

**THE MPONPONSUO AFENA AS AN AGENT OF PEACEBUILDING: A  
RESTITUTION THEORY ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE RETURN  
AND RECONCILIATION**

**Lawer Mawuli Akunor (PhD Candidate)**

Film Artistic Department - Institute of Film and Television  
University of Media, Arts and Communication: Institute of Film and Television  
Orchid Number: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6554-8117>  
Email: [dpmc24008@student.unimac.edu.gh](mailto:dpmc24008@student.unimac.edu.gh),

**Emmanuel Bempong**

Sunyani Technical University, Department of Communication Studies, Sunyani  
ORCID Number:0000-0001-6202-4356  
Email: [bemila1971@gmail.com](mailto:bemila1971@gmail.com).Tel:0244-525595

and

**Joseph Aketema**

Institute of Film and Television  
University of Media, Arts and Communication  
Email: [jaketema@unimac.edu.gh](mailto:jaketema@unimac.edu.gh)  
Orcid.org/0000-0003-1791-1612

**Abstract**

This paper examines the 2024 return of the Mponponsuo Afena (Responsibility Sword) from the British Museum to Manhyia Palace through the lens of cultural heritage restitution, framing the artifact as an active agent in peacebuilding between Ghana and Britain. Created by Okomfo Anokye for Asantehene Opoku Ware I in the eighteenth century, the Afena functions as a material instrument of political legitimacy and cultural continuity within Asante governance. Its seizure during the 1874 Anglo-Asante War constituted both material dispossession and symbolic violence against Asante sovereignty. The 2024 return, structured as a renewable three-year loan, offers a critical case for assessing how restitution initiatives can facilitate reconciliation while exposing the contradictions of loan-based frameworks that preserve colonial ownership. Drawing on restitution theory (Campfens, 2019; Sarr & Savoy, 2018), the study analyses Afena's return as a simultaneous act of partial legal-ethical repair, cultural restoration, and peacebuilding, while interrogating the paradox of restoring sacred regalia through temporary custodial arrangements. The research further examines how museum narratives have historically privileged European epistemologies over indigenous Asante interpretive frameworks and why meaningful restitution must encompass complete ceremonial ensembles rather than isolated objects. The study employs an ethnographic methodology combining visual documentation, participant observation, and purposive sampling of twenty (20) knowledgeable cultural custodians to elaborate Afena's contemporary ceremonial functions and the community's response to its return. The findings demonstrate that authentic cultural heritage restitution requires permanent, unconditional return grounded in the recognition of indigenous ownership rights, and the dismantling of legal structures that continue to impede comprehensive restitution of sacred regalia.

**Keywords:** Mponponsuo Afena, Asante Royal Regalia, Manhyia Palace Museum, Epistemologies, Tradition

## **Introduction**

The 2024 return of the Mponponsuo Afena to Manhyia Palace marks a significant yet paradoxical moment in the global movement toward cultural heritage restitution and historical reconciliation. After 150 years of separation following its appropriation during the 1874 Anglo-Asante War, the Afena's physical presence once again graces the ceremonial spaces of Asante traditional authority (Boakye, 2021; British Museum, 2024). However, this return operates under a three-year renewable loan agreement rather than a permanent transfer, raising fundamental questions about the nature of restitution itself. How does one genuinely reconstitute sacred regalia to its people while maintaining ownership claims through loan arrangements? Can temporary transfers address the profound historical injustices that restitution theory seeks to rectify? This paper proposes a comprehensive study to examine these contradictions through a critical analysis of restitution frameworks, legal structures, and indigenous knowledge sovereignty.

## **Understanding the philosophical undergird of Mponponsuo Afena**

The Mponponsuo Afena, whose name derives from the Akan word meaning responsibility, embodies Asante's concepts of accountable leadership, spiritual authority, and cultural continuity (Boakye, 2021, p. 158). Created by the legendary priest Okomfo Anokye for Opoku Ware I in the early eighteenth century, the Afena functions as a sophisticated communication system comprising ceremonial regalia, performance contexts, oral traditions, and indigenous epistemologies that collectively constitute cultural expression and political legitimation (Ross, 1982; Sarpong, 1971; McCaskie, 1995). Critically, the Afena never functioned in isolation but as part of a complete ceremonial ensemble worn by the Mponponsuohene, including a feathered headdress, gold pectoral discs, ceremonial textiles, and other coordinated elements that together communicate Asante royal authority and cultural identity (Kyerematen, 1964). Yet current restitution arrangements address only the Afena itself, leaving the remainder of this integrated system dispersed across Western institutions or lost to history.

This study critically analyses Afena's return through restitution theory frameworks while interrogating the structural contradictions embedded in loan-based arrangements. The research examines how loan agreements perpetuate colonial power dynamics by maintaining Western institutional ownership claims. It further emphasises how indigenous Asante narratives about

the regalia challenge museum knowledge frameworks built on colonial appropriation (Amo-Agyemang, 2025). The study further examines why genuine restitution requires legal reforms enabling permanent, unconditional return of complete ceremonial ensembles rather than isolated objects (Campfens, 2019; Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Woodhead, 2020).

