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Journey of No Return: The Impact of Looted Heritage on Nigeria's Cultural Legacy

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound impact of looted heritage on Nigeria's cultural legacy, highlighting the historical, cultural, and economic implications of the plundered artifacts. Beginning with a historical overview of the colonial-era looting that occurred during events such as the British punitive expedition, the discussion emphasizes the ongoing significance of these artifacts in shaping local identities, cultural narratives, and spiritual practices. Heritages are memories of the past that allow present and future generations to relive and experience events from the past. Each piece provides valuable insights about the previous generation's daily lives, beliefs, and social systems. Other than preserving memories, heritage properties contribute to a nation's cultural legacy, establishing a feeling of identity and continuity that is much valued by the individuals they represent. Over the years, heritage properties have also been properly utilized by various countries in their money-generation schemes through heritage tourism. It is therefore no gainsaying that heritage properties have numerous beneficial potentials for host communities. These benefits, however, are severely compromised when heritage properties are illegally acquired from the custodians of the heritage. In Nigeria, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of heritage properties have been illegally taken from the country through various means. This large-scale loss impacts not only Nigeria's cultural legacy but also the nation as a whole. It is therefore the aim of this paper to identify the looted Nigerian heritage and examine its impact on Nigeria's cultural legacy. To achieve this aim, this paper adopts a qualitative approach relying solely on literature sources for data collection.

Keywords: *Impact, looted heritage, cultural legacy, Nigeria*

Introduction

The entirety of the African continent is rich with immeasurable cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, movable and immovable heritage resources, as Africa is the cradle of humanity and endowed with traces of early hominids and ancient tools. Nigeria is situated in West Africa and occupies a geographical space of 923,768 sq.km, with over 250 ethnic groups. It has the Yoruba in the Southwest, Igbo in the Southeast and Hausa in the North (Aremu, 2007). Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural country and bestows with heterogeneous and unique heritage resources that ever entice outsiders, especially when they are harnessed for tourism development. For centuries, Nigeria has been home to a myriad of heritage resources, all of which hold memories of the ingenuity and resourcefulness of our forefathers. While some of these heritage resources have been discovered and harnessed, others are still deeply buried in their hiding places lying in wait to be unearthed by Archaeologists. These buried heritages are frequently faced with a variety of difficulties, ranging from natural and cultural deterioration to illicit excavations of materials for personal gains (looting). A good example is the Nok terracotta figurines trafficked from burial sites in old Zankan some 14 kilometres South West of Godo Godo in Kaduna State (Gundu, 2020: 50). Due to their value, these buried resources are usually the targets of unscrupulous individuals who often engage in unauthorized diggings to extract the object from the ground and sell it on the black market. This is however not to say



that only buried heritage are usually at risk of being looted, significant risks also confront surface-level heritage resources.

According to Onyima (2016), the era of colonialism in Nigeria, from 1900 to 1960, brought several unobstructed negative human activities, which included unscientific excavations of historical sites and grave goods, wars, iconoclasm, illicit trafficking, vandalism, looting, bribery, thefts, and corruption. For instance, the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 saw to the forcible collection of the Benin Bronzes from the Benin palace, and thousands of artefacts plundered and later distributed among private collections and museums throughout the world. Resources that have already been safely deposited in treasure houses, and museums, are not exempted from the claws of looters. There have been several cases of break-ins into museums and several objects carted away from the supposed safe hands of museums. This study concentrates on identifying some of the looted heritage from Nigeria, evaluating the factors that motivate the looting and trafficking of cultural heritage, assessing the impacts of looting and trafficking of these heritages from their progenitors and custodians, and the possible measures to resolve the issue.

Scope

The study is limited to the defined geographical area, of Nigeria. The focus of this research is on the looted Nigerian heritage resources as well as its impacts on Nigeria's cultural legacy. It is important to note that the research does not cover the entirety of Nigeria's looted heritage because there is no comprehensive document that allows for this in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications and Literature Review

In the most basic sense, heritage is generally believed to be anything that was inherited or has been passed down through generations. The above definition of heritage is shallow and does not depict the truism of what heritage encompasses. Although heritage is becoming a commonly used term in contemporary society as well as development discourses, it still poses significant conceptual challenges (Zazu, 2011: 135). For instance, Tonkins (2006:1), narrowed the Australian perspective of heritage to "buildings, places and precincts; archaeological sites and relics; landscape, environment, gardens and trees; movable heritage (artefacts) and intangible heritage (customs, language, stories, beliefs) which are cherished by local communities, celebrated in Heritage Week, defended in conservation initiatives or regulated by the government". Onyima (2016: 273) defines heritage as "cherished characteristic features of society passed down from generation to generation through conscious preservation. They refer to the riches of extinct and extant societies which are of historic, educational, recreational, and economic importance, preserved and handed over from one generation to another." It is inclusive of the tangible and intangible or material and non-material heritages present within human society.

