're talking about, about digital being a kind of freedom, a way to create possibilities, you know, she actually mentioned that this is an exercise in imagination. And the ways in which that is being done in theory, and in practice was very, very interesting. For me, this idea that digital prevents kind of freedom to exist outside the rigidity of actual museums and collections in which we are very used to having certain ways of behaving in museums and around objects. So it's don't touch this, don't do that. And all of a sudden, now we have the opportunity to actually, to play with data, you know, to take it apart, put it back together. And this offer is very much a resistance to the narratives that have been embedded. And also, I think it is a direct challenge to to the fact that the people who own the objects can only control the narrative, you know, and so what happens when we completely shift that lens upside down and do not equate owning or possessing the physical objects to actually possessing or controlling the narrative? And so that freedom for me is a very, very interesting place to be at this point in time and understanding the kind of dynamics and potentials that artificial intelligence offers, and the different ways in which we're structuring that conversation as African practitioners.

Molemo Moiloa 10:18

For sure. And I think that Minne also really points to this dynamic of how long those who took the objects and their descendants have had control over the narrative. Through publication, through academic writing, through exhibitions, a very particular story has been told. And I think that this idea of really exploring and as you say, sort of a reimagination, of what other narratives become possible is a really exciting space to operate from. And the kind of quite experimental strategies of reimagining what pasts could have been, and therefore what like contemporary moment or a future might be, really offers us so much in the space of what object histories can do for us. Even outside of their objective thingness, and that, so much of what's really vital to the restitution project is narrative. And how we tell ourselves a different kind of story.

And I think what Minne is showing is the ways in which the kind of process of restitution and the Benin Bronzes, of course, are probably the most emblematic of restitution in most people's minds now. That that process of restitution, and in particular, the process of the Benin Dialogue Group, because of their restitution, undertakings, working on making digital images of these objects free to access, it's restitution that made that possible, and therefore made Minne's work easier to do in terms of rethinking narrative, in terms of reimagining. And so we see the real implications between the restitution of physical objects, and the possibilities that start to happen in the digital realm. And the kinds of creation that become possible in the space of knowledge making, which is just so vital.

And we will, of course, I think, in the very next episode, after this one, discuss much more around these questions of intellectual property, what it means to, for Africans in particular, to continue to create from this historical material, and how sort of western museums have operated within that kind of framework. But many of the people who are engaging with questions of digital restitution, are very much interested in the kinds of knowledge creation, the ways in which contemporary generations of artists might relate to these art histories. And new work might emerge out of that. So those questions become really vital. But I think that the primary point around what the digital can do for completely reimagining our histories, and our contemporary realities, based on these physical collections is really exciting. And it's certainly some of the questions that Samba and Mulenga who we've already met from the Women's History Museum in Zambia, they've also been asking quite similar questions and doing exciting things with this question of digital restitution.

Samba Yonga 13:27

You know, the digital space is turning banks upside down, it's turning, you know, economies upside down, like why not museums? And so like, that's the direction we were going, like, museums don't have to look like this or function like this. And the objects inside don't have to be like this, or kept like this. There is so much more, there is so much more that you can do with this thing. And I think for for us, thank you very much Europe, you've kept these objects for so long. But once they get back to Africa, we are going to have different ways of having our people access them, use them, monetize them, mainstream them, and, you know, do what, whatever we want with them. You know, for me, the digital age is made for Africa. And you know, we're exploring even embedding NFTs into some of the objects that have, and some of the digital artwork. So we want to see what the possibilities are, the digital possibilities as well, in terms of what a museum can actually do with its objects, with ideas outside those objects, because of those objects.

Molemo Moiloa 14:39

Samba states, the digital age was made for Africa. And I think what so many of these practitioners are doing is pointing to a way of operating that recognizes many of the limitations of the digital in the African continent, issues of access to data, to devices, etc. But also kind of moving forward at the same time, operating at a place that recognizes the possibilities that the digital offers the African continent to address some of its core historical concerns. We're discussing things like NFTs, blockchain technologies, AI, 3D scans. But also, in the previous episode, we were talking about things as simple as WhatsApp groups and WhatsApp conversations as strategies for using the multifaceted-ness of the digital to plug the gaps that have been so wide, historically. And to kind of resolve some of the really burning questions around the kinds of stories we tell ourselves, the kinds of knowledge creation that needs to so urgently be done, due to the lacks of our predecessors in the kind of heritage space, and what becomes possible when we use all of the tools that we have at our disposal, I suppose.

Chao T. Maina 16:01

I definitely think that The Digital was Made for Africa should be a t-shirt somewhere, somehow, because ha ha, I'm very interested in the ways in which you and the rest of

our speakers, as well have really touched on this kind of balance between infrastructure and imagination. And oftentimes, when we talk about Africans and digital disruption, and you know, we're talking about NFTs and blockchain and AI, the first question will always be, but not everyone has access, or you don't have enough internet. And I like that our speakers show that I mean, as much as we have this question, and we're dealing with this question of access, as you said, Molemo, when you're dealing with this question of infrastructure, it does not necessarily determine how far or how less or how how much we can imagine, you know. That is up to us and this balance between what we imagine and what we create as being possible and existing alongside the kind of infrastructure that we have, and speaking to not all audiences, but certain audiences. And that having an impact as well. We've really touched on digital collections, and the ways in which African practitioners are creating them, using them, and processing them. When we started this podcast, Molemo and I were really fascinated by this question around digital restitution, what does it mean to return digital data, or even to restitute digital data in today's age? And there's so many questions. For us, this is an important question, because it's not one that we have answers to. And so we asked our guests, and we'll get more and more insight as we move along the series, what they understand by the term digital restitution, digital repatriation. So we hear from Neema, Samba and Mulenga, Minne and Kọlá on this.

Neema Iyer 18:07

And one thing that I really found very interesting in the NFT space is this real explosion of artists who are interested in showing African culture. And there was a very nice collection that came out by an artist in Ethiopia called Afro Masks, and they had done research on different masks, but then they like made them Afrofuturistic, and they sold out in like, one hour. And for me, that was really exciting. And in that it's a very different way of making people interested in African culture. So is it enough to, you know, take these different artworks and make a digital form? And then, you know, it lives, I don't know where, maybe it lives somewhere within the museum? Or is it more important that you make them super accessible to people in that they can actually interact with, you know, as you said, with, you know, where did the piece come from? Who was given to? What is the story behind that piece? And what is the history behind that piece? I think that that would be very interesting to think about ways. So in the NFT space, there was a, there was a joint collective of a bunch of artists, and they put up their work in a virtual gallery. And so I went to the gallery and I looked at each piece and it just felt so accessible, and it felt really beautiful to see all these artworks. So for me, it would be more important that people can really understand what is the history and that it's accessible to people in an interesting way.

Mulenga Kapwepwe 19:41

So for us, digital repatriation is like a first step of access, for the Zambian people. Because we know that we can easily do that without having to, and we can do it museum to museum, we don't have to go and you know, do whatever government officials have to be done. You can actually make that a project, which is what we have done with the Swedish ethnographic museum. So for us, the whole digital repatriation issue was about one, how do we get our own people to have easiest and quickest

access to these objects, even if it's merely visually for the first step? Secondly, we wanted to avoid all the legal stuff and all that, that is actually kind of hampering the conversation around the physical restitution.

Minne Atairu 20:32

So I'd like to think if it's the return of digital assets that represent looted, stolen cultural objects back to their communities of origin, right, I also like to think of it as this precondition for restitution. So in reference to like, communities whose works have been stolen, like how do you set the parameters around the restitution of a physical objects and make sure that any associated digital material images, 3D files are returned back to you, in addition to the physical objects?

Kọlá Túbọ̀sún 21:06

When we think of restitution, we're talking of reclaiming a space for yourself that has been taken from you. And when I think of the work I do, I find a lot of opportunities to use the technologies that have been brought to us. Most times, we didn't have many roles, a lot of roles in creating and using them to benefit ourselves. Because more times than not, we're just consumers, and you know, these people, they divided the technology on this basis, just come and get our data, get our phone numbers, our photos and everything and then commercialize them and stuff like that. So to me, restitution is you finding ways to use those tools, those same tools, for work that benefits us, the language, the culture, the literature, just ways of being.

Molemo Moiloa 22:12

This podcast is brought to you by Open Restitution Africa, a collaboration between African Digital Heritage and Andani.Africa. The podcast is produced by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa with Phumzile Nombuso Twala and Lethabolaka Gumede on research. Thank you to Josh Chiundiza for the music, Karugu Maina on design, and Annelien Van Heymbeeck on editing.