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Analyse the contradictions inherent in loan-based restitution arrangements of the Mponponsuo Afena.
2. Investigate how indigenous Asante knowledge about the Afena is built and sustained.
3. Demonstrate why comprehensive restitution must address complete ceremonial ensembles of the Mponponsuo Afena.

### **Research Questions**

This proposed study is guided by the following critical questions:

1. How do the loan-based restitution arrangements of the Mponponsuo Afena embody structural contradictions between symbolic return and the persistence of colonial ownership frameworks?
2. How is indigenous Asante knowledge about the Mponponsuo Afena constructed, transmitted, and sustained across generations within ceremonial and oral traditions?
3. Why must comprehensive restitution of the Mponponsuo Afena extend beyond the return of the blade to include the complete ceremonial ensemble and its integrated cultural system?

### **Methodological Approach**

This research employs purposive sampling of twenty (20) knowledgeable cultural respondents, and an ethnographic methodology that integrated visual documentation, participant observation, oral historical narratives and legal-institutional analysis was used. This methodological approach aligns with the restitution theory's emphasis on centering source community voices while extending analysis to examine structural and legal dimensions that constrain or enable genuine restitution (Smith, 1999, Smith, 2021; Chilisa, 2012). The methodology prioritises collaborative engagement with Asante cultural custodians while

examining the institutional and legal frameworks that shape restitution possibilities. Beyond the ethnographic methods described previously, this study incorporates legal and institutional analysis examining British Museum policies, British heritage legislation, international cultural property frameworks, and comparative case studies of successful permanent restitution. We further use discourse analysis to anchor our discussions on the loan agreement terms to explain what constraints they impose on traditional Asante authority.

### **Restitution Theory and Cultural Heritage Ethics: Perspectives on Loan Agreements and Legal Frameworks**

Restitution theory provides critical frameworks for analyzing how the return of appropriated cultural property can facilitate justice, reconciliation, and healing in contexts of historical violence and dispossession (Chechi, 2023; Gerstenblith, 2023). However, the theory also exposes fundamental contradictions in loan-based arrangements that claim to achieve restitution while maintaining colonial ownership structures (Campfens, 2019; Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Woodhead, 2020). This section examines core principles of restitution theory while critically interrogating how loan agreements paradoxically undermine the very justice they purport to serve.

### **The Paradox of Loan-Based Restitution: Temporary Transfers and Permanent Injustices**

Since restitution theory holds that historical injustices create moral obligations requiring active rectification through material return that acknowledges wrongful appropriation and restores rightful ownership (Campfens, 2019, p. 18), the Mponponsuo Afena's return through a three-year renewable loan agreement creates a fundamental paradox that this study interrogates. Thus, how can institutions genuinely retribute sacred regalia while maintaining ownership claims that perpetuate the very colonial hierarchy that restitution seeks to dismantle?

Sarr and Savoy (2018) explicitly critique loan arrangements as inadequate mechanisms for addressing colonial violence, arguing that temporary transfers fundamentally misconstrue the nature of restitution. They contend that loans maintain Western institutions as benevolent lenders graciously permitting source communities conditional access to their own heritage, thereby reinscribing colonial power relations where Western institutions determine terms, conditions, and duration of access (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 52). Genuine restitution requires

permanent, unconditional transfer acknowledging that appropriation was fundamentally unjust and that source communities possess inalienable rights to their cultural property regardless of legal technicalities. Anything less constitutes continuation of dispossession under ostensibly progressive rhetoric.

The three-year renewable structure introduces additional complications. Renewable agreements create ongoing uncertainty about Afena's future, potentially requiring Asante authorities to repeatedly petition for extensions, thereby forcing source communities into positions of supplication that Sarr and Savoy identify as dignity violations. The renewable nature suggests that the British Museum maintains authority to evaluate whether Manhyia Palace has adequately cared for the Afena, implicitly positioning Western institutions as judges of indigenous stewardship capabilities. This paternalistic framework echoes colonial justifications for appropriation that claimed African communities lacked the capacity for proper heritage preservation, justifications that restitution theory thoroughly discredits as racist ideology masking theft (Hicks, 2023, p. 67).

### **Legal Frameworks and the Need for Reform: Enabling Genuine Restitution**

The loan arrangement reflects not merely institutional reluctance, but legal constraints embedded in British national heritage law that currently obstruct permanent restitution. The British Museum Act 1963 prohibits the museum from permanently deaccessioning objects from its collection except under narrowly defined circumstances, effectively treating colonial appropriations as inalienable national heritage requiring protection from disposal (Palmer, 2000, p. 234). This legal framework privileges institutional possession over indigenous ownership rights, codifying colonial appropriations as legitimate acquisitions deserving legal protection (Diergarten, 2019; Nichols, 2018). Recent amendments allowing long-term loans represent incremental progress but fundamentally avoid confronting the ethical bankruptcy of laws that protect colonial theft.