Looting on the other hand is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigerian heritage resources. In simplicity, looting is a term used to refer to the stealing of heritage properties. It is "a part of the economic system, the antiquities market that works through the destructive removal of archaeological objects to supply the demand of collectors of archaeological objects." (Elia, 1997). It can also mean the illegal removal of cultural objects that are of archaeological importance

from their original site, which may have resulting repercussions, that pose threats to the society such objects belong. It is a truism that looting is regarded as a worldwide crisis. Nevertheless, Gundu (2020) argues that the several colonial assaults that occurred in the country paved the way for looting in Nigeria. To add to this, Arua, Ebisi, Ukwuaba, Ezeanuna, Nwebiem, Eze, and Igbo (2019) summarised the causative factors of looting as greed, ignorance, religious beliefs, internal conflicts, and neglect. Elia (1997) gave a rather differing opinion as to the causes of looting in her article titled "Looting, Collecting, and the Destruction of Archaeological Resources." For her, the primary cause of looting is collections. "The high-end market for antiquities is primarily driven by wealthy collectors - public and private - and prominent individuals in society. These collectors create a demand for antiquities, which they purchase from dealers. Dealers, in turn, operate a network of runners, couriers, and smugglers who obtain antiquities from looters that dig at archaeological sites clandestinely" (Elia, 1997: 87).

Today in Nigeria, a variety of cultural heritages, have been subjected to the harsh realities of looting and illicit trafficking. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of heritage resources have been carted away from the possession of the country. Some include the Benin corpus, Nok terracotta, Ife Sculptures, Igbo-Ukwu bronzes, Akwanshi stone monoliths, and Tiv objects among others (Gundu, 2020). To make matters worse, the fate of these looted objects in Nigeria remains bleak, especially as leaders seem to have a negative attitude towards the repatriation of the objects. One may be forced to wonder if this negative attitude is a result of ignorance of the overwhelming impacts caused by the loss of heritage objects. For one, any form of benefits realised from such heritage material is automatically shifted from the owners or custodians of the heritage, in this case, Nigeria, to the country or persons in possession of the heritage object (Arua et al, 2019). Looting also destroys the Archaeological context of objects thereby diminishing the chances of using such objects to accurately reconstruct the past by Archaeologists. (Arua et al, 2019).

Methodology

The evaluation of the impact of looted heritage on cultural legacy has become necessary in the contemporary to know about the damages such negative attitudes have procured in Nigeria. This work centres a cursory explanation of the looted heritage, examines the factors that motivated looting, and examines the influence of looting on cultural, economic, social, legal, and tourism activities, in Nigeria. To achieve this, the historical document was adopted through which qualitative information was acquired from secondary sources like books, journal articles, the internet and other published and non-published documents. The looted heritage was chosen using purposive and convenience sampling techniques and they are Benin bronze, Igbo-Ukwu bronze, the Ife head, Nok Terracotta, Arochukwu shrine items, and Ekpu sculptures.

Major Findings

Looted Heritage in Nigeria

As earlier stated in the preceding paragraph, there is no single comprehensive document in Nigeria that captures the entirety of heritage resources that have been

lost from the grip of Nigeria due to one reason or the other. With the aid of different documentary sources, this paper attempts to document a few. They include the famous Benin bronze, Igbo-Ukwu bronze, the Ife head, Nok Terracotta, Arochukwu shrine items, and Ekpu sculptures.