Chao T. Maina 22:35

The podcast was made possible by 99 Questions at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. This podcast is also available in zine form in French and German at www.openrestitution.africa and www.humboldtforum.org. Thank you for joining us

EPISODE TWO (PART TWO) RESOURCES

Minne Atairu

https://www.minneatairu.com/

Igun AI: https://igun.minneatairu.com/

Benin Dialogue Group

A central objective of the Benin Dialogue Group is to work together to establish a museum in Benin City that will facilitate a permanent display reuniting Benin works of art dispersed in collections around the world.
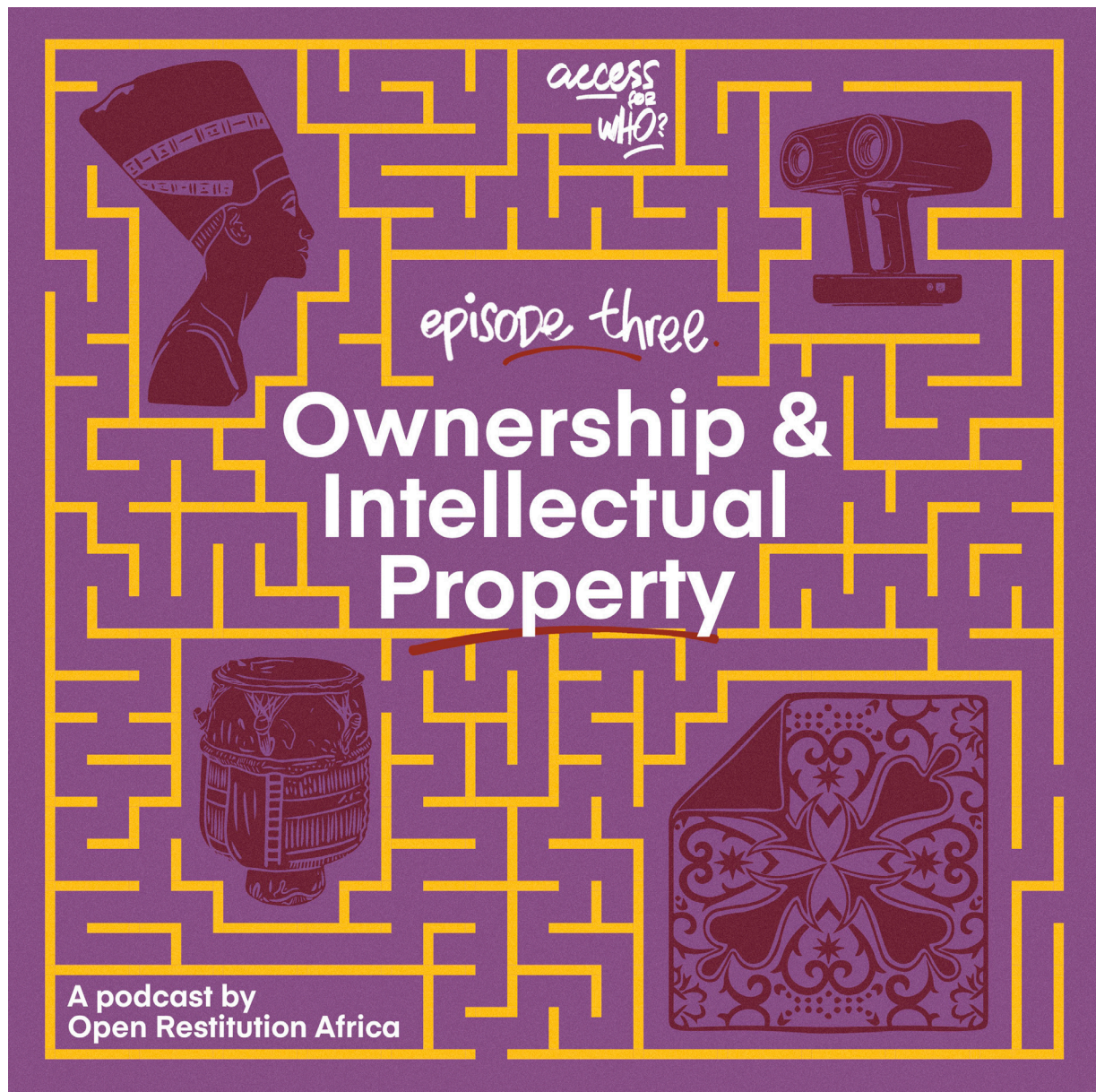
https://markk-hamburg.de/en/benin-dialogue/

Afromask NFTs

A series of artworks that capture reimagined traditional masks of African peoples as futuristic elements.

https://www.instagram.com/afro_masks/

EPISODE THREE

SYNOPSIS

This episode explores the complex and entangled questions around legal ownership of digital collections in the face of already contested physical collections. While Western IP systems are built around individual ownership, indigenous knowledge systems are designed to have communal and collective benefits. What limitations and dangers does this present in the context of mass digitisation? Who has the right to make digital copies in the first place? And how can we imagine legal ownership outside Western oriented frameworks?

SPEAKERS

Nothando Migogo, Molemo Moiloa, Chao T. Maina, Andrea Wallace, Mulenga Kapwepwe

EPISODE THREE

Chao T. Maina 00:00

Hello, everyone, welcome to episode three of the Access for Who? podcast. Today we're going to be talking about ownership. We're going to be delving deeper into questions on intellectual property, copyright, trademark, and everything that we have been discussing, very briefly the in the previous episodes. How did we get here? We've been talking about digital technology, we've been talking about the potential that it has for museums for restitution, and really understanding what different practitioners are doing in the digital space. But at the same time, we're also very aware that the digital world is an entirely new and different universe that people are not really fully understanding of, but at the same time, people are learning and making their way as they go. We ended the last episode by asking practitioners what digital restitution means. And we had very different answers, but all pointing to the idea that ownership is central to the question of digital restitution in as much as it is central to the question of physical restitution. So there's this issue of ownership. And when we talk about ownership, we're talking about the ownership of the objects and the original artefacts or archives or the things that we have, physically. And then there's the ownership of their copies and the digital copies. So who owns the object? Who owns the digital copy? Who has the rights to make copies of the copies? And this really is an intellectual property discussion that has very wide ranging and deep impact on the restitution question. A disclaimer, Molemo and I am not legal experts, one day maybe, but this should not be considered legal advice. As we began, we said that we are exploring this question. And we hope that the insights that you gained from this episode can help you navigate some situations.

Molemo Moiloa 02:30

Yeah, today, we're going hardcore, we're getting deep into the details of some of these really complex questions of particularly restitution and the digital question. And as you say, Chao, I think today's conversation, I'm really excited for it, it's a really complex negotiation of questions of the original, and what it means to have property and ownership of an original, which is the kind of object artefact in the museum, but also then thinking about what it means to have the rights to a copy of that original, which is the digital version of that, and how does that operate? And we speak to some really amazing people to deal with that today. And to really also begin to touch on a vital question, which is often not discussed in restitution conversations, but it's this kind of elephant in the room, around money, money, money, and what restitution has, what it offers to the African continent in terms of a kind of reparation for what's been lost over a long period of time. But also, some of the motivation behind the resistance to restitution also being very much around the kinds of value derived from these objects that these museums hold. And what the implications are of that within the restitution conversation, and the idea of return. So we won't be able to delve into that question deeply. It is a big question. But we will start to discuss that particularly in relation to the question of IP and property.

Chao T. Maina 04:03

We're joined by Dr Andrea Wallace, who is a senior lecturer in law, focusing on the intersections of art and cultural heritage within the digital realm.

Andrea Wallace 04:15

And so one of the things, there's a couple of ways that intellectual property is really important to this process. First is whether or not there's intellectual property in the object that the institution is working with. And so intellectual property can be copyright. It can be a patent, it can be trademark, you know, there's different things that kind of fall under the umbrella of intellectual property. And most often, especially with heritage collections, we're thinking about copyright. Or we're thinking about different types of rights like traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions that have been created to go alongside intellectual property rights, because intellectual property rights are very specific under understanding of exclusivity, they think about someone owning the rights for other people to copy, you know, to recreate, to do things around the object.

And so we have these different kind of moving pieces that we need to think about in relation to the object that's in the institution's collection. And that may actually impact whether or not they can take a photograph of it and what they're able to do with the photograph. Because if that object is protected, they have to think about who owns those rights and who should be consulted in that process. A lot of intellectual property rights do expire, or, you know, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, we have national laws, thinking about how those need to be respected and protected as well. But then, if there are no rights that restrict the institution and what the institution can do with the object, or they don't, you know, encounter or restrict the institution from making a digital image of the work, then we start to think about what rights might exist in the actual digital photograph. So the institution because they've made the photograph, or the photographer, or anyone who's involved in it, may have some rights in the actual digital image. And so those are the sorts of things that also become important when we think about what gets published online.

Nothando Migogo 06:17

Okay, so I'm Nothando Migogo. I'm a copyright and licencing specialist in creative sector, mostly working with music, I've worked with visual arts, literary works, etc. I personally have a keen interest in IKS, and have had the opportunity to make inputs to some of the legal, the legislation put through parliament in South Africa around indigenous knowledge systems, and traditional knowledge and the relationship with intellectual property. Well, so intellectual property is really a system of property ownership, obviously, looking at the intangible types of property. And it comes from a particular philosophy that's very individual-centric. And it balances essentially, an intellectual property balances the individual's rights to the fruits of his or her labor, versus the public interest in having access to the fruits of that labor. And you've got different types of intellectual property; designs, patents, trademarks, copyright. I'll speak more on copyright, because that is my area, specifically.