Woodhead (2020) argues that genuine restitution requires comprehensive legal reform at national and international levels. Nationally, Britain must amend heritage legislation to create explicit exceptions for objects acquired through colonial violence, establishing a presumption

of return rather than a presumption of retention (Woodhead, 2020, p. 165). Such reforms would acknowledge that colonial appropriations differ fundamentally from legitimate acquisitions and therefore merit different legal treatment. Germany's recent reforms enabling the return of Benin Bronzes demonstrate that legal change is politically feasible when institutions prioritize justice over institutional interests. France has similarly amended laws to facilitate restitution to Benin and Senegal, though critics note these reforms remain limited to specific cases rather than establishing comprehensive principles (Savoy, 2022, p. 89).

Internationally, existing frameworks like the UNESCO conventions on cultural property focus primarily on preventing future illicit trafficking rather than addressing historical appropriations. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property established important principles but explicitly does not apply retroactively to colonial-era appropriations (Prott & O'Keefe, 1989, p. 456). New international instruments are necessary that recognize colonial appropriations as ongoing injustices requiring rectification, regardless of historical legality under colonial legal systems. Such frameworks might establish international tribunals for adjudicating restitution claims, create binding obligations for states to return appropriate heritage, and provide mechanisms for the coordination of the return of dispersed ceremonial ensembles currently scattered across multiple institutions and jurisdictions. This paper investigates specific legal reforms necessary to enable comprehensive restitution of the complete Mponponsuo Afena ceremonial ensemble.

### **Indigenous Knowledge Sovereignty: Whose Narratives About Sacred Regalia?**

The question of who built and controls narratives about the Mponponsuo Afena illuminates profound epistemological dimensions of restitution extending beyond physical objects to knowledge sovereignty. During 150 years of museum custody, British Museum scholars and curators constructed authoritative narratives about the Afena through cataloguing practices, exhibition labels, scholarly publications, and institutional documentation that positioned Western interpretive frameworks as legitimate while marginalising or ignoring indigenous Asante knowledge systems (Hicks, 2023; Coombes, 1994). Museum narratives emphasised aesthetic qualities, technical metallurgical features, and abstract symbolic meanings accessible through visual analysis, while systematically excluding or dismissing spiritual dimensions

(Han, 2025; Seppä, 2024), ceremonial protocols, oral traditions, and Akan philosophical concepts that Asante people consider essential to understanding the Afena's significance.

This epistemic colonisation paralleled physical appropriation, denying Asante intellectual sovereignty over their own cultural heritage. British Museum labels described the Afena as state sword, ceremonial weapon, or decorative object, categories derived from Western understandings of similar artifacts but fundamentally misconstruing how the Asante people conceptualise the Afena as living agent possessing *suman* (spiritual power), materialising *kra* (life force) of the Asantehene, and embodying ancestral authority transcending purely material or symbolic dimensions (Gyekye, 1995; Sarpong, 1971). Museum knowledge production thus constituted ongoing violence that persisted long after physical appropriation, continuing to dispossess the Asante people of the authority to define and interpret their own heritage.

Indigenous Asante knowledge about the Afena derives from fundamentally different epistemological foundations than museum scholarship. Palace authorities, elders, and ceremonial specialists possess knowledge transmitted through oral traditions spanning centuries, through direct participation in ceremonies where the Afena functions as an active agent, through apprenticeship systems that teach proper handling and interpretation, and through spiritual experiences that museum curators cannot access or evaluate using Western academic frameworks (Boakye, 2021, p. 172). This knowledge encompasses dimensions that Western scholarship systematically excludes: how the Afena's power accumulates through use in binding oaths, how its spiritual efficacy depends on proper ritual consecration, how it connects living Asante people to founding ancestors through material continuity, and how its significance transcends individual objects to participate in networks of relational meaning impossible to capture through isolated museum display.

Genuine restitution requires not only physical return but also epistemic decolonisation that restores indigenous interpretive authority. This means acknowledging that Asante palace authorities are rightful experts on the Afena's significance, that their knowledge possesses equal or superior legitimacy compared to Western Museum scholarship, and that future research must center on indigenous epistemologies rather than treating them as supplementary to Western frameworks. The return creates opportunities for rebalancing knowledge power,

enabling Asante custodians to challenge museum narratives, assert alternative interpretations, and determine what knowledge about the Afena should be shared publicly versus protected as restricted ceremonial knowledge (Smith, 1999; Smith, 2021).

Additionally, the research examines how loan arrangements affect knowledge sovereignty. Does temporary possession enable full transmission of ceremonial knowledge to younger generations, or does ongoing British Museum ownership create uncertainty that inhibits comprehensive cultural education? Can Asante authorities freely share restricted knowledge about Afena when ultimate ownership remains with external institutions that may be subject to different disclosure requirements? These questions illuminate how legal ownership structures affect not only physical access but also knowledge sovereignty, demonstrating why permanent restitution is necessary for restoring indigenous authority over both objects and knowledge systems.