The Benin Bronze

In 1897, the palace of Oba of Benin was looted when the British Colonial Administration attacked and several high-valued bronzed works and art treasures of the royal palace were stolen. This serves as a noteworthy experience that adversely affected the management of cultural heritage resources in Nigeria (Aremu, 2008). During this period, the British expedition, led by Consul Philip, caused the looting of tens of thousands of works of art, which are in wood, bronze and ivory. The palace was also burnt and the king was sent into exile, because of the death of seven out of nine expeditors. These heritages were illegally relocated to London. Gundu (2020) described this as the inclusion of royal artwork made from bronze objects, brass, ivory, bone and wood scattered in various museums throughout Europe and America and other continents besides Africa. During the 1897 Benin expedition, over 4000 of these objects were shipped away to Britain and further scattered out to other countries to pay off the debts caused by the expedition which meant that they auctioned these objects to the highest bidders and some still today are unaccounted for (Layiwola, 2010 in Gundu, 2020; 48). The punitive expedition by the British government was guessed to be retaliation to the massacre of an unarmed party of British envoys and a large number of their African bearers earlier that same year (Hicks, 2020). After the independence in 1960, one of the goals of the Nigerian government was to repatriate the looted artefacts to be brought back to their ancestral homes as they very much tell the stories of the Benin people. Between these periods, some of the artefacts were sold back to the Nigerian government until it came to the notice of the museum that some of them were duplicates, which caused the end of the sales of such artefacts. Plate 1 below is the carved image of Queen Mother Idia in Benin and it was taken to the British Museum, London, United Kingdom.



Plate 1: Image of Queen-Mother Idia that is now in the British Museum, London, United Kingdom (Source: Arua et al., 2019)

The Nok Terracotta

Nok culture is viewed as one of the pre-historical and earliest societies in Western Africa and has existed from around 500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The Nok terracotta was first discovered during an open cast mine in 1928 in Taruga, Kaduna State by Colonel Dent Young. It was later recovered by Bernard Fagg and was named the Nok culture which is a population within Nigeria which encompasses a variety of states across the country such as; Kaduna, Jos, Katsina, parts of Benue, Niger, Abuja, Nassarawa, Sokoto, amongst many others as have been recovered. The objects are made out of clay and left to harden by subjecting them to fire and afterwards sun drying them. The unique characteristics of the Nok Terracotta made it different from every other culture in Nigeria with its artistic style, geometric precision, and exaggerations, which had significant roles to play in society. With the establishment of the Antiquities Department today known as the National Council for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in 1952, the recovered Nok Terracotta had a place to be kept and accounted for. However, today some of the Nok Terracotta is found in museums outside Nigeria. This is because of the continuous looting of burial sites, and the forceful collection of the objects to be used for monetary gains. The Terracotta objects have been found in museums in Belgium (Jemkur, 1992 in Gundu, 2020), North America, Europe, and other parts of the world (Gundu, 2020). Plate 2 shows some of the Nok terracotta that were looted and found in foreign museums.



Plate 2: Some Nok Terracotta (<https://thinkafrica.net/literacy.nok-civilisation/amp/>).

The Ife Head

Unearthed accidentally in 1938 alongside other brass and copper heads at Ife, Nigeria is a copper alloy sculpture, which is used to depict a king in society. These objects were initially housed in the National Museum of Ife before they were further shipped out of the country to different museums outside Nigeria. It was revealed that two of the Ife bronze objects were looted and trafficked to the United States, while the third one was moved to London, through Paris. The editor of Daily Times of Nigeria, H. Maclear Bate, who was believed to have sold the artefact to the National Arts Collections Fund and then passed it right along to the British Museum in 1939, first

took the Ife Head out of the Nigerian museum. Plate 3 below shows one of the looted Ife Head sculptures.



Plate 3: Ife Terracotta Human Head, now in British Museum (Source: National Art Museum, Lagos)

The Igbo-Ukwu Bronze

Isaiah Anozie unearthed Igbo-Ukwu Bronze accidentally in 1938 while digging a cistern in his compound. This discovery piqued the interest of Thurstan Shaw, who carried out excavations at three sites; Igbo Richard, Igbo Isaiah, and Igbo Jonah, all named after the owners of the compounds. The excavations led to the discovery of elaborate bronze cast objects including vessels, pot stands, jewellery, various ornamental regalia, glass beads, preserved textiles, elephant tusks, and ceramic shards. Plate 4 shows the Igbo-Ukwu Roped Bronze pot.



Plate 4: Igbo-Ukwu Roped Bronze pot (Source: <https://amarthistory.org/Igbo-ukwu/>)

Arochukwu Shrine Objects

Arochukwu Shrine, popularly called *Ibini Ukpabi Shrine*, is a sacred and religious shrine in Arochukwu, Abia State, Nigeria. This shrine is dedicated to the veneration of Ukpabi, the major deity in Arochukwu. The shrine dates back to the 17th century

when influential and powerful people of Arochukwu Kingdom established it. The shrine is known as a place of worship, justice, and commerce and people from many regions visit the place for fortification, consultation, and supplications. Many objects from this shrine were looted while some were sold and trafficked to foreign countries. During the Arochukwu expedition between 1901 and 1902, which is known as the Anglo-Aro War led by Dr. Robert Aliman – Principal Medical Officer for the Oil Rivers Protectorate several objects were looted, which include Arochukwu puppet that is now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Strother, 2017). The Plate 5 below shows the environment of the shrine.