But I think, you know, when getting into this discussion, one really needs to understand that the essence and the basis of intellectual property is fundamentally different to the approach and the essence of indigenous knowledge. So like I've said, IP, or the different IP really is based or centers around the individual and the individual's rights to owning and having a monopoly, albeit in limited monopoly on the fruits of their labor. In order for copyright to exist, there are a number of elements. There has to be an identifiable creator, like this person is the person who created this thing. Also, there has

to be a date of creation, it has to be material form, for example, and it has to be original. Now, if we look at indigenous knowledge, there is no identifiable creator really, as in a single person or a single entity, it's a people, a community, date of creation unknown. And in the context of types of creative works, like, you know, songs or stories, it's not necessarily always in material form. So someone would have to put it in material form and copyright will exist in that particular copy. So I think, yeah, as a sort of basic introduction.

Molemo Moiloa 08:50

Okay, so there's so much being said here. But I think that the vital point that's really important to get from this is Nothando kind of describes how the western 18th century invention of intellectual property that is protected by the World Intellectual Property Organization, is kind of quite a fixed system that has very particular rules, and that these rules are based on individual, time determined creations. And that it's important to understand that that protection, as Andrea mentions, has an expiry date. So when we think about the actual original objects in the museums under the frameworks of intellectual property systems, that currently govern us, they are not actually protected, because of the various reasons that Andrea and Nothanndo have discussed. And so the original objects in museums are not generally under the usual kind of frameworks of intellectual property, they're not protected. What does become the question then, is the digital replicas, whether they're images or 3D scans, those are then new creations of the originals, and so the questions of rights of copy and who owns what and the kind of new creations, those questions emerge as we make copies of the originals, and we'll discuss those questions little bit more.

Chao T. Maina 10:17

What's really interesting about what has come out from Nothando and Andrea is this concept of intellectual property is essentially a western concept of property ownership, right. And the whole idea behind IP is centred around the rights of an individual who has created or produced a certain thing. So what happens if material or culture, both in tangible and intangible form is not necessarily attributed to an individual as in many African communities, it is attributed to the community and the society at large. So we begin to have this kind of confluence of legal system or legal framework that is not designed for our traditions, our societies and our cultures, being copied and pasted over this kind of idea and Molemo, you and I have talked about it, that this in itself is a very, very big violence. The ways in which we can reduce everything that our society has created, and place it within the framework of an entirely different way of living, an entirely different society, and then be forced to kind of comply with that. And this is this is very interesting in this discussion, because then we begin this question of who has the right to digitize, you know, if you don't own the original copy, you don't own the original objects. Do you have a right to digitize it? Do you then also have rights to the digital image that you didn't own in the first place? And can you prevent people from taking photographs or accessing the images when the original object is not yours to begin with, right?

Molemo Moiloa 12:05

I think there's also a fundamental question of like, if intellectual property law covers you say, for 50 years of original invention, and that object is then taken from you, and you don't actually have it in your possession. Because it was, say stolen, when does the 50 years start? Like, how does that work as well? There's a lot of questions that emerge. And I think Nothando already starts to delve into some of the really fascinating work that's being done from around the world around, okay, there are a whole lot of systems that don't fit into this existing sort of intellectual property framework, how do we address that.

Nothando Migogo 12:48

Whereas with indigenous knowledge, it's very community-centric, and communal and more than the individual's interest, the public or the community's interest is paramount. And usually, this indigenous knowledge or also referred to as traditional knowledge, like in the WIPO environment, is usually tied to the essence of that community, whether it's, you know, the spirituality of that community or the identity. So that's sort of from a broad perspective, the difference between the two systems. And then if you sort of zoned into copyright, for example, very similar with the other types of intellectual property, but like I said, I'll kind of talk to copyright. I mean, if I can just talk to that, there are two schools of thought, right. There is the one school of thought that really says we must, because the intellectual property system is established, it's recognized, it's respected, and ultimately it runs, it runs the world. I mean, the economy is ultimately run on IP, right? So what we need to do is make sure that we take our indigenous knowledge and fit it into that system. It has to fit, because then it will get the maximum protection. And, yeah, and that is one school of thought, and I'll talk about it a bit when we speak about the South African experience. You know, when we were going through that, and we still are going through it, but there was a time, there was a particular piece of legislation that was being debated. And this was, you know, really high on the agenda as to can you really fit, I remember there was a quote by one of the academics around this saying, but can you really fit a square peg into a round hole? IKS being the square peg, the IP system being the round hole.

Andrea Wallace 14:38

As opposed to when we think about an image of an object and thinking about that image within the same kind of system? If the object that we're thinking about, of course doesn't come from like the copyright system and the copyright mentality and how things are made, then those rights can actually be a bit inappropriate in how they get applied to the digital work. So for example, with all the Benin Bronzes, you can go online and you can search and you can find all kinds of images that say copyright trustees of the X museum or copyright this museum. And just on its face, there's a bit of a kind of a confrontation, you know, that the viewer might look at that and say, wait, hold on, I have to go to this institution for permission to use this, but who does this work actually belong to? And when we start to think about restitution, those are the questions. It is the questions of who the actual object belongs to, who the rights belong to that are associated with those works, who should even be making the decision about how to digitize it, whether to digitize it, whether to claim rights in all of those digital images. But because digitization is such like a thing that's so embedded as something that's normal, we don't necessarily ask those questions at the point of digitization. And one of the things that my colleague Mathilde Pavis and I have been

working on a lot is really trying to like say digitization is not neutral, depending on where something is digitized and the country where it sits, all of the rights of that law, of that country are going to attach to the digital materials, and they're going to prevent people from accessing it, they're going to enable people to commercialize it. It's a whole other layer and form of knowledge and wealth extraction, that we really need to be conscious about when we're thinking about restitution and digital restitution.

Molemo Moiloa 16:42

So we know that there is work being done to try and reimagine intellectual property from the perspective of indigenous knowledge systems, and that this needs to be something completely different. And that there's this real challenge of, as Nothando says, putting a square peg in a round hole. But we also know that as museums are digitizing, even in the space of this conversation around trying to address indigenous knowledge systems, museums are going ahead with digitizing. And anything that's been digitized fits within the existing law that we know doesn't work. And regardless of the museum's intentions, if you're digitizing, you're creating new things within the law framework of that country. And that law framework is kind of internationally agreed and all powerful, and you can't necessarily sort of apply other systems that aren't within your own legal framework in your European country where you are digitizing.

Chao T. Maina 17:38

So, you know, I kind of get this very deep sense of fear that all this digitization is actually creating a much more different form of complexity that will essentially end up disenfranchising and not being of benefit to the communities of origin and the source communities where these objects come from. Molemo, you and I have talked about several times in this podcast, but also in different panels around the dangers of this kind of mass digitization, and we're talking about hundreds of 1000s of objects. These are the objects themselves. Now we imagine that each of these objects has its own kind of copyright complexity, intellectual property complexity, right. And we're digitizing en masse, we're digitizing, you know, quantity, quantity first. So what does it mean that we're creating this kind of loopholes in a very massive scale? When it comes to intellectual property the other thing that has been floated or is used to kind of push back against individual ownership is open access licencing and open access frameworks. By open access, we're meaning that data is free to access, it's free to use and it's freely distributed, which is also a kind of western approach to looking at data. What does it mean when objects are taken from the community and then you decide that, okay, now we want to make it free for everyone, when the community themselves have not had part of the decision making. And so Andrea takes us into what this actually looks like.

Andrea Wallace 19:35

So of course, you know, in the past two decades, we've seen cultural institutions go from taking digital images of the objects that are in their collections, and using those internally for, you know, thinking about their cataloguing system and how different staff can access and view things that may be in storage to starting to publish that and material online, so that the public can see what are in collections, but also so that the public can reuse some of the stuff that's in collections too. And so that's really kind of what's happening with the open access movement. There's a lot of important impacts

that are coming from it around transparency, about what's actually in the institution. But there's also a lot of important questions when we think about what sorts of permissions are placed around the digital, you know, photographs and the data and the things that institutions publish online. Because it can allow the public to do some really amazing and incredible things, where we're taking the digital stuff that's made available by one institution, and linking it and connecting it with the digital stuff that's made available by another institution.

So in that way, we can ask different questions across collections that we're not able to do without that digital material, and without having access to it. And I'm a huge open access advocate. But it really does come down to the decision and who makes the decision around that. And so that's another thing that, you know, Mathilde and I were trying to point out is that even the the decision to make something open access, or to waive rights should really be made by the people who hold the rights and the objects. And so we were trying to, you know, bring a little bit more light to this very short paragraph or two around kind of this world of open access that was possible. Because, you know, there's even questions about how people digitize and how objects are represented, they're still presented as if they are like specimens, you know, there's a very kind of object focused way of viewing the image through the camera, which is another form of capture, that also then controls how we read and we view and we see the work that is captured in the actual digital image.