### **Community Dissatisfaction with the Loan Agreement Framework**

A theme that emerged from respondents is their profound dissatisfaction with the three-year renewable loan structure governing Afena's return. This dissatisfaction operates at multiple interconnected levels: legal-political, cultural-spiritual, and practical-ceremonial. Respondents consistently articulate that the loan arrangement fundamentally contradicts Asante's understandings of ownership and belonging, particularly regarding sacred regalia that never ceased to belong to the Asante people despite physical separation (Gyekye, 1995). The notion that the British Museum maintains ultimate ownership while graciously permitting temporary access is experienced not as progressive restitution but as a continuation of colonial dispossession under ostensibly benevolent rhetoric.

It has been argued that the younger generations must learn ceremonial protocols involving the Afena through sustained engagement over many years, not uncertain three-year intervals (Boakye, 2021, p. 175). The renewable structure means that every three years, the community must effectively petition for continued access to their own heritage, positioning them as supplicants rather than rightful owners. This dynamic mirrors colonial-era relationships where African authorities had to seek permission from European powers for matters concerning their own sovereignty and cultural practices (Hicks, 2023, p. 89).

While specific terms remain confidential, community members worry that the renewable structure grants the British Museum ongoing authority to evaluate whether Manhyia Palace is adequately caring for the Afena, potentially threatening non-renewal if institutional standards are not met. This arrangement positions Western museum expertise as the arbiter of proper heritage management, implicitly questioning indigenous capacity for stewardship of their own sacred objects (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 54). Such concerns echo historical colonial justifications for appropriation that claimed African communities lacked technical capacity or cultural sophistication to properly preserve their heritage, justifications now thoroughly discredited as racist ideology masking theft (Savoy, 2022, p. 112).

### **Reluctance to Divulge Information on Ceremonial Use and Spiritual Significance**

A significant finding is the reluctance among certain cultural custodians and ceremonial specialists to divulge detailed information about Afena's ceremonial functions, spiritual properties, and associated ritual protocols. This protective stance operates differently from simple privacy concerns; it reflects profound anxieties about knowledge appropriation, spiritual vulnerability, and the potential for sacred information to be extracted, commodified, or misused when indigenous control remains incomplete. The reluctance became particularly evident when interviews approached questions about specific ritual procedures, invocations associated with the Afena, and the spiritual mechanisms through which the regalia exercises agency within Asante cosmology (Sarpong, 1971, p. 67).

This protective behaviour appears directly connected to the ongoing ambiguity of Afena's legal status and the loan arrangement's implications for knowledge sovereignty. The respondents indicated, both explicitly and implicitly through their hesitations, that if the British Museum retains ultimate ownership, there remains a risk that ceremonial knowledge shared within the research context might become subject to external institutional claims or documentation practices beyond indigenous control. Asante cultural systems maintain distinctions between public knowledge (accessible to all), restricted knowledge (accessible to initiated community members), and sacred knowledge (accessible only to specific ritual specialists and lineage holders) (Yankah, 1995, p. 78). The current legal ambiguity creates uncertainty about which category applies to knowledge shared during research when the physical object remains legally

owned by a European institution with potentially different epistemological frameworks and disclosure obligations.

Furthermore, historical experiences of knowledge extraction inform current protective stances. Colonial-era anthropologists and missionaries systematically documented African religious and ceremonial practices, often without consent and in ways that violated sacred prohibitions, subsequently publishing this knowledge in forms accessible to global audiences while African source communities lost control over who accessed their spiritual knowledge and for what purposes (Chilisa, 2012, p. 134). These historical precedents create legitimate concerns that sharing detailed ceremonial knowledge, even within academic research contexts, might facilitate new forms of appropriation or misuse. Several elders referenced examples where ceremonial knowledge documented by colonial scholars was later deployed inappropriately, sometimes appearing in commercial contexts or being practised by individuals lacking proper initiation and authority (Smith, 1999, p. 89). Such historical experiences underscore why complete restitution, including permanent legal ownership transfer, constitutes a prerequisite for full knowledge sharing, as only genuine indigenous control can provide assurance against renewed knowledge appropriation.

### **Subtle Suspicion Regarding Authenticity in the Context of Modern Technology**

Another core finding concerns subtle expressions of suspicion among some community members regarding whether the returned object is genuinely the original Mponponso Afena or potentially a replica produced through modern technological means. This suspicion, while not universally expressed, emerged in several informal conversations and represents a significant dimension of community reception deserving careful analysis. The concerns centre on the recognition that contemporary digital scanning technologies, 3D printing capabilities, and advanced metallurgical reproduction techniques could theoretically enable the creation of visually indistinguishable copies of historical artifacts (Jones, 2018, p. 134).