Plate 5: Arochukwu Shrine (Source: <https://nigeria.archivingafrica.com>)

***Ekpu* Sculpture**

In 1958, a temporary museum building located at Oron, Cross River, Nigeria, was burgled and *Ekpu* figurines were looted. It was revealed that these looted carving figures were smuggled out of their ancestral homes and traded among private collectors and museums in Europe and the United States of America (Murray, 1946, Ibia, 2012). Murray (1946) revealed that *Ekpu* figures are religious, symbolic, and historical objects as they represent ancestors or ancestral spirits that move around. According to Ibia (2012: 1), it was stated that:

Each *Ekpu* figure is a monoxylous pole carving of hard forest timber such as camwood *pferocarpus soyayii* (Oron-Ukpa) or *Coula edulis* (Oron-Oko). Generally, *Ekpu* figures are about one meter high; depicting deceased Oron elders. They are shown with beards and headgear and most of them bear emblems of lineage authority in both hands.

Pre-historically, immediately after a man joined his ancestors, before his final burial rites, a sculpture would be made to represent him according to his rank, wealth, and family status. This was their belief that the spirit of such a dead man resided in the *Ekpu* that was made for him, and this figure would be kept in the *Obio* (which means the village meeting shed), where his spirit could be consulted at will, but not worshipped. Many of the *Ekpus* were looted and some were sold in exchange for money (Ibia, 2012). Figure 1 shows the representation of *Ekpu*.



Figure 1: Oron Ekpu Figure (Source: Ibia, 2012)

Factors Motivating Looting and Trafficking of Cultural Heritage in Nigeria

Many factors conspicuously influence the looting and trafficking of cultural heritage in Nigeria. Some of these include the corrupt attitude of the influential personalities and heritage custodians, policy ineffectiveness, lack of interest, poor security management, inadequate funding, poverty and ignorance, and commoditisation. The findings of Arua, Ebisi, Ukwuaba, Ezeanuna, Nwebiem, Eze, and Agbo (2019) revealed that corruption has infiltrated the minds of some of the heritage custodians. As a result of this, they sometimes collaborated with international illicit art dealers who illegally burgled royal palaces, museums, sacred groves, shrines, and historical buildings in many local communities in exchange for money, positions, fame, and power. They concurred that illicit antiquity merchants are involved in the robbery and trafficking of cultural antiquities because the custodians are usually exposed to corruption and bribery, which give way to looting. The INTERPOL (2007) revealed that the annual trade of illegal transactions of cultural antiquities was estimated to be US\$7.8 billion, which is ranked behind drugs and arms that estimated to be US \$160 billion and US \$100 billion respectively as the most financially inclined black market.

Ineffectiveness of policy enforcement is another major factor that aids the looting and trafficking of antiquities in Nigeria because the major laws that protect cultural antiquities are the Antiquity Act No.9 of 1953, Decree No.9 of 1979, and National Commission for Museums and Monuments Act of 1979. These legislations centre on protecting Nigerian cultural heritage and prohibiting any form of illegal buying and selling. Shyllon (1996), Shyllon (1998), Arua et al. (2019), and Oloidi (2019) revealed that these laws need amendment and to be strengthened with stringent sanctions and better measures to enforce them. Oloidi (2019) added that, when the laws that are protecting these antiquities are weak, there would be many chances for looting and trafficking, which could easily affect their sustainability, tourism potentialities, and tourist patronage in the contemporary period. It is noticeable that weak cultural policies and ineffective enforcement across Nigeria encourage the activities of looters, traffickers, and illegal merchants. The issue of poor policy enforcement is usually caused because the concerned stakeholders are been passivized and their lack of

interest towards the sustainability of heritage resources leads to the abandonment of these antiquities, and then gives the opportunists and looters the chance to loot and trade them. Likewise, Campbell (2013), Arua, et al. (2019), and Oloidi (2019) revealed that looting and trafficking of antiquities are proliferating due to the less attention from the custodians. They found out that, the nonchalant attitude of the custodians like the various families, local communities, cultural groups and the government increases the activities of illegal artefact traders, looted and traffickers.