And so I think, you know, there are some ways that that can shut down future creativity, some ways that that can make us read a work and the knowledge and the information and the stuff that surrounds it in a very culturally specific way as well. And so we also were trying to point out, there are other ways to digitize, there are other ways to reproduce, there are other ways to think about what a "copy" is, and how that copy can carry knowledge and information out into the world. And those sorts of things should be done by the people who are associated with the objects too. So I think there are, you know, there's some moving pieces, and there are some, you know, different things, it's more about, like being able to hold all of these things in our mind at once. So that we can kind of see the impact that this like rush to digitization and making everything available, open access, kind of shuts out, you. So it is about the decisions, it's about the ownership, but it's also about the potential of open access, and what it could be, if we push back against all of the habits and the things you know, that have, have directed it of late, which of course, are related to resources and who has possession of the works. And then we start to walk back from that, because those seem like obvious examples. But there could be objects that have a spirithood of personhood, a ceremonial purpose, that also shouldn't be digitized. And when you think about the people who possess the works, and whether they're the best people to be making those decisions, because they don't have that insight or that knowledge, we then start to think about the different questions that arise around that recommendation to digitize everything before we send it back.

But even with respect to making stuff available, open access, and even making all of those digital images available in the public domain for anyone to reuse for whatever purpose, you know, there's a few different issues that come from there. And one is that, you know, for years, the institutions in possession have been able to commercialize the works and make money from them. So by putting copies of images out into the public

domain, where no one has to pay for them anymore, and no one has to reuse them, it's essentially removing that revenue source from the institutions that could potentially do that going forward once the objects are returned to them. And that is a question, you know, I think that's really complex. And I'm a huge open access advocate. But it really does come down to the decision and who makes the decision around that.

Molemo Moiloa 24:23

So Andrea is saying so much here that is really, really vital around museums' choices to go open access as a very positive approach to recognizing their role as a public good, but of course, there are still questions here. And a really good example of this is the project called The Other Nefertiti which was a really interesting art project, a release of a 3D scan of a bust of Nefertiti, which is based in the Neues Museum in Berlin, Germany, by artists, Nora Al-Badri and a colleague of hers whose name now escapes me, sorry. And this 3D scan was released and it caused quite a bit of controversy at the time. But the really interesting process that then for for our context that emerges afterwards is the museum is pressured by another artist to then release their version of the Nefertiti, their 3D scan. And through legal systems, they are forced to then release their 3D scan. And when the museum releases their 3D scans, they have digitally engraved a Creative Commons license into their 3D scan. And so they released this 3D scan with this license and this raises a lot of questions.

The first question, of course, is that they didn't release the 3D scan to begin with, and they were forced to release the scan. And so this Creative Commons license is only being put out, because they've been forced to put this out, right, which tells you that the initial intention around the scan was certainly not open access. The second thing that's really complex about this engraved license is the fact that there's actually, it's not fully clear, because 3D scans and what they mean and intellectual property are still a new space. But in principle, this object is not under copyright, because it's so old. And the 3D scan of it is actually an exact replica. And an exact replica is not a new work, and therefore doesn't necessarily have new copyrights on it. And so in principle, the museum doesn't actually have the right to make a claim of a new work on that 3D scan, and therefore doesn't have the right to put a Creative Commons license on it. I hope you're still with me. The third thing that's, of course, really interesting about this, which Andrea points to, is a kind of public knowledge of a formal claim on this Nefertiti, by Egypt to get it back. And so in principle, it's under kind of restitution cloud. And so this 3D scan, and this licence on this 3D scan is also a claim of a kind of right to determine the use of this 3D scan by a museum whose rights to that object are currently under question, right. And as Andrea says, when this object is returned, the rights to how it is used have already been predetermined, in the process of engraving this license under it by the people who don't own it, and therefore, the Egyptians would have to go through a much more complex process to redefine how this should be used. And I think that this is a really interesting example of also the ways in which museums can weaponize the idea of open access as a strategy that undermines some of the

questions of ownership and restitution that exist within the museum world and this relationship between African restitution claims and museum practice.

Chao T. Maina 28:12

The Nefertiti discussion, essentially, and all the kinds of dynamics that went into the reproduction of the Nefertiti bust, around ownership, around what happens when we return things, and essentially around, you know, the frameworks that are being set by museums when there is a kind of restitution contention on the table. And we know that museums are under a lot of pressure to digitize objects, artefacts, archives. I work with museums, training museums, to digitize their artefacts and one of the most common things that people say is that we feel we're getting left behind. So trust me museum digitization pressure is very real. But at the same time, there's also very little consideration going on, on the ethics of digitization, the ownership of digital reproduction, the rights of communities, who, who gets to say whether an object should be digitized or not. And we are essentially creating more complexities, as we have said in the beginning than we're solving. And so the question for us at this point is what are the practical steps? What do we need to do to fix this and what can we, how can we mitigate the kind of damage that is already happening at a very, very rapid rate?

Nothando Migogo 29:37

Yeah, so sui generis is unique and specific to itself, like its own genre of law, if you want to put it like that. So it's sui generis, and that one says that we can't fit IKS or indigenous knowledge or traditional knowledge protection into any existing legal framework, into the IP framework, we have to create an entirely unique framework. And I think that's really the school of thought that's at the forefront. And I think I subscribe to that as well, for one main reason. And it goes back to the difference in the two systems, right, is that intellectual property is ultimately there to create this limited monopoly for the individual, right? It's there to to capitalize on a particular creation. Whereas I believe that the system that IKS needs the first, the primary, yes, we obviously have to have beneficiation ability for the communities to benefit. But ultimately, the main concern is to preserve and protect for the benefit of the collective. That's a different spirit that the laws, or the systems, have different spirits.

Andrea Wallace 30:52

There have been examples where, for example, the Smithsonian has worked with communities to make sure that the reproduction process really does honor the work and the community ideals. And then the original is given back to the community while the reproduction is held by the museum. And that's happened in a few different instances. And so I think there's like a range of things that can kind of happen around here. But one of the things we really need to prepare ourselves for, and I think that it's fair around digital restitution is the host institution completely withdrawing any sort of claim or ownership or possession of physical and digital materials. And that should relate to the archival materials, the associated materials, all of these things that have been generated in the course of possession, that relate to the object that relate to the collection. Because you know, if the community of origin says we want everything back, and we would like for you to withdraw, any claim ownership, all the material, that is entirely appropriate, you know, and so I think often, some institutions start to think, oh, god, oh, no, we won't be able to study, we won't be able to do these things. And those

are really important feelings, that people who are having them for the first time should kind of slow down and think about, and let resonate, in terms of who should be feeling those with respect to that sort of bits of the collections themselves.

I don't know how else to say this. But yeah, I think it's totally appropriate that we include absolute withdrawal of all materials, digital and physical that can be in an institution as a potential outcome for digital restitution. But we have to start thinking about things outside of this kind of binary copyright and public domain system. You know, we need to start thinking about ways to even limit digital access to the people for whom it's most appropriate, or thinking about different forms of labels and licenses to communicate the appropriateness of the reuse on the front end. So there's been work by Kim Christen, Jane Anderson, around you know, local contexts. And there's another project that's called ENRICH that's looking about data sovereignty. But these are asking these really important questions around how do we enable reuse according to the complexity of the material itself, rather than this idea of ownership and exclusivity and being able to commercialize. Because so often, you know, that's not the goal of trying to make these things available. It's more about how do we educate? How do we contextualize? How do we protect the person rather than the rights holder? And it's a really important question when we're thinking about, you know, the potential of computational processing and the digital divide. Because right now, all of that power is also held in places that have benefited from wealth transfer from colonization. And so those sorts of technologies and the availability of them are shaping that area as well, and how we think about what's possible, you know, with computers and technology. I mean, you know, that's not an absolute statement by any means. But there's a lot of commercial value, or I wouldn't say value, but commercial desires that are being embedded in that that yeah, we should really kind of slow down and be hesitant to allow. Yeah.

Molemo Moiloa 34:27

There is also a vital point coming out of what Andrea is discussing here around these really interesting processes of working with communities to ensure that their interests and wishes are respected in digitization processes. But there's also an additional question about okay, but what is the value to these communities? What are these communities really getting from this process? And value is an important question in the intellectual property conversation around restitution, particularly of digital copies. Partly because coming back to our dear Nefertiti story at the Neues Museum. To this day, the Neues Museum sells replicas, physical replicas, but these physical replicas are made from that exact same 3D scan. And they're sold for 1000s and 1000s of euros (we'll include the link in the notes to this podcast). And that really points to the kinds of value that are emerging out of these objects and the kinds of value that come also from their copies. And this is a discussion that we don't really have in the restitution space very much, because we like to think of restitution being an issue of like public good, but people are making money from this. And people have made money from this for a very long time. And there is, of course, this really important question about the fact that Africa has been robbed of its value, and what is the potential of a return of value when these objects are returned.