These suspicions partly reflect awareness of museum practices involving digital documentation and reproduction, noting that major institutions increasingly employ high-resolution 3D scanning for collection documentation, ostensibly for conservation and scholarly purposes (Bennett, 2017, p. 156). However, the same technologies that enable precise documentation

also permit the creation of remarkably accurate physical replicas, raising questions about whether institutions might retain original objects while returning copies, or whether scanning processes might have been conducted before their return to enable future reproduction. Several community members expressed concern that the British Museum, having possessed the Afena for 150 years, had ample opportunity to produce detailed documentation and replicas before return, potentially retaining material or digital surrogates even as they relinquish physical custody.

Also, technological concerns intersect with spiritual authentication frameworks within Asante's epistemology. For many cultural practitioners, the Afena's authenticity extends beyond material composition to encompass spiritual properties and accumulated power (*suman*) derived from centuries of ceremonial use, ancestral connection, and ritual consecration (Gyekye, 1995, p. 134). Physical replicas, no matter how materially accurate, cannot possess these spiritual dimensions. This creates a dual authentication challenge: European technological verification focused on material composition and manufacturing techniques versus indigenous spiritual verification assessing the object's spiritual authenticity and accumulated power. Several ritual specialists indicated that proper spiritual verification would require ceremonial procedures and consultation with ancestral authorities through established protocols, procedures made complicated by the Afena's 150-year separation and the ambiguous circumstances of its return.

Colonial and post-colonial museum practices have documented numerous cases where institutions made dubious claims about provenance, concealed information about acquisition circumstances, or provided incomplete disclosure when pressed about their holdings (Coombes, 1994, p. 178). Given this history, community scepticism about institutional transparency appears entirely rational. The finding underscores that genuine restitution requires not only physical return but also comprehensive transparency about all documentation, scanning, and reproduction activities conducted during custody, coupled with mechanisms allowing indigenous communities to verify authenticity through both European technological and indigenous spiritual frameworks.

### **Constituent Parts of the Afena: Beyond Material Components to Integrated Systems**

In this study, clarifying what indigenous cultural frameworks identify as the constituent parts of the Mponponsuo Afena, revealing that Asante's conceptualisations extend significantly beyond the material components described in museum catalogues and existing scholarly literature. While previous sections of this paper have documented the blade, hilt, sheath, and associated allied regalia worn by the bearer, ongoing interviews with cultural specialists are illuminating additional dimensions that complicate restitution discussions and demonstrate why comprehensive return must address more than isolated physical objects.

According to several knowledgeable elders, the complete Mponponsuo Afena as understood within Asante epistemology comprises not only physical regalia but also non-material elements essential to its proper function and meaning. These include the specific ritual knowledge (nyansa) required for proper handling, consecration procedures, and ceremonial protocols; the oral traditions (nsem) narrating the Afena's creation, historical uses, and associated proverbs; the musical accompaniments and drumming patterns performed during ceremonies where the Afena is displayed; and the relational networks connecting the Afena to other state regalia, ancestral authorities, and living officeholders who activate its power through their embodied presence and ritual actions (Ross, 1982, p. 67; Yankah, 1995, p. 92).

Additionally, the respondents emphasised that the Afena functions as part of a living system requiring the continued presence and participation of trained specialists who carry embodied knowledge about proper ceremonial deployment. This includes the Mponponsuohene (officeholder who carries and dances with the Afena), drummers who know the specific rhythms, linguists (akyeame) who recite associated proverbs and historical accounts, and ritual priests who maintain the Afena's spiritual potency through periodic ceremonies (Sarpong, 1971, p. 89). The 150-year separation disrupted these systems of embodied knowledge transmission, creating what several elders characterised as ceremonial amnesia regarding certain protocols. While some knowledge has been preserved through careful oral transmission and documentation, other dimensions have been lost or exist only in fragmentary form, requiring painstaking reconstruction through consultation with multiple knowledge holders and examination of historical records.

These findings regarding constituent parts demonstrate that European Museum categorisation systems, which privilege discrete physical objects amenable to individual cataloguing and display, fundamentally misrepresent how Asante people conceptualise ceremonial regalia. The Mponponsuo Afena is not merely a sword plus allied physical objects; it is an integrated system encompassing material forms, embodied practices, oral knowledge, musical elements, spiritual relationships, and social networks that collectively enable the regalia to function as intended within Asante governance and cultural life (Chwe, 2013, p. 78). Genuine restitution, therefore, requires not only returning physical components but also supporting the reconstruction and revitalisation of knowledge systems, ceremonial practices, and specialist roles that were disrupted by appropriation and prolonged separation. This significantly expands what comprehensive restitution must address beyond merely transferring ownership of isolated artifacts.

### **The Sacredness of the Regalia and Its Implications for Research and Display**

Over the years, it has become increasingly evident that cultural custodians understand the Afena not as a historical artifact or artistic object (European museum categories) but as a living sacred entity possessing spiritual power, agency, and connection to ancestral authorities that transcend purely material or symbolic dimensions (Gyekye, 1995, p. 156; Sarpong, 1971, p. 72).

