

# „Wissen entgrenzen“ Podcast der Max Weber Stiftung

## Topic:

Restitution of African cultural objects. The example of “Akpini royal regalia” from Ghana.

## Guests:

Susann Baller

Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo

## Intro

*Borborbor-Musik, DZORDZORME EFO GERSHON*

### Quote\_Togbui Opeku VI

*“Woƒe teƒe sia vava gana dzideƒo mí be míafɛ kesinɔnuwo mebu o. Nya siwo katã míegblɔ la, wonetsɔe de dɔwɔwɔ me eye woalée ɔe agbalẽ dzi be le yleti wuievea me, ne wogatrɔ va la, agbalẽ siwo míawɔ la nade mía dzi.»*

### Overvoice: Wazi Apoh

“Their coming today has given us so much hope that our heritage is not lost.”

*Musik kurz hoch und weiter unter Aba*

**Aba:** So decolonisation is where we have to regain ourselves. We have to give our own narratives of who we are. It is not just about our self decolonising ourselves in our mindsets and our personality as Africans or our identity as Africans. But it's also about the things that makes us Africans. And the things that makes an African and African is the heritage. Just as it's up to every other human being.

*Einsatz MWS-Intro-Musik*

*Intro Musik Max Weber Stiftung, unter Moderation von Janine abblenden*

## Janine\_mod:

Welcome back to “Wissen Entgrenzen”, the Max Weber Foundation’s podcast. In this podcast we regularly present research on history, culture, economics, and the social sciences connected to the associated institutes around the world. My name is Janine Funke, I am a historian and science journalist and in this episode I will be speaking with Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo and Susann Baller about decolonisation and restitution.

## Susann:

Hello, I'm Susann Baller, and I'm a historian. For the last three years from 21-23, I was one of the two directors of the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa MIASA and affiliated with the German Historical Institute, Paris Max Weber Foundation.

Since January 24 I have been on a Max Weber Collaboration Research Position at the Marc Bloch Centre Berlin.

**Aba\_02:**

Hello, I am Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo, an archaeologist and a senior lecturer at the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies in Ghana. My research interests focus around museology, heritage management, gender issues and archaeology. And my recent research is around restitution issues.

*Borborbor-Musik, DZORDZORME EFO GERSHON*

**Janine\_Mod:**

What you just heard at the beginning of this episode is a quote from Togbui Opeku VI, the chief of Kpando-Agbenohoe in the Volta region in Ghana. This quote is part of a documentary called “Epistemologies of Restitution”, which is produced by Martin Doll and published on the website “Thinking About Restitution”. Togbui Opeku VI talks about the “lost treasures”, the “Akpini Royal Regalia”, that are traditional objects German colonial settlers have taken away from the palace in their region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently, these objects are the property of the Ethnological Museum as part of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. In October 2015, the late King of Kpando, Togbui Dagbadu VIII, made an official request to the German ambassador in Ghana for the return of the objects.

*Musik kurz hoch und weg*

**Janine\_Mod:**

There are many other examples of similar restitution cases, in Germany and other former colonial powers. A very well-known example that has recently received a lot of media attention in Germany, is the case of the “Benin Bronzes”. Twenty out of more than a thousand of these objects were officially returned to Nigeria in December 2022 by the German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock. These were artifacts that had been taken in the late 19th century by British colonialists, and which Germany later purchased.

**Quote\_02 Annalena Baerbock, Speech German Foreign Ministry, 1 July, 2022**

“This is a story of European colonialism. We should not forget that Germany played an active role in this chapter of history. Today, more than 120 years later, we state clearly: The Head of a King belongs to the people of Nigeria.”

**Janine\_Mod:**

This is a quote from the speech Annalena Baerbock gave on July 1, 2022. On that day, an official declaration between Germany and Nigeria was signed that transferred the ownership of the “Benin bronzes” from German Museums to Nigeria. But the return of these objects was also subject to a controversial debate on restitution conditions. A central point of contention was the question of how the objects would be stored and made available to the public after their return to Nigeria. This debate raised a variety of questions: Should conditions be attached to the return of objects, for example regarding the further use of these objects and especially the public access to them? Is museum storage the only acceptable way of preserving historical cultural artefacts? When can a case of restitution be considered successful? And who gets to decide that – as this may not look the same from different perspectives? An international research group at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa, the “MIASA”, at the University of Ghana has engaged with these questions:

**Susann:** So, MIASA is an Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. And it is based on a collaboration with four German partner institutions. Among them is also the German Historical Institute Paris, but also University of Freiburg and others. And it is sponsored by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research with some Co-funding from the University of Ghana. It offers different fellowship formats and also we are organising quite a huge number of events every year. Fellowships go from three months to ten months and one of the fellowship formats is the “Interdisciplinary Fellow Group”, which is always for four months and it brings together 4 to 6 Fellows from different disciplinary backgrounds and from different geographical backgrounds. And one of these IFGs, was we make a short version, IFG, one of these IFGs was with Aba on restitution. Our overall topic is sustainable governance, but we really try to discuss this topic from very different angles and very different areas and also within a critical debate. Our main commitment is also making African thinking more relevant in academic debates.