Another factor that encourages the looting and trafficking of cultural antiquities is a low level of security management both at local and national levels. Campbell (2013) and Arua, et al. (2019) disclosed that there are shoddy security measures to preserve and protect heritage properties in their locations. They also explained that most of the museums and historical sites in various palaces, communities, and educational institutions across Nigeria are not enjoying satisfactory security arrangements. This state of insecurity increases the criminal activities of looters and traffickers in Nigeria. The findings of Arua, et al. (2019) revealed that Western people are enthusiastic about the acquisition of African antiquities and some of the custodians are willing to exchange them for goods and money. This act has exposed these objects to danger and neglect. In another way, many families who have converted to Christianity have no reason to house historical and cultural objects; rather they are subjected to looting, stealing, and trafficking. Consequently, some were traded and trafficked out of their ancestral home and country to foreign lands due to their financial values, which some individuals or groups of individuals used the opportunity to accumulate wealth. Shyllon (1999) revealed that the worth of bronze and terracotta figurines stolen from the Ife Museum was estimated to be \$250 million, and this monetary value encouraged people to steal, loot, and traffic them.

Impacts of Looted Heritage in Nigeria

The impact of looted heritage on Nigerian cultural policy refers to manners in which the act of stealing and illegally exporting cultural artefacts from Nigeria affects the country's ability to protect, preserve, and promote its cultural heritage. Regardless of Nigeria's colonial freedom granted in 1960, the problems of looting, vandalism, and illicit trafficking of the cultural heritage continued unabated even with the laws and legislations put in place by governmental bodies to resolve such issues. The very impacts of these lootings are evident in today's Nigeria and present missing links to further establishing the history of the varying cultures within Nigeria. These looting activities strip a community of its heritage which is a valuable part of any community's history and very identity thereby presenting the community with a difficult situation of trying to connect to their past. In other words, the documentation of the history of man in Nigeria from the earliest period to the present is being hindered by the destructive acts of the plunderers of cultural resources (Akinade, 1999).

Moreover, a distortion in the form of archaeological information creates a gap in the early history of the Nigerian culture and therefore whatever is lost is lost forever without returning to its originality. Tampering with cultural heritage results in misinformation and loss of authenticity especially when they are shipped out of the country and people other than the respective owners of the material remain to tell the

stories of these heritages. With looting, comes a great loss of information concerning the traces of past human activities. Many of these looted artefacts are unaccounted for and have not been found even to date, which makes it difficult to trace the history of Nigerian culture. More so, when cultural heritage is compromised, it diminishes a community's connection to its past, disrupts the transmission of traditions and knowledge, and erases the tangible and intangible markers of its identity (Onyido, 2020, Onyima, 2016, Oloidi, 2019). In light of the above, the impacts of looted heritage on the Nigerian economy can be categorised into three including legal, economic and socio-political impacts.

Legal Impact

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) Act of 1979 established the NCMM as the body responsible for the preservation and management of Nigeria's cultural heritage. It outlines the commission's duties, including the protection of monuments and antiquities, and the prohibition of their unauthorized export. The Nigerian Criminal Code Act contains provisions that criminalize the unauthorized export of cultural objects and the fraudulent dealing in cultural property, offering legal recourse against looting and trafficking (Odubayo, 1994). Looting incidents directly undermine this goal by removing valuable artefacts from their original contexts, thereby threatening their physical integrity and cultural significance. Since the incidents of looted heritage, Nigerian cultural policy has undergone several specific changes aimed at strengthening the protection, preservation, and repatriation of the country's cultural heritage. These changes reflect a broader shift in policy direction, prioritizing the recovery of stolen artefacts, enhancing legal frameworks, and improving the management of cultural heritage sites. This has negatively impacted the cultural policy Decree No. 77 of 1979 'to be in charge of the collection, documentation, conservation, and presentation of the National Cultural properties to the public for education, enlightenment, and entertainment' (Ojedokun, 2012). The NCMM Act, while instrumental, has shown limitations in its enforcement, prompting calls for its revision and enhancement.