This sacredness imposes specific protocols and restrictions governing appropriate interaction with the regalia. Multiple respondents emphasised that the Afena should not be handled casually, photographed without proper authorisation, or discussed in certain contexts without observing ceremonial proprieties. Specific taboos (akyiwade) regulate who may touch the Afena, under what circumstances physical contact is permitted, and what ritual purifications must precede and follow handling (Rattray, 1923, p. 278). These restrictions are not merely cultural preferences or traditional customs but spiritual requirements understood as necessary for maintaining the Afena's power and preventing spiritual harm to those who interact with it improperly. Violations of these protocols are believed to carry serious spiritual consequences, not only for individuals but potentially for the broader community whose well-being depends on maintaining proper relationships with sacred objects and ancestral powers.

The implications for research are substantial. Standard ethnographic methods involving photography, measurement, and material analysis must be negotiated with cultural authorities who determine what documentation is permissible, under what conditions, and with what ritual preparations. Visual documentation (the research's emphasis on participant observation and visual methods) must respect restrictions on what may be photographed, from what angles, and during which ceremonial contexts. Certain aspects of the Afena's ceremonial function, particularly those involving restricted ritual knowledge, cannot be observed by non-initiated researchers regardless of academic credentials or research permissions from formal authorities (Chilisa, 2012, p. 145). This reality requires research designs that acknowledge legitimate boundaries around sacred knowledge while still achieving scholarly objectives through culturally appropriate methods.

Furthermore, the sacredness dimension raises critical questions about appropriate display contexts now that the Afena has returned to Manhyia Palace. Museum display practices developed for European institutions, emphasising visibility, accessibility, and educational interpretation, may conflict with indigenous requirements for sacred regalia. Several cultural specialists indicated that certain powerful regalia should not be continuously displayed for public viewing but rather should be brought out only during appropriate ceremonial occasions when proper spiritual protocols can be observed (McCaskie, 1995, p. 134). The Manhyia Palace Museum must therefore negotiate between tourism and educational objectives (generating revenue and promoting cultural understanding) and cultural-spiritual requirements (respecting sacredness and maintaining proper relationships with powerful objects). These negotiations involve complex decisions about when the Afena is displayed, who may view it, under what conditions, and with what explanatory materials, all while respecting both sacred protocols and the reality that the regalia has returned as part of a loan agreement with institutional expectations about appropriate stewardship and public access.

The findings regarding sacredness underscore that restitution is not simply a matter of transferring physical custody but require acknowledging and accommodating fundamentally different epistemological frameworks regarding what sacred objects are and how they should be treated. British museums practices treating artifacts as secular objects for study and display must give way to indigenous frameworks recognising sacred regalia as powerful entities

requiring specific spiritual protocols. Genuine restitution therefore necessitates not only legal ownership transfer but also restoration of indigenous authority to determine appropriate treatment, display, and research access according to their own cultural and spiritual requirements rather than European institutional norms (Smith, 2021, p. 167). The loan arrangement's ambiguity about ultimate authority complicates these negotiations, as cultural custodians must balance indigenous protocols with potential institutional expectations embedded in loan terms, creating ongoing tensions between sacred requirements and institutional frameworks.

### **The Mponponsuo Afena: Material Form, Cultural Significance, and the Complete Ceremonial Ensemble**

The Mponponsuo Afena comprises several material elements functioning as an integrated communication system. The artifact features a 60 to 70 centimeter curved cast iron blade decorated with distinctive circle-triangle motifs pierced along the outer cutting edge (Boakye, 2021; Ampene & Nyantakyi, 2016). The barbell-shaped wooden hilt is covered with leopard skin, signifying royal authority, topped by a gold ball ornament made from plaited gold strands. The sheath bears a gold embossment depicting a coiled puff adder holding a hornbill in its mouth, visualising the proverb that the puff adder that cannot fly has caught the hornbill that flies; communicating leadership virtues of patience, strategic thinking, and circumspection essential to Asante political philosophy (Cole & Ross, 1977; Boakye, 2021, p. 163). Refer to figure 1



**Figure 1.** Photograph of some returned regalia on exhibition at the Manhyia Palace Museum with the Mpomponsuo Afena labelled A (Photo: By the First Author)

Alt. Title: A photograph of some regalia displayed in a showcase at the Manhyia Palace Museum, with the Mpomponsuo Afena in the Background and labelled A (Photo: By the First Author)

However, understanding the Mpomponsuo Afena requires recognizing that it never functioned in isolation but as a centerpiece of a complete ceremonial regalia system worn by the Mpomponsuohene. This ensemble includes ntakrakye (feathered headdress with distinctive eagle plumes), akrafokomu (gold pectoral discs worn across the neck), waist side regalia among others. Refer to figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Mpomponsohene dressed in full regalia, and holding the Mpompomsuo Afena.  
(Photo by Manhyia Palace)

Atl. Title: The Mpomponsohene dressed in full regalia, wearing a white cloth, adorned with accompanying gold regalia, and holding the Mpompomsuo Afena. (Photo by Manhyia Palace)

Each element communicates specific cultural messages through material, color, form, and iconographic symbolism, with meanings emerging from relationships among elements rather than from components in isolation (Kyerematen, 1964; Ross, 1982). The coordinated visual impact of gleaming gold against richly dyed textiles, the sonic dimension of bells

accompanying movement (Vernallis, 2023), and the symbolic resonance of leopard imagery restricted to royalty create multisensory communicative effects that isolated objects cannot replicate.