**Aba:** And restitution, we realized, also fits in well because it's also about best practice, if I can put it that way, which is the best practice for going about with restitution. To whom and then for whom? The IFG5 thought that this was a topic in demand globally. It was a global discussion and we thought we should just focus on that. But in focusing on that, because we had limited time, 4 months, and we wanted to get in depth information on the processes involved, we decided to settle on one revolving case study. So that it's how come the IFG5 group decided to work on Kpando.

**Janine\_Mod:**

And Kpando is the region in Ghana from which a restitution claim for the „Akpini royal regalia“ is ongoing. So, let’s have a closer look on the history of the objects and the region, before talking in more detail about how this particular restitution case has evolved.

### BORBORBOR Musik - DUNE NENYO KEKELI

#### **Janine\_Mod:**

The Kpando Municipal District is located on the eastern bank of the Volta region of Ghana, close to the lake Volta and not far from the border to Togo. The main city in the area is called Kpando. The name “Akpini Royal Regalia” is linked to former migration processes in the region; during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called “Akpini people” came into the area. The “Akpini Royal Regalia” are objects that belonged to the Kpando Royal Palace and include drums, ivory side-blown horns, and smocks. They were taken away in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this story is closely linked to the colonisation of the region.

### Musik kurz hoch

#### **Janine\_Mod:**

In simple terms, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the world was divided into colonists and colonisers, as colonial powers wanted to find new markets, resources, and manpower to make goods. Though Germany did initially not show much interest in becoming a colonial power, this changed in the 1880s, when the possession of colonies became not only a factor in imperial competition, but also an important factor in economic growth at the height of European industrialisation.

### Musik kurz hoch

#### **Mod\_Janine:**

As more and more imperial European powers occupied land in Africa, there was a need for formal agreements amongst the colonialists. From the perspective of European powers, the indigenous people did not have any rights. An important conference in this matter was the Berlin Act of 1885. The main interest of the imperial powers was to ease trade and set rules

for the occupation of the land, to avoid conflict amongst themselves. After the Berlin conference, the German Government officially established so-called “protectorates”, including “Togoland”. The German colony of “Togoland” included the area of today’s Togo and part of Ghana and with it parts of Volta and Oti regions. The city of Kpando officially became part of the German protectorate in 1889. Responsibility for this “protectorate” meant that the colonisers took over the political and economic administration of the occupied region and ruled over many aspects of the social and cultural life.

### Musik kurz hoch und unter Aba abblenden

**Aba:** Well, you know Colonialisation was all about exploitation of resources. It was about subjugation. It was about African people, especially since we are talking about African context, not owning what we have because they are superiors, they are masters with demand or access to whatever you have to do.

*Geräusch-Collage/Kriegsatmo (alles zusammenmischen und 5 Sekunden stehen lassen dann leise unter Mod abblenden (Weg bei „It is assumed...))*

### Mod\_Janine:

When World War I broke out in 1914, battles were not only fought in Europe, but also in the colonies. It is assumed that around this time, the “Akpini Royal Regalia” were stolen from the palace in Kpando and brought to Germany. But there is still a great debate ongoing about when exactly which objects of these objects came to Germany. When Germany lost World War I, it also lost its colonial territories in Africa. The larger part of the former German protectorate Togoland was divided between the British and the French. The Kpando-region was set under British rule. When the state of Ghana was formed in 1957, the region gained independence from the British. It was only after their liberation struggles had led to formal independence, when the region embarked on a far-reaching process of institutional and cultural decolonisation.

**Aba:** So decolonisation is where we have to regain ourselves. We have to give our own narratives of who we are. It is not just about our self decolonising ourselves in our mindsets and our personality as Africans or identity as Africans. It’s also about the things that makes us Africans. And the things that makes an African and African heritage. Just as it's up to every other human being. It's your heritage and African heritage is a living heritage. It's a heritage that is in the survival of the African person. So then in decolonisation, we are saying that it should not just be about words, about thinking about structures. But it should also be about the things that were made by

our forebears that speaks to who we are. That's embedded with the meanings of what's our personality all stands for, what's our values, what's our knowledge systems were all about. So decolonisation is really tied into restitution.

**Janine\_Mod:**

Restitution and decolonisation are closely intertwined. For