Chao T. Maina 35:54

And it's very telling also in the ways in which we ascribe the value as you're saying, because we have a cultural value, spiritual value, when it comes to from an African

perspective, those are the kind of things that we are seen to, to care more about. But what we're not really talking about is the violence around the economic value that western museums are making, from creating high resolution digital reproductions, and selling them as souvenirs, online, etc. And what we are hearing from African practitioners is that the whole digitization process is really an engagement with the object and with the people. And when you begin to ask these questions with communities, then you can be able to establish ethical ways of creating this value, especially financial and economic value, and bringing in new audiences into the space to think about using this digital reproduction, using the digitized objects in ways that respond both to, you know, social value, spiritual value, etc. So Samba and Mulenga from the Women's History Museum have spoken to us at length about working with communities. What's interesting about their approach is that they're also using digitization as a way to pivot and engage young artists, young audiences with the digitized data, inviting these audiences and artists to create essentially new derivatives of the digital work inspired by the digital data. And by digital data I'm talking about digitized historical collections. So we hear about this briefly now from Mulenga.

Mulenga Kapwepwe 37:42

Okay, okay, so my name is Mulenga, that's really, I mean, the whole thing of ownership is really a very interesting space. There's two issues. There's the, you know, when you create something from something else, say it's a song, and then you do your own version, you own the rights to that new version. Yeah? So we're kind of exploring along those lines for the individual users. If you create something new from an object, that new idea, is your idea, so you can copyright it. Secondly, if you create that new idea, because you have been paid say by the Women's History Museum, that's a commissioned, it's a commissioned activity. So then we can have a discussion around who owns what there, and uses and all that kind of stuff. So that's a different layer, as well, that we understand we have to, you know, explore. But we're certainly exploring it along the same lines as any kind of copyright when you produce an original, a new thing from an old version, if you want. So that, you know, there's there are those two layers of things that we're exploring right now. And we're having conversations around that. And it's very, very interesting. Very interesting. We don't know where it will land, but I think it's necessary to have a conversation.

Andrea Wallace 39:11

And one thing I didn't even mention is also copyright as a selector and something that carries its own bias because, you know, when digitization and even mass digitization have really started to take off, people were thinking, oh, we can really make money off of our collection. And so just that desire embedded a commercial value, a viability selection process, into the decision of what to digitize and what not to digitize, which re-canonizes a lot of stuff, because that's the stuff that's going to generate money. So there's, and then when we think about open access, a lot of times people are like, okay, well let's take the collections that we do have and make those available online. So then when we think about what has been digitized and what's popular, and you know what has made into digital form, copyright is something that made a big impact on what we have in digital form in order to be released. And now that there's no copyright on what's released, people can do whatever they want with it, which then creates these algorithms. And these, you know, these bigger things that think that those are the things of value.

Nothando Migogo 40:19

No and I think that that probably will be the case in many instances, you know, because now that, you know, restitution is, and hopefully the full legal frameworks at an international level and at national level will, will really, you know, come to pass whether it's sui generis, or they managed to put in the IP system, we, it'll, we'll have to look back. Because there's been a lot of benefitting that's been happening to the exclusion of the communities. And then what needs to happen is full disclosure, of what commercial financial benefits, you know, have happened, you know, or how people, how the different, the new, the acquirer has benefited. And then there has to be a benefit sharing agreement. Because if you look at, for example, the South African context, and it's not only the South African context, when is the derivative work created? So if there's a new, I think there was that example that you gave in the in an email around the Louis Vuitton blankets. And that's also a very layered question, which we must also touch on. But in that situation, if we were to assume that the Seanamarena blankets fully belong to the Basotho people, right, what needs to happen is that there are four elements so that so the Louis Vuitton blankets would be derivative works. And before you can create a derivative work, there are four main things, you need full and proper, prior informed consent. So that comes from the community, right. And that means it's obtained free from any manipulation, interference and coercion.

This is the point that Molemo was talking about earlier that, you know, these things are bought, but like, are they really that free trade? No. Number two, there has to be full disclosure of the indigenous cultural expressions, artefacts or knowledge to be used. Number three, there has to be a benefit sharing agreement. So basically a licensing. And that's where the commonalities with the IP system come in that no, you are licensing this use. So there has to be a benefit sharing agreement. And then fourthly, there has to be community participation. So adherence to any protocols that the community have developed with regards to the commercialization or use of their work. So this is definitely forward looking. But if you take this as a framework, when we look at restitution and saying, okay, we're now taking these, the Benin Bronzes, back, or anything, any other artefact between this moment where they're coming back home, and the last 500 years or 200 years, however, whatever the time period is, what are the benefits that have accrued to the entities that we're getting these things back from, and then there has to be a payment. There has to be commercial value that is then shared with the original community over and above, bringing that back, if we follow the IK legal frameworks, that's what would happen.

Molemo Moiloa 43:26

I must say, hearing Nothando speak this way about the potentials of indigenous knowledge system legal frameworks, and the ways in which they protect communities of origin makes what feels like a disaster feel a lot more possible, and a lot more doable. And even sort of listening to Andrea you know, these legal minds, there are systems and frameworks that, there are solutions, we could be doing this better, I think. And maybe just to give a quick caveat that Nothando was really responding to the Seanamarena blankets, which are blankets from Lesotho and you might know them, they were used in the Black Panther film, they were the kind of forcefield shields. And the reason we discussed those blankets was in response to this question of the ways in which African cultures continue to be tested, thieved, even beyond the objects that are in museum. And she did actually mention that the Seanamarena blankets have a much

more complex history that isn't kind of cut and dry indigenous knowledge systems, from listening to, and it was an interesting example because it reflects on the sense that so much has been taken from the continent, but also that much of the continent's cultural production, now lives in this kind of strange, multifaceted space between the continent and what we share with so much of the rest of the world. And, I mean, Chao, you would know this every couple of years there's a kind of furore about another stolen thing from the continent, whether injera from Ethiopia, or the mbira from Zimbabwe, all these kinds of things that have been copyrighted in other parts of the world. Hakuna Matata... exactly, and Disney, there's a very specific reason that there's this kind of paranoia around things being taken. And   a very clear recognition of what we lose, when that happens, and what communities of origins lose when that happens. And Nothando's response, I think is so refreshing in relation to that.

Chao T. Maina 45:37

Black Twitter, African Twitter has done a lot to protect, kind of the cultural expressions, especially in light of Louis Vuitton blankets, kikois, kiondos, and things that the public is very sensitive and attuned to the kinds of dangers in which our cultures and our traditional expressions are being appropriated. But also are financially viable in different countries with no benefit whatsoever to the countries and the people in the communities that they're from. As opposed to actually ending this episode in a very, like low and bleak note, we've been talking about digital restitution, and what it means, you know, what are people doing? What are they saying? How do they perceive it? But one of the things that we wanted to talk about as we end this episode is to really push back very categorically and very clearly, against the notion that digital restitution is a replacement for physical restitution in itself. It's interesting that people even begin to think that you could just give back a digital copy of an object or an artefact, and the communities should be pleased with it. There's a Pokomo, Pokomo is a community here in Kenya towards the coast and there's a drum that was taken from them in the early 1900s. Now, this drum was very sacred to the community itself. And I was watching a documentary of this drum, which is currently in the basement of the British Museum. It's called the Ngadji drum. And someone actually commented, I don't understand why they cannot record that drum being played and like WhatsApp it back to the community. So I mean, really? Could you imagine? This like, spiritual object that is so central to a community's life and someone is like, just play the drum in the British Museum basement, record it on WhatsApp and just like, send the sound back? You know? So we're talking about this in jest. But this is a perspective that people actually stick to and it's very dangerous and patronizing in a sense that we are seeing digital restitution as a replacement, but not as facilitating physical restitution in itself.

Molemo Moiloa 48:05

Absolutely. And I think that you know, Africans have very viscerally and like, ethically responded against the idea that digital restitution replaces physical restitution. But

in having this conversation with these incredible minds, like Andrea and Nothando, it becomes so clear that the whole precept of the one replacing the other is legally illogical, right, that the idea that European would make a WhatsApp recording, which then belongs to the European because they made it, right. And then it can be returned back to us! It's just like, it's clearly unfathomable. It's impossible to think that instead of getting, instead of Africans getting back what they made, Europeans will make something new out of what they took, and return that back to Africans.

Chao T. Maina 49:04

As a gift or as a sign of benevolence in itself. And so what is the intention of all this digital work that we're doing and we pose this to you as listeners, as museum practitioners? What is the intention of the digital work and digitization and accessing this data, when we still have all these underlying issues, you know, and what are the ethics behind it essentially?

Molemo Moiloa 49:30

Big question.

Chao T. Maina 49:32

Can you imagine like WhatsApping this man who is like in his 90s and saying, you remember the drum that was stolen from you when you were a kid? Here's the sound. This is what you get back.

Molemo Moiloa 49:47

Because this is what you need. Some tinny sound coming out of your phone.

Chao T. Maina 49:52

That's been compressed because, you know, it's not even the highest...

Molemo Moiloa 49:57

And it's more important that it's in my basement. Much more important that it's in my basement. I need it in my basement!