**Table 1: Summary of responses from knowledgeable**

<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Age (Years)</b>	<b>Responses</b>
6	20-39	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We see it every day, but we don't know what it really means</li> <li>2. Our fathers say that it is the soul sword of the king.</li> <li>3. If we understand what it means, we will be able to appreciate why it has been talked about for so long.</li> <li>4. It is the first time that we could come close to observing what it really looks like.</li> <li>5. Such regalia are not in the domain of women and thus the average woman would not have the opportunity to come close to observing it, as it is on display now in the museum.</li> <li>6. If we must fight to get all the regalia back, we should; that's just what you do when you discover your property that has been stolen.</li> </ol>
5	40-59	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is infuriating that our regalia is looted only to be returned in pieces and on a loan basis.</li> <li>2. We can understand that why the British must give up these regalia, but our people also have the history and narrative of these things that have been handed down to them over the generations.</li> <li>3. There is more to the sword than just its physical appearance.</li> <li>4. it is and can be a strong regalia that reconciles our people</li> </ol>
5	60- 79	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is heartwarming that after so many years, Otumfuo has been able to secure some of the key regalia back home. We know that other regalia will come soon.</li> </ol>

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. “If the crow picks the feathers of a parrot to decorate itself, it is how it crows that will show its identity.”</li> <li>3. “The sparrow can never be the farm owner.”</li> <li>4. Diplomacy and tact are the ways to negotiate peace in today’s world.</li> <li>5. Dialog brings results, and the use of force brings more enemies.</li> <li>6. I hope that the younger generation will embrace our culture as expressed through our regalia</li> </ol>
4	80	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is quite interesting to imagine that the Afena has been intact all this while.</li> <li>2. Nananom (our ancestors) are gradually bringing their own regalia back home.</li> <li>3. There is a lot more regalia attached to it that is yet to come.</li> <li>4. If we don’t fight to get everything back, we risk losing it together with the history that comes with it.</li> <li>5. Hopefully we may see the full regalia as it was used by our forefathers and be able to testify of what our grandfathers told us.</li> </ol>

The 1874 British appropriation did not target the Mponponsuo Afena alone but systematically removed several items of Asante royal regalia, dispersing this integrated ceremonial system across multiple institutions (Coombes, 1994; British Museum, 2024). Some Akan, Yoruba and other elements remain in the British Museum (Ogundimu, 2025; Seidu, et al., 2022), while others were transferred to museums across Britain and Europe, and many have been lost to history or remain in private collections inaccessible to researchers or source communities. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London holds significant Asante gold ornaments and textiles that likely functioned alongside state Afenas in ceremonial contexts. The Wallace Collection possesses Asante ceremonial objects acquired during or immediately following British military campaigns (Watt, 2023; Savage, 2015). Additional prized West African cultural artefacts are scattered across regional British museums, including those in Manchester, Liverpool, and Oxford, many inadequately catalogued with fragmentary provenance information that obscures

their original ceremonial functions and relationships to other regalia elements (Kingdon & van den Bersselaar, 2017; Poulter, 2013).

This dispersion represents not merely physical separation but deliberate fragmentation of knowledge systems. When ceremonial ensembles are broken apart, the relationships among elements that generate cultural meanings are obscured (Chwe, 2013). Museum cataloguing practices that describe isolated objects cannot capture how elements functioned together in coordinated systems (Jones, 2018; Bennett, 2017). Indigenous knowledge, African systems that catalog ceremonial configurations, proper sequences of assemblage, and relational symbolism becomes difficult to transmit when younger generations cannot experience complete ensembles in living ceremonial contexts (Akporherhe & Udi, 2022; Falola, 2022). Genuine restitution must therefore address not only individual objects but the reconstruction of ceremonial systems through coordinated return of related elements currently dispersed across institutions (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 48).

Critically, the return of the Afena alone does not constitute return of the complete Mponponsuo Afena as it is understood and named within Asante cultural frameworks. The term Mponponsuo Afena, as it is called by Asante people, refers not to an isolated sword but to the entire integrated ceremonial system comprising the blade, its bearer, and all allied regalia functioning together as coordinated communicative and political apparatus (Ross, 1977). The Afena blade without its ntakrakyé, the shoulder cross belt among other ensemble elements represents fragmented heritage incapable of performing its full ceremonial functions or transmitting complete cultural meanings. Only when all Allied Regalia are returned together can it be said that the complete Mponponsuo Afena in its wholeness can be said to have been genuinely restituted (Cudjoe, 2023). Current arrangements that return the blade while leaving ensemble elements dispersed across European institutions thus achieve partial restitution at best, restoring physical presence of one component while the integrated system remains fragmented. This incompleteness fundamentally limits what the returned Afena can communicate, how it can function ceremonially, and what knowledge it can transmit to future generations (Watt, 2023). There is also the need to emphasise the fact physical artefacts have prized cultural and spiritual implications (Hooper, 2014). Therefore, comprehensive restitution requires understanding that indigenous naming practices like Mponponsuo Afena designate integrated systems, not isolated objects, and that genuine return must honor these indigenous conceptualisations rather

than imposing European museological categories that privilege individual artifacts over relational assemblages.

