

CULTURE



Jembe (power objects) from Buganda collected by Roscoe



Tanned horse hoof

UGANDAN ARTEFACTS RETURNED FROM UK

BY TITUS KAKEMBO

More than half a century is long enough for absence to start masquerading as truth. Memory thins. Ownership blurs.

For decades, many of Uganda's cultural artefacts existed in that uneasy space — physically absent and narratively controlled from elsewhere. Their return is now underway. But this moment is not really about objects coming home. It is about something far more consequential: who gets to tell history.

Across Uganda, the response has been immediate. These artefacts are not being received as curiosities or museum pieces. They are being recognised as evidence — of identity, continuity and a past that was interrupted, exported and reframed.

Among the most symbolic returns is a set of artefacts repatriated from the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in the UK.

In 1964, British colonial administrator and anthropologist John Roscoe removed a collection of cultural objects from Uganda and shipped them to Britain during the late colonial era.

The returned collection includes regalia, traditional tools and objects tied to Buganda's royal and cultural history.

After decades in storage and exhibition abroad, the pieces

were finally returned through negotiations involving Ugandan authorities, cultural institutions and British museums.

Some of the returned artefacts are now housed at the Uganda Museum in Kampala, where conservators and historians are documenting them for public education and exhibition.

Others are expected to be shared with the cultural institutions and communities from which they originated, especially in Buganda and western Uganda. Discussions are still ongoing over whether future returns should remain under national custody or be permanently relocated to traditional kingdoms and community museums.

Objects taken during the colonial period were preserved, catalogued and displayed in foreign

institutions, often stripped of the context. What remained at home were fragments: Oral histories, inherited memory and the quiet awareness that something was missing.

Repatriation begins to close that gap. But more importantly, it shifts authority.

"Museums are no longer just places to store the past. They are spaces for education, dialogue and economic development," says Jackline Beisigye, Uganda's commissioner of museums.

The return of the artefacts creates the possibility for Ugandans to interpret their own history — on their own terms, and for their own audiences. That matters because history is never neutral. It shapes how nations see themselves, and how they are seen by others.

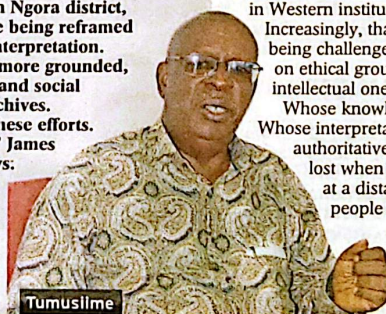
CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE

Sites such as the Nyero Rock paintings in Ngora district, Kasubi Tombs and Bigo bya Mugenyi are being reframed not just as attractions, but as spaces of interpretation. Cultural centres like Nshenyi are telling more grounded, lived histories — of cattle, trade, conflict and social structure that rarely feature in formal archives.

The return of artefacts adds weight to these efforts.

"These returned pieces will not speak," James Tumusiime of Igongo Cultural Centre says: "But they will make us ask questions."

And it is in those questions that their significance becomes clearest. Not just what happened. But how it was recorded. Who recorded it. And whose voices were left out.



Tumusiime



Apron for Karimojong girls

For decades, Uganda's global identity has been framed largely through wildlife and landscape — gorillas, savannahs, lakes and national parks. Cultural heritage, despite its depth, remained secondary. The absence of artefacts helped reinforce that imbalance.

"These objects carry our story. Having them back gives us an opportunity to tell it in our own voice," says James Tumusiime of Igongo Cultural Centre.

The timing is not accidental.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

As Uganda prepares to mark International Museum Day on Monday, May 18, the conversation around cultural ownership is shifting globally. For a long time, the dominant argument held that artefacts were safer, better preserved and more accessible in Western institutions.

Increasingly, that position is being challenged — not just on ethical grounds, but on intellectual ones.

Whose knowledge counts? Whose interpretation is authoritative? And what is lost when history is told at a distance from the people who lived it?

"Now the discussion is about justice, context and giving

communities agency over their heritage," says tourism state minister Martin Mugarra.

Many of these artefacts were taken out of the country between the late 1800s and the early decades of the 20th century by colonial administrators, missionaries, explorers and anthropologists who collected royal regalia, ceremonial objects, drums, spears, stools and spiritual items during military campaigns and colonial expeditions.

Their absence was never just physical. It shaped how history was archived, studied and understood.

For younger Ugandans, the impact is immediate. "These pieces give young people something tangible. Something real that connects them to their past beyond what they read in books," says principal curator Nelson Abiti.

That tangibility matters in an age where history is often abstract, digitised or distant. To stand before an object shaped by your own cultural lineage is to encounter history not as theory, but as presence.

As tourism potential grows, so does the temptation to treat artefacts as assets — as economic tools rather than cultural anchors.

"The challenge is to ensure that these artefacts remain connected to the people and traditions that gave them meaning," says Olive Nakalembe at the tourism ministry.