Chao T. Maina 50:04

And I see it even though I don't know how to use it.

Molemo Moiloa 50:09

Oh my goodness, goodness gracious. This podcast is brought to you by Open Restitution Africa, a collaboration between African Digital Heritage and Andani.Africa. The podcast is produced by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa with Phumzile Nombuso Twala and Lethabolaka Gumede on research. Thank you to Josh Chiundiza for the music, Karugu Maina on design, and Annelien Van Heymbeeck on editing.

Chao T. Maina 50:39

The podcast was made possible by 99 Questions at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. This podcast is also available in zine form in French and German at www.openrestitution.africa and www.humboldtforum.org. Thank you for joining us.

EPISODE THREE RESOURCES

The Other Nefertiti

Talk by one of the artists: https://vimeo.com/239598613

Article by Hyperallergic (free): https://hyperallergic.com/647998/what-the-nefertiti-hack-tells-us-about-digital-colonialism/

Nefertiti copies for sale

Neues Museums sells copies of the Nefertiti for 8900€ (as of 25 June 2022) https://www.gipsformerei-katalog.de/sammlungsgebiete/aegypten/2751/nofretete

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https://creativecommons.org/

Seana Marena Blankets

The Seanamarena brand is the original form of all 'Basotho blankets'. This brand dates back to the 1930's when it was created by the late Mr Charles Hendry Robertson who owned a trading store in Leribe called Seanamarena. The word 'Seanamarena' means 'to swear by the Chiefs'. The Collection features the famous Poone design with its corncob motif. In Basotho culture the corncob is a symbol of fertility and wealth. The Chromatic design derives its name from its creator's initials C.H.R. https://www.aranda.co.za/products/seanamarena-chromatic

Louis Vuitton: https://www.enca.com/life/cultural-appropriation-or-appreciation-louis-vuitton-turns-basotho-blankets-into-expensive

Injera

Injera is a sour fermented flatbread with a slightly spongy texture, traditionally made of teff flour. In Ethiopia, Eritrea, and some parts of Sudan, injera is the staple; also eaten in other countries in East Africa, injera is central to the dining process, like bread or rice elsewhere.

Theft of IP and battle to get it back: https://qz.com/africa/1545111/ethiopias-teff-flour-is-no-longer-patented-as-a-dutch-invention/
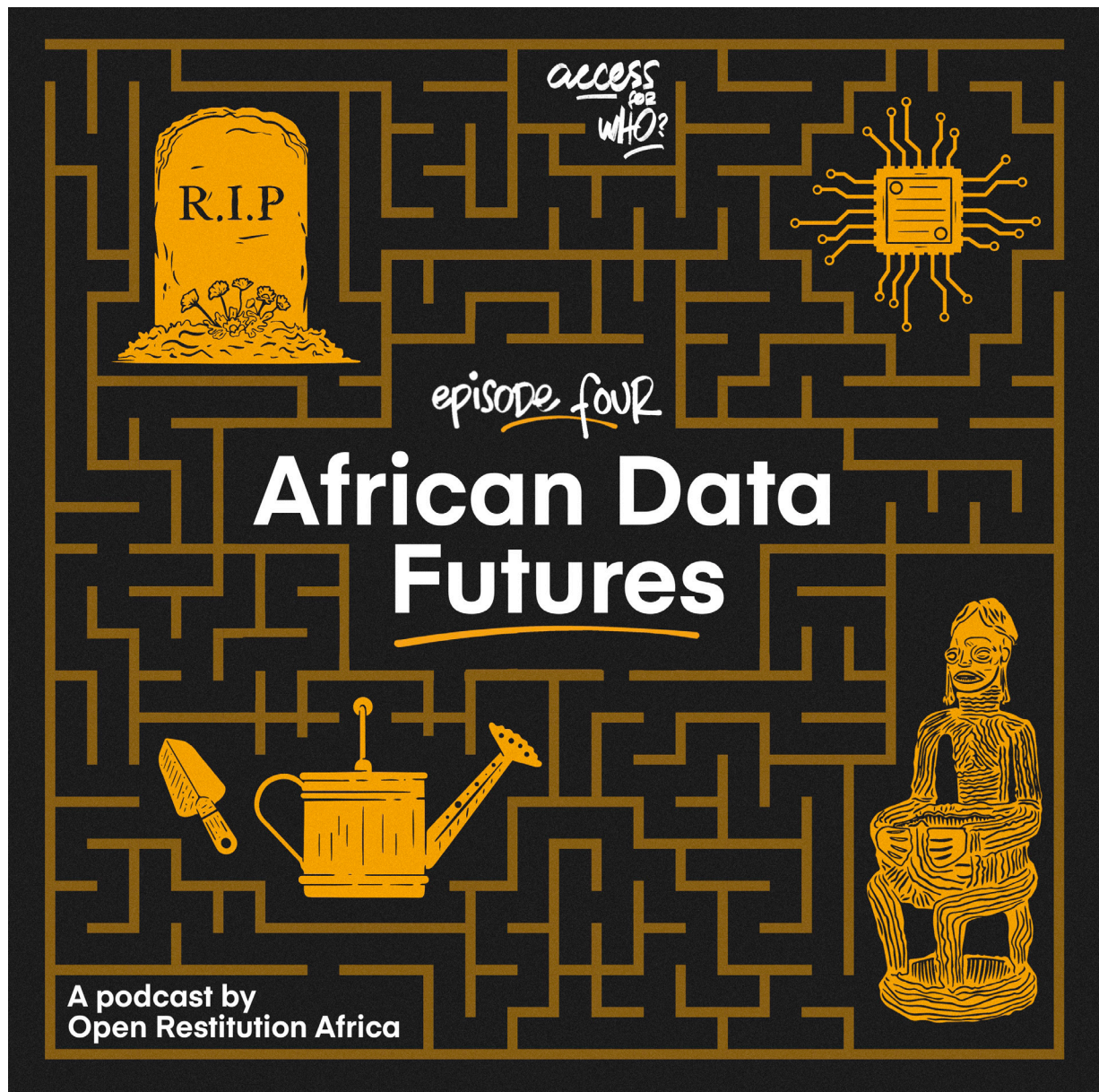
Hakuna Matata

Disney trademark: https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/12/14/676703629/swahili-speakers-horrified-by-disneys-trademark-of-hakuna-matata?t=1656168887880

Ngadji drum

The Ngadji is a drum belonging to the Pokomo community of Kenya. Once hidden in sacred places within forests by elders of this community, the drum played a central role in the community's way of life. It was once revered as Pokomo's center of sovereign power. The Ngadji was stolen by British colonial officers in the early 1900's and is now kept in storage at the British Museum.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/09/kenyas-pokomo-people-ask-british-return-what-was-stolen-their-source-power/

EPISODE FOUR

SYNOPSIS

As we move towards the end of the series we ask - How can we build sustainable digital infrastructure that is people centered and Africa centered? We reflect on indgenous data sovereignty, data stewardship and creative strategies towards collective care for digital data. Positing that digital collections are not a point of reversal to an idealized past but rather a point of departure towards a collectively imagined future.

SPEAKERS

Angela Okune, Temi Odumosu, Minne Atairu, Andrea Wallace, Molemo Moiloa, Neema Iyer, Chao T. Maina

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EPISODE FOUR

Molemo Moiloa 00:26

Welcome, everyone to the final episode of the Access for Who? podcast. It's Molemo here and I'm joined by Chao. And we are at the final point of our kind of exploration into this question of digital restitution. We have over the past couple of episodes, really tried to track a kind of exploration of the nature of the digital within the African context, and in relation to African memory, African heritage, and the question of restitution. And we have spoken to a lot of really great people who are doing exciting work to try and work through some of these questions, including testing out strategies for thinking through digital restitution, at a practical level, in terms of working with communities, but also in terms of thinking through questions of rights and ownership at all its different levels. And we've also done a bit of a whirlwind tour of kind of museum practice and museum collections and digitization of collections as well. And so today, as the kind of final session, we're looking forward, we're looking to the future, and thinking about what might be the kind of infrastructures of our African data futures. And the idea is really to think through the forms and frameworks that are available to us to move forward in this way. And in a sense, we've already covered some of these topics already in our conversations with Kọlá, with Neema, some of the kind of imagining that's already happening by a lot of other practitioners such as the Women's History Museum in Zambia. But today, we'll just sort of buckle down and kind of try and think through how we might learn from all these different projects to create a framework that could really work for the future.