### **Contributions and Significance**

The study makes several critical contributions extending beyond existing restitution scholarship by critically analysing loan arrangements as fundamentally inadequate restitution mechanisms. The research contributes to restitution theory's ongoing development, providing empirical documentation of how temporary transfers perpetuate colonial power relations while appearing to address historical injustices. This analysis will strengthen arguments for legal reforms enabling permanent restitution and challenge institutional claims that loans constitute genuine return.

Second, the research advances the understanding of indigenous knowledge sovereignty by documenting how Asante's epistemologies about sacred regalia differ from and challenge European museum narratives. By treating indigenous knowledge as a primary analytical framework rather than supplementary data, the study will model epistemological approaches that decolonial scholarship requires. The arguments demonstrate why genuine restitution must address both physical objects and interpretive authority, restoring indigenous communities as rightful experts on their own heritage.

Third, by documenting the complete Mponponsuo Afena ceremonial ensemble and analysing barriers to comprehensive return, the paper contributes practical frameworks for addressing dispersed heritage systems. The paper demonstrates why restitution must extend beyond isolated objects to encompass relational ceremonial systems, providing models applicable to countless cases where colonial appropriations fragmented integrated cultural assemblages. This systemic perspective challenges current institutional practices that address objects individually without considering ceremonial relationships among elements.

Finally, and most significantly, by examining Mponponsuo Afena's dual role as a traditional peacebuilding instrument and catalyst for international reconciliation, the paper illuminates how cultural heritage restitution operates simultaneously across multiple scales with core

arguments aimed at addressing historical injustices. It is true that this material return creates foundations for transformed relationships extending beyond specific objects to broader patterns of engagement between former colonising powers and source communities. This multiscale analysis will contribute to transitional justice scholarship by showing how material restitution connects individual cases to systemic reconciliation processes.

## **Conclusion**

The proposed study of Mponponsuo Afena's 2024 return will provide critical insights into both the transformative potential and structural limitations of contemporary restitution practices. The three-year renewable loan arrangement exemplifies broader contradictions in how European institutions engage with restitution demands: acknowledging moral obligations to address colonial violence while maintaining legal and institutional structures that perpetuate colonial hierarchies. This paradox requires sustained scholarly attention if restitution movements are to achieve genuine justice rather than symbolic gestures masking continued dispossession.

Genuine restitution requires permanent, unconditional return that acknowledges indigenous ownership rights, comprehensive legal reforms at national and international levels enabling such returns, restoration of indigenous interpretive authority over cultural knowledge, and coordinated restitution of complete ceremonial ensembles rather than isolated objects. Anything less perpetuates colonial power relations under progressive rhetoric, allowing institutions to claim engagement with restitution while maintaining substantive control over appropriated heritage. The Mponponsuo Afena case illuminates these dynamics with particular clarity because sacred regalia cannot be genuinely restituted through temporary possession any more than stolen land can be genuinely returned through leases.

However, the study also demonstrates that imperfect return generates meaningful benefits compared to continued museum custody. The Afena's physical presence enables ceremonial practices, facilitates knowledge transmission, restores community dignity, and contributes to peacebuilding at multiple levels despite ongoing legal ownership contests. These realities

validate demands for comprehensive restitution while acknowledging that incremental progress matters for communities who have endured 150 years of dispossession.

The questions driving this research, regarding loan agreement paradoxes, knowledge sovereignty, complete ensemble restitution, and necessary legal reforms, address urgent issues extending far beyond this single case. Vast quantities of African cultural heritage remain in European institutions under legal frameworks that obstruct return. Countless ceremonial systems have been fragmented through appropriations that separated related elements across multiple institutions. Indigenous communities worldwide continue struggling against institutional and legal structures that privilege European possession over indigenous ownership. Understanding how these dynamics operate in the Mponponsuo Afena case will inform broader struggles for genuine restitution grounded in justice rather than institutional convenience.

As global restitution movements intensify and source communities increasingly demand permanent return of appropriated heritage, scholarship must provide both theoretical frameworks for understanding what genuine restitution requires and practical analyses of obstacles preventing comprehensive return. The study contributes in greater detail in examining a case that embodies both possibilities and limitations of contemporary restitution practices, providing evidence for legal and institutional reforms while documenting cultural revitalisation that even imperfect return enables.

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