Economic Impact

Countries lose their cultural artefacts when they are stolen, and they directly and indirectly lose the financial value of these items. For example, the Benin Bronzes, taken by British forces in 1897, are estimated to be worth millions of dollars today. The loss of such treasures represents a significant financial blow to Nigeria Cultural heritage sites attract tourists who spend money on accommodations, food, and local crafts. The theft or damage of these sites can deter visitors, leading to a decrease in tourism revenue. For instance, the looting of the Nok statues from Nigeria's Middle Belt region has likely affected tourism in the area, impacting locals (Onyido, 2020). The removal of cultural artefacts can strip a nation of its tangible symbols of identity and history. The Benin Bronzes, for example, were taken by British forces and are now held in European museums. Their presence overseas can be seen as an affront to Nigeria's national identity and history. Cultural artefacts serve as links to a nation's past, connecting current generations to their ancestors' lives and achievements (Onyima, 2016). The loss of these artefacts breaks this chain of connection, disrupting the continuity of a nation's historical narrative. With less tourism, there is less incentive for governments or investors to fund the preservation

and restoration of cultural heritage sites. This lack of investment can lead to further degradation of these sites, creating a vicious cycle.

Socio-Political Impact

The looting of Nigerian heritage challenges the country's sovereignty over its cultural artefacts and undermines efforts to build a national identity based on shared cultural heritage (Onyima, 2016, Onyido, 2020). This socio-political impact is exacerbated by the refusal of some Western museums to return looted artefacts, despite calls for restitution. The refusal of Western museums to return looted artefacts challenges Nigeria's sovereignty over its cultural heritage. This refusal implies a denial of the right of newly independent nations to reclaim their cultural artefacts, which were often taken under coercive circumstances during the colonial era. The absence of these artefacts in Nigeria undermines efforts to build a national identity rooted in shared cultural heritage (Onyido, 2020). Cultural artefacts serve as tangible links to a nation's history and identity, and their absence can create a void in the national narrative. Effective restitution policies also need to engage with international institutions like UNESCO and ICOM. These collaborations can facilitate the return of stolen cultural properties and enhance Nigeria's capacity to protect its cultural heritage.

Tourism Impact

Most of the looted artefacts from Ife, Benin, Igbo-Ukwu, Arochukwu, Nok, and Ekpu would have become part of the major attractions for tourism development in Nigeria. Their high level of symbolic, cultural, artistic, and historical authenticity would have served as motivational factors to promote sustainable heritage tourism in their various communities (Oloidi & Okonkwo, 2020). They are now attracting visitors across international museums where they are forcefully and illegally kept instead of having such opportunities in Nigeria. These looted antiquities generate millions of dollars in foreign museums and art galleries through tourism development because they depict elements of creativity and indigenous technology of Nigerian people.

Summary and Conclusion

Nigeria is endowed with many heritage resources, which have been proven from the types of artistic and symbolic works from Benin Kingdom, Ife, Arochukwu, Oron, Igbo-Ukwu, and Nok. These cultural legacies are parts of the behavioural and general ways of life of the people, which depicted the indigenous knowledge of the past generations. These objects are of high significance as they attract people from different parts of the globe to their aboriginal homes and where they were displayed after looting. They have elements of economic viability if they are well-preserved and promoted beyond the communities. Now that some of these cultural, artistic, symbolic, religious, and touristic objects have been taken to foreign lands where their functional and cultural roles are truncated and impossible to exercise, there is an urgent need to strategize how they would be repatriated legally to their various communities where they are more significant to the people.

From the foregoing findings, there is no gainsaying that the continued looting of archaeological materials has had a devastating effect on the nation's cultural heritage. Since the colonial era, it has left a lasting imprint on the country's approach to cultural

preservation and national identity. The refusal of some Western museums to return looted artefacts, such as the Benin Bronzes, challenges Nigeria's sovereignty and complicates efforts to build a national identity rooted in shared cultural heritage. More so, the illegal trade of these materials often leads to their dispersal into private collections or foreign museums, making it challenging to recover and preserve them for future generations. Even more challenging is the fact that the recognised authorities (i.e. Federal government, NCMM, etc) seem not to concern themselves with the repatriation of these valuable objects. To this effect, it is important to educate and create proper awareness about cultural heritage as well as the impact of its looting on the nation as a whole. In addition, efforts must be made to strengthen laws and enforcement mechanisms in a bid to better protect archaeological sites and materials and facilitate the return of stolen cultural properties instead of subjecting them to the journey of no return.

In conclusion, reclaiming and preserving Nigeria's cultural heritage requires a multifaceted approach involving legal frameworks, public awareness, and community engagement. By recognizing the intrinsic value of these artifacts and advocating for their return, Nigeria can revive its cultural legacy, strengthen its national identity, and promote economic opportunities rooted in its rich history. The journey of return is vital for restoring dignity and ensuring that the stories and traditions encapsulated in these artifacts are passed down to future generations.

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