Chao T. Maina 02:16

Absolutely. Thank you, Molemo. It's so interesting, because we have covered a lot, like a lot, just hearing you speak. And I myself, despite being there, through all the episodes, I'm like wow, that is a lot of data. And that's a lot of themes that we've covered. But it's been a really amazing journey. And as you've said, in this episode, we're looking at African data futures, and the infrastructures that frame the work that we're doing now, but also that will continue to frame the work that we're producing. So we're generating all this data, we are digitizing, we're putting collections online. And at the same time, all these activities exist within certain frameworks, certain standards. And these frameworks, in essence, really determine how this data is used, as we saw in the copyright, and in the legal framework episode, that we're still working in systems that govern data production. And so this episode is not so much about museum practice, specifically, but rather, practices around data and data production as a whole. Data is not created in a vacuum. You know, when we talk about infrastructure, we're not just talking about server equipment, we are talking about people, we are talking about, you know, the artefacts we're talking about the different ways in which all these components that come together to bring this data to life interact with each other. And for data to have meaning at the core of it, it has to be related to people in one way or another. For you and I Molemo, we have gone through very many variations of this, even as we are collecting data on African restitution in a way, still making sure, or we keep bringing ourselves back to the point of well, but

who is involved in restitution? Who are the parties who are engaging in this discussion? And it really speaks to that kind of people slash make data intersection, you know. We start off with Angela Okune who is a scholar and a researcher who specializes in data infrastructure.

Angela Okune 04:33

Thank you so much for inviting me. I am in the final days of finishing up my PhD. I'm in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. So infrastructures, right, are kind of, I think the general understanding is the systems that kind of enable the circulation of whether it's goods or knowledge or meaning, people, power, you know, I think it really is the kind of basis of movement for all of these things. And here again, I'm drawing on kind of the social studies of science and technology to really think about infrastructure, not just as you know, most people think of bridges, most people think of these kind of big infrastructure projects that we're so used to. But I also add a layer of the social to understand infrastructure as something that requires the people in practice, as well, right. So it's shaped by the people as well as shaping people.

Chao T. Maina 05:22

So Angela speaks to this idea of adding a layer of social, of the social to understand infrastructure, and to better understand data. This reminds us of Neema Iyer's work, you'll remember from episode one. And today, she shares the practical ways in which the connections between data and people, between people understanding and remembering and visualizing data are being implemented in Uganda.

Neema Iyer 05:51

For us, I thought it was very interesting to try to think and present data in a different way than, because if you just walked up to someone on the street and showed them some chart, you know, indicating, you know, something is going up, something is going down, I think a lot of people would struggle to really interpret what you're telling them. And for me, it was really important to make it accessible, that is really what guides all my work, is making information accessible, because I understand how jargony tech can be. So if you went into a community and you started talking about algorithms, algorithms... can't even say it haha, algorithmic bias, and surveillance and digital identity and encryption, like all these words are so big, there's so like, what does it actually mean?

So one thing that I'm interested in researching right now is this concept, it's quite new to me as well, but it's a concept of data stewardship, or data trusts or data collaborators or data commons. So it's thinking about different ways in which we bring our data together and in which we benefit from that data. And I'm very curious of like thinking, what does that look like in the African continent? So for example, if there's several organizations working on digital restitution, and everyone has some kind of data, then how would you pool all that different data in one place? How would you decide how you govern that data? How would you decide how you share it? How people can donate to it, how you can get profits from it? So I think it's an interesting concept. And it's something that I'm very interested in, in looking at and trying to see, like, what are different African values that could also support this kind of a model? But also, I mean, even thinking about African values, like, values are not set in stone, right? So it can also be like, how

do we decide what our values will be, as well? So I think it's a very interesting space, and something that needs a lot more thought and work and working with very different stakeholders to kind of imagine what that could look like.

Molemo Moiloa 07:56

In a previous episode, we touched on this question of ownership of data as it relates to IP, and particularly sort of discussed with Nothando these questions of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural strategies for thinking through ideas of IP. And Neema brings a really interesting positionality to this when talking about data stewardship, and kind of collective ownership of forms of data and a responsibility towards how that data is governed and shared, which is really exciting to hear from her and I think really speaks to how we might start to use strategies from own contexts, as we kind of first intimated in the first episode. To begin to think about other ways of dealing with digital restitution and digital data in relation to restitution in the first instance, but of course, I think, really points to other contexts as well.

Chao T. Maina 08:55

I remember when we were talking about the kind of ways in which the digital is magic in that it exists everywhere and nowhere at all. But this speaks really to what Neema is saying around ownership and a responsibility for caring towards data, really brings us closer to an understanding of what it meant to have indigenous knowledge systems, to transfer them into digital spaces. You know, and this is something as you said, Molemo, Nothando brings up in the previous episode. And these questions around data ownership, data stewardship, are not just questions that we're talking about in an abstract form. In a museum setting, they apply in various ways, where is the data being stored, who owns it, you know, who owns the actual infrastructure of the data that we are saying, for example, is Kenya's heritage or South Africa's heritage or Namibia's heritage? At the end of the day we own it conceptually, but it exists, you know, within someone's framework or certain servers or certain organizations. And with the entry of companies like Google and Amazon and CyArk into the cultural heritage space, it really brings up an interesting dilemma and discussion around ownership from the perspective of who is the custodian of the data. So while we might all indulge and say this is Namibia's heritage online, who is actually taking care of it at the end of the day? You know, Angela speaks to this very brilliantly because this is a discussion that we have had with her in the past.

Angela Okune 10:41

You know, I found in a news article that quoted the Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, this was in October 2020, and it quoted him as saying, if you let me quote it, "We must look for a common vision in the dreams of our ancestors. We must seek out their wisdom and preserve their memory, we must bring them to life in a way that present generations can relate, through technology. You can begin that journey by visiting the National Museums of Kenya page on the Google Arts and Culture platform, to learn the stories of our folk and cultural heroes, relive their experiences, draw the inspiration you need from them, in order to play your part in constructing and exemplifying our national ethos". And so I found this quote so striking because what does it mean when Kenyan youth are advised by their president to turn to Google for the dreams of their ancestors? And so it really has stuck with me that, you know, I have no problem at all,

with you know, Kenyans being advised to turn to to their ancestors, of course, it must be that way. But to then go through an intermediary that is Google, which is known to have extractive data for profit as part of its business model, it really just, you know, has has left me at odds.

Molemo Moiloa 12:09

It's important to reflect on the ways in which this isn't just a conceptual ownership of data. It's a physical one as well. And we often don't really think about the physical nature of how data lives in the real world, like, where does it actually reside? And what are the power dynamics that come from the physical manifestations of data? Temi Odumosu, who's an academic art historian who we've heard from many times already in this podcast, as well as Minne Atairu, who's an artist really exploring a lot of these kinds of themes, reflect on this from a museum data and restitution data perspective, also thinking particularly about the African continent.

Temi Odumosu 12:53

We also have to think about, okay, so the digital is a space of potential. But of course, like who, like, who owns the servers? Like there is an enclosure around the digital that it's invisible, but it's there. And it's right back center in this colonial framework. So unless we're going to sit and start thinking on a deep level about, you know, owning our own, or thinking about satellites, and server farms, and where things are going in a different kind of way. And even you know, I know that there's a lot of activist talk about the potentialities of, you know, Bitcoin and all of these crypto contexts. Well, yes, but in a way that's also mapping a neoliberal capitalist logic, just offering different potentialities. So given that we know that we live within constraints and structures, within enclosures, whether they're big enclosures that we cannot feel the edges of, or small enclosures. Okay, how can we still think anew in those contexts? I think this is where the creativity comes. And it's a creativity that you can think of in relation to how do diasporas thrive out of a cultural context, live left or community, detached from language, unable to have a fully formed sense of, you know, an identity that's rooted in one place but has a plurality of identities. Well, how have we historically thrived, right, and how can we create thriving spaces of potential within the context of what we know are kind of wider machinations of power, right?

Minne Atairu 15:01

I mean, I do think that in relation to like, you know, digital restitution, as we've been talking about, there is a need to just engage with, you know, institutions or western institutions knowing that, like the idea of digital colonialism is very real. And I liked the term, it's something that one of my favorite artists coined, thinking about how western institutions continue to like extract and monetize resources from African communities using digital technologies. So how do we pay attention to that as we think about restitution, even in our communities? How do we ensure that what we're doing internally is not reinforcing the idea of digital colonialism? That we're not giving our data freely to institutions who just want to continue extracting and ploughing and monetizing our resources?

Chao T. Maina 16:03

You know, throughout the series, we've really been asking questions, but in as much as we've been asking questions, I think the work that several practitioners, not to mention the Women's History Museum of Zambia, and other practitioners that we have spoken to are also giving us answers to the ways in which some of these questions can be addressed practically. And at this point, we'll hear from other speakers, from Angela, from Temi and Andrea, as well around what are the kind of models of data stewardship, of custodianship, that we could learn from, that we could borrow from, in a bid to really make this a holistic, but also a human-centred approach, an African-centred approach to digital data and data futures?

