

Restitution in practice: a comparative critique of Jos van Beurden's *The Empty Showcase Syndrome* through the lens of Guinea-Bissau

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JOS VAN BEURDEN'S *THE EMPTY SHOWCASE SYNDROME* (2024) presents a detailed and timely exploration of the politics and practice of restitution of cultural heritage. His work maps the uneven efforts across European countries and highlights the ambivalences and structural challenges inherent in the process of repatriating cultural artifacts to their countries of origin. While the study offers a broad and nuanced overview of the European landscape, this analysis aims to compare the author's conclusions with the findings of my research on the cultural heritage of Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony. Such a comparative perspective enables a critical reflection on the limitations and possibilities of current restitution frameworks, underscoring the need for a more profound epistemological and infrastructural shift that addresses both the symbolic and material dimensions of restitution.

Van Beurden classifies European states into four categories based on their level of engagement with restitution. While countries like Germany and France have adopted relatively proactive policies, nations such as Portugal and Italy lag significantly behind. Portugal, specifically, is portrayed as still entangled in a largely theoretical debate, with minimal practical advancement. This portrayal aligns closely with the realities observed in Guinea-Bissau. Despite a reinvigorated interest in restitution since 2018, Portugal's efforts remain centered in academic and museum discourse, with little institutional or governmental commitment toward the actual repatriation of objects.

A key strength of van Beurden's work is his insistence on a decolonized methodology of provenance research, one that integrates actors from the Global South. In this regard, the study conducted in Guinea-Bissau is thought to contribute. From the outset, the goal was to establish a shared methodological framework by collaborating with the Portuguese diaspora and communities in Guinea-Bissau. This dual focus, combining archival research with interviews across both geographies, embodies the participatory approach van Beurden advocates. Yet it also exposes a critical gap: while European institutions may increasingly include Global South voices in provenance inquiries, the asymmetry of power and resources remains unaddressed.

Van Beurden's tripartite analytical framework – rethinking provenance studies, addressing private collections, and reconsidering restitution recipients – finds resonance in the Guinea-Bissau context, particularly in the latter domain. His question of to whom objects should be returned reveals complex layers of negotiation and desire. In Guinea-Bissau, the urban population favors the establishment of a national museum to house returned artifacts. At the same time, rural communities express a preference for the return of objects to their places of origin. To that end, community members advocate for the establishment of representative committees drawn from every village that was historically implicated in the looting of cultural artifacts, together with the convening of inter-village assemblies in which those delegates can deliberate

on the rightful destinations of the objects under consideration. They further maintain that, as a form of reparation for the colonial harms previously inflicted on these communities, the logistical costs of such meetings – including travel and the broader mobilization of villagers – should be financed by programs by Western states; in the present case, that responsibility would fall on Portugal, the party currently engaged in the restitution negotiations. These tensions mirror those described in van Beurden's broader analysis: competing claims between national institutions and local communities, as well as diasporic skepticism toward the very efficacy of restitution.

A significant insight from the Guinea-Bissau study is the population's pragmatic view of restitution. Rather than framing it solely as a moral imperative, participants emphasize the necessity of material reparations and capacity-building initiatives, including the establishment of museums, staff training, and support for cultural projects. This resonates with van Beurden's critique of the rhetorical dimension of European restitution policies. Despite public commitments, actual returns remain rare, and for communities in the Global South restitution often feels like a symbolic gesture devoid of transformative impact. The metaphor of the "empty showcase" captures the frustration that promises of return do not fill museum cases, nor do they revive interrupted cultural narratives.

The voices from Guinea-Bissau also challenge the implicit assumption that the return of objects necessarily equates to justice. Many respondents, particularly within the diaspora, acknowledge the role European museums play in preserving and displaying their heritage to a global audience. For them, restitution should not be an all-or-nothing proposition. Instead, they advocate for shared custody, reciprocal exchange, and sustainable cooperation. This nuanced position complicates van Beurden's framework, suggesting that restitution must move beyond binary logics and embrace more flexible, negotiated outcomes.

Moreover, the Guinea-Bissau study points to the persistent legacy of colonial epistemologies within both African and European museological practices. Even post-independence, the conceptual frameworks governing heritage institutions remain heavily influenced by Western models. This observation underscores van Beurden's call for a radical rethinking of museological structures and the necessity of genuine epistemic plurality in restitution discourse.

Jos van Beurden grounds the practice of restitution in three interdependent principles – trust, equality, and justice – and insists that the mere return of an artefact cannot by itself repair the damage originally inflicted. Genuine redress, he argues, demands an explicit public acknowledgement of the damages committed in the past.

In the chapter that interrogates inequality within provenance studies, van Beurden recounts a visit to the Wereld Museum in Leiden to view Benin

objects, accompanied by a Nigerian lawyer. The lawyer reminded him that provenance research is still conducted predominantly about objects and only rarely about the people and life-worlds entwined with those objects. Human lives were often lost during the violent appropriations that supplied today's collections, yet such experiences seldom appear in exhibition narratives. Provenance research is therefore never neutral: the decision about which objects merit investigation is always already political. Ideally, every study should begin with systematic consultation of source communities; such consultation presupposes a prior relationship of trust, and it is precisely the breakdown of trust that causes many restitution projects to stall.

These reflections raise fundamental methodological questions for community-centered provenance work. Field research carried out in Guinea-Bissau demonstrated the value of institutional independence when approaching communities. To forge the trust required for meaningful dialogue, museums will need to rethink their field strategies – extending the duration of researchers' stays among the so-called “communities of origin” – so that, before defining restitution policies and selecting objects, they can gauge the desires and priorities prevailing in the country of return. Working from an autonomous institutional and scholarly position in Guinea-Bissau during this PhD research project created a more expansive space for dialogue. It opened access to the contradictions and non-linear discourses that shape local relationships to history, memory, and the past. Much, however, remains to be done if European cooperation programs are to live up to the standards implied by van Buerden's three principles.

In conclusion, *The Empty Showcase Syndrome* offers a foundational mapping of the restitution landscape in Europe and articulates critical principles for moving toward a more equitable system. However, its focus remains primarily on the European side of the equation. The findings from Guinea-Bissau expand the scope of the debate, emphasizing the voices and priorities of source communities. They reveal that restitution is not merely about returning objects, but about transforming relationships between nations, institutions, and epistemologies. For restitution to be meaningful, it must be grounded in co-created processes that address both symbolic recognition and material justice. Only then might the showcases – both literal and metaphorical begin to fill.



Figure 1 – Group conversation with elected members of a Nalu community (southern Guinea-Bissau) on Portuguese colonial occupation and the restitution of cultural heritage to the country of origin. During this meeting, printed images of the objects held in Portuguese museums were shown to the local population. February 2025.