

Last year, the Smithsonian Institute returned 29 Benin bronze statues to Nigeria. Do they really belong there?

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Benin bronze “Ceremonial Head of a King”. Photo by Franko Khoury/Smithsonian.

In October of 2022, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art officially ceded ownership of 29 Benin bronzes to Nigeria, to be placed in the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Almost immediately, the Restitution Study Group, a New York-based nonprofit dedicated to reparations and restitution from corporations complicit in the

antebellum enslavement of Africans, filed a lawsuit claiming African Americans with Nigerian DNA have a right to ownership of the artifacts.

Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, the executive director of RSG, has been studying the Benin kingdom and these bronzes for most of her career. While obtaining her masters and doctorate degrees, she found she had a special connection with the bronzes, beyond her educational pursuits.

“Visiting the artifacts is always a spiritual experience for me. What I never knew, though, was my connection to them. That's something I've learned as a result of DNA testing,” Farmer-Paellmann said.

Farmer-Paellmann decided to have her DNA tested after beginning her academic thesis on the Benin bronzes, revealing that 27.7% of her DNA is of Nigerian origin. Farmer-Paellmann said at least 100,000 enslaved individuals from Benin were brought to America in the transatlantic slave trade. She says this genetic claim to the bronzes she and many other African Americans have should justify the placement of the bronzes in the United States, where individuals can access the resources accompanying the transfer and connect with their genetic history as Farmer-Paellmann has.

In the lawsuit, plaintiffs RSG and its executive director, Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, said the Smithsonian Institution “failed to protect the interests of U.S. citizens descended from enslaved people,” seeking to stop the transfer to the Republic of Nigeria and Kingdom of Benin.

The origin of the bronzes

Benin bronzes are bronze and various metal alloy sculptures that include intricate cast plaques, animal and human figures, and commemorative heads created in the kingdom of Benin during the Middle Ages. First placed in the hands of the Smithsonian after an 1897 British raid on the Republic of Benin, now a part of the Republic of Nigeria, 29 bronzes were returned in a ceremony in Nigeria alongside the National Gallery of Art and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Benin City, previously the Kingdom of Benin, was robbed of nearly

90,000 statues in the 1897 raid, which have since been scattered through museums around the world—including London, France, Portugal, and the United States. As a result of the Smithsonian's [new ethical returns policy](#), the Smithsonian's Board of Regents voted to transfer ownership of the bronzes to Nigeria.

The complexity of Western African borders makes the question of ownership infinitely more complicated. Since the original transfer, the bronzes have been presented to the Oba of Benin, who maintains advising and administration capacity in the Nigerian government despite ethnic and power fractionalization by the Nigerian state.

The origin of the bronzes themselves is a source of ownership claims for RSG as well. In a [textbook written by the Oba Ewuare II Foundation](#), the kingdom admits that the bronzes were directly tied to the slave trade in West Africa, which, according to Farmer-Paellmann, further supports her ownership claims.

The Benin Kingdom's once-self-sufficient metal importing trade was almost completely taken over by the Portuguese in the 16th century, where trading imported metal in the form of manillas (a metal alloy bracelet used as currency at the time) became common. These manillas were used to exchange spices, ivory, and enslaved people. Farmer-Paellman said the bronzes' metal comes directly from the manillas involved in the transatlantic slave trade, giving African Americans with DNA linked to the Benin Kingdom a legal right to the bronzes.



Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, Executive Director of RSG, holding a manilla, used as currency including the buying and selling of enslaved people. Farmer-Paellmann claims these were the very same manillas used to create the Benin bronzes.

What the Restitution Study Group proposes

RSG proposes, instead of returning the artifacts to a country they claim is not the rightful owner, that the artifacts be returned to the United States and for African Americans to have the opportunity to access, interact, and connect with the artifacts—which Farmer-Paellmann argues is essential in reconnecting African Americans with their roots and restoring rightful ownership in the form of a communal ownership claim. Additionally, Farmer-Paellmann proposed specific forms of reparations from the institutions who currently maintain ownership over the artifacts in the meantime.

“First of all, you want the institutions to hold them (the bronzes) in trust. But the Restitution Study Group and African Americans also want internship opportunities, employment opportunities, entrepreneurial opportunities and accessibility to DNA testing to tap into our heritage that was stolen from us,” Farmer-Paellman said.

Some are quick to dismiss her and other African Americans' claims to the artifacts. According to a BBC article, David Edebiri—a member of the current Oba of Benin's cabinet—[“laughed for about 15 seconds straight”](#) in response to RSG's and Farmer-Paellaman's lawsuit.

Nigerian novelist and journalist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani has followed this story since the announcement of the artifact's repatriation. In her work, she has found that many Nigerians, scholars and officials have had similar reactions.

“Most Nigerians with whom I have discussed this US lawsuit have burst into laughter,” Nwaubani said.

Farmer-Paellman's allegations have been met with intense criticism, some disagreeing with the historical analysis her claim is founded on, while others see the claim as a typical occurrence in repatriation and restitution efforts. Suse Anderson, a professor of museum studies at the George Washington University, , said the complex nature of repatriation and restitution makes claims like Farmer-Paellmann and RSG are fairly common and to be expected in questions of repatriation.

“This idea of competing claims is relatively common in restitution questions, and it's one of the reasons they're so complex. The history of the world has been incredibly dynamic—country borders have shifted questions around,” Anderson said. “Governance and government structures have changed questions around who defines ownership of artifacts, where they belong, and whether they were paid for under duress or not under duress. These are the very things that animate these kinds of conversations.”

Acknowledging the deeply complex and contested nature of restitution and artifact ownership, Anderson proposed focusing repatriation efforts on preservation and community empowerment, while various ownership claims are being settled.

“If we think about who has access to resources and information, noting that restitution often comes with a valuable exchange, restitution efforts like these stop being single-sided. It’s no longer institutions holding on to these things that other institutions deserve and lack,” Anderson said. “That exchange, I think, is really empowering to many communities and can be really positive. There is no necessarily right answer on who this belongs to, but there is something good that can come out of the exchange.”