Angela Okune 16:54

Oh, boy, easy question. Yeah, I mean, I definitely don't have the answer. But I do wonder if there might be something to learn from what's been going on around indigenous data sovereignty, which is a movement that, you know, I've kind of followed from afar, but is especially strong in New Zealand and Australia, and also in various parts of the US and Canada, where various indigenous communities are thinking about, you know, pushing back against kind of objectified regimes, regimes of objective data, you know, as an object without recognizing the kind of relations within which data is embedded. And so they have come up with various protocols, they have, I think, been working around how to keep the materials within community. What forms of engagement with the materials make sense? Because when you ask that, you know, when you give the example, I just wonder, like, what does it mean to even get, you know, the information back on WhatsApp. Like, what is that experience like? And are there other forms, or genres of engagement that can be kind of, you know, established, framed, cultivated, setup, experimented around? I don't know, you know, like, whether it's art, you know, I feel like The Nest Collective has been doing some of this stuff in the Kenyan context, whether it's, you know, a gallery of missing, and I know, you've been involved in it as well. So the gallery right of missing artefacts, there's a beautiful exhibit from 2016, I believe, around missing data, the concept of missing data, and just an empty folder of what is missing, right. And so I, I don't know, I think there are various creative ways that people can tactile, like, in a very material way engage with this material that might not be getting it back on WhatsApp. So I would be really interested in diving in more about people's experiences around that and what forms they would want it in, you know, and I think it's different for different communities. I don't think there is a one size answer.

Andrea Wallace 19:24

You know we need to start thinking about ways to even limit digital access to the people for whom it's most appropriate, or thinking about different forms of labels and licenses to communicate the appropriateness of the reuse on the front end. So there's been work by Kim Christen, Jane Anderson, around you know, local contexts. And there's another project that's called ENRICH that's looking about data sovereignty. But these are asking these really important questions around how do we enable reuse according to the complexity of the material itself, rather than this idea of ownership and exclusivity and being able to commercialize. Because so often, you know, that's not the goal of trying to make these things available. It's more about how do we educate? How do we contextualize? How do we protect the person rather than the rights holder? And it's a really important question when we're thinking about, you know, the potential of

computational processing and the digital divide. Because right now, all of that power is also held in places that have benefited from wealth transfer from colonization. And so those sorts of technologies and the availability of them are shaping that area as well, and how we think about what's possible, you know, with computers and technology.

Molemo Moiloa 20:52

Listening to Angela and Andrea, we realize that it's not so much about inventing entirely new ways of relating to data, or trying to create whole new systems, whole new server farms. But rather, it's about building on existing practice and finding ways to amplify and expand on really important work that's already happening, and to find ways to ensure that more people have access to that, and Temi really touches on this.

Temi Odumosu 21:24

But the objects that have moved out of an African context have become a kind of diaspora. And in becoming a diaspora, they have acquired stories, histories, experiences, they have been resignified also by way of being put into glass vitrines in temperature controlled spaces, which is not how they were originally envisioned or used, right. So the question of ownership is one like, so on the one hand, when I think about ownership, I'm thinking about a certain kind of cultural authority that still resides with the communities from which these artefacts come from. And this cultural authority is about a worldview, like their cosmology, their worldview, their way of thinking about what it means to be human, the relationship with the more than human world, their spiritual practices, and so on. And I think it's important to maintain that sense of a cultural, I don't like the word agency so much because of the way it's used in different contexts, but this kind of sense of cultural authority that continues to belong to the communities from which these objects come from. But then you have the objects then taking a forced migration of varying kinds, and then they become a diaspora. And then they're doing other kinds of work in the cultural domain, both in physical museum spaces, and then again, when they're replicated, and turned into digital form.

Molemo Moiloa 23:08

This point of Temi's, about the ways in which these objects and material heritage within museums in the global north have taken on whole new lives is such a valuable one, in thinking about African data futures and what data restitution means for a future of kind of African digital heritage in a sense. Because I think, sometimes we can feel like restitution of African heritage is in the center, a call on a reversal going backwards to some idealized precolonial time. But I think what Temi's pointing to is the realities of where we are now and how we need to face the histories that we have kind of inherited together, the realities of what those histories have resulted in, but also the responsibilities and also the possibilities of what now needs to be created.

And by doing so we can really start to think about, okay, restitution has this capacity to potentially create something anew for the African continent and for the ethics of our relations with other parts of the world. And we need to begin framing what that should be and what we want that to be. And, and the digital collections, digital restitution, in particular, really call on us to think about why are we doing this? What are we trying to achieve? And what are the best models, the best infrastructures, the best strategies, the best practices for making that happen? So I think after the last couple of episodes,

we've really tried to explore that together and ask questions for ourselves, and for anybody listening who's interested in the same about how to do this, and what are the possibilities. And while a lot of it is quite challenging, I think there are some really exciting spaces and there are definitely people doing some really exciting work. And while we've touched on a lot of subjects, there are probably a few gaps, a few things that are still important to kind of touch on. Chao for you, what are the kind of key things?

Chao T. Maina 25:30

I mean, okay, there are many. We have talked about the idea of like a digital graveyard, in which we are digitizing 1000s, even hundreds of 1000s of objects and artefacts and archives that just sit in servers and no one accesses them. And no one knows where they are in five to 10 years. It's very interesting to see that we're talking about data, not just as a technical abstract concept, but as a social concept as well. And this brings about the questions on caring for data, caring for this digital data, just as you would, I like the term a digital garden in itself, you know, you have to tend to it, you have to weed it, you have to water it. And so even when we create this data, from an African perspective, in particular, we are saying that we are creating this data, we are planting the seeds. And we hope that these seeds, this data grows into something else, you know that people use it for other things. And so this idea behind digital gardening, really is a core point of data sustainability, in the ways in which we're saying that this data that we're creating right now, we want it to be accessible 10 years from now. And so we have to put in the structures, whether it's funding structures, whether it's human resource capacity, to not just create data, or digitize data, but also take care of it.

Molemo Moiloa 26:59

One of the things, as you mentioned, now, Chao that we haven't even really discussed is the absolute amount of energy that collections in their physical form use in sort of temperature controlled storage rooms in museums of the north. But how that is then replicated in digital collections and how these servers and these infrastructures that we've mentioned in and of themselves are major energy guzzlers. And all of these kinds of questions feed into this question of what is sustainable? Do we see these collections really being used in a digital form? As you've just asked in, say, the next 10 years? And if so, in what way? And what really makes sense? And I think that one of the things we've really just been emphasizing over and over again, and so many of our speakers have spoken to, is that there's this current rush to digitize 1000s and 1000s of objects in the Global North. And what we're speaking to is, what is the purpose of that? In what way does this create an ecosystem? In what ways is this really usable? And in what ways is this looking to repair so much of the damage of the past? Or just replicate it? In what ways is it possible to then care for this data? Or are we simply as you say, creating more graveyards, and I think we're kind of emphasizing, hey, what what could be possible, if we took a little bit more time, were a little bit more careful, ask ourselves the right questions, and did this in the best possible way, in the most ethical way. And in a way that brings all of those different aspects of the ecosystem on board.

Chao T. Maina 28:42

I think one of the things that we have talked about as well is that digital restitution is a monster in its own, that there's so many questions and so many things that we need to consider. But at the same time, I say this with a very firm conviction that we shouldn't be shying away from these questions. We shouldn't be shying away from seeking answers and doing the work. Because if you're in a position where you feel that digital, or digitization, is the easy way out, or is the easier route, you're probably not asking the right questions, you know, and what we've seen through the episode is that in as much as there are questions, there are ways of really coming and creating solutions for them. You know Molemo when you say that a lot of the work rests on African shoulders, it is very true. At the same time, we're saying that even digital restitution in itself is not a substitute for physical restitution.

How do we make it so that digital restitution, digitization, is aiding in this work that African practitioners have to do within the restitution process. They're not separate, in the sense that digital restitution is not a solution or is not something that we'll say, okay, since we've digitally restituted, we don't need the physical stuff anymore. But we're saying is that digital restitution is aiding the process of physical restitution and should aid in the ways in which it can allow for reconnecting to objects. It can allow for dialogue, it can allow for knowledge production, it can allow for questioning as well. And this work that we are doing as African practitioners in setting a stage for this digital work to happen as it aligns to our humanities and our context and our histories as well as our futures is extremely, extremely crucial.

Molemo Moiloa 30:49

Chao drops the mic! I think that brings us to the end of our podcast. Thank you very much, everybody for joining us on this journey of questions. This has been Access for Who? a podcast by myself Molemo Moiloa and ...

Chao T. Maina 31:10

Chao Tayiana Maina.

Molemo Moiloa 31:13

Thank you very much for joining us.

Chao T. Maina 31:14

For who and for what?

Molemo Moiloa 31:23

This podcast is brought to you by Open Restitution Africa, a collaboration between African Digital Heritage and Andani.Africa. The podcast is produced by Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa with Phumzile Nombuso Twala and Lethabolaka Gumede on research. Thank you to Josh Chiundiza for the music, Karugu Maina on design, and Annelien Van Heymbeeck on editing.

Chao T. Maina 31:45

The podcast was made possible by 99 Questions at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. This podcast is also available in zine form in French and German at www.openrestitution.africa and www.humboldtforum.org. Thank you for joining us.

Chao T. Maina 31:45

EPISODE FOUR RESOURCES

Angela Okune

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The Nest Collective

The Nest Collective is a multidisciplinary collective living and working in Nairobi, Kenya.
https://www.thisisthenest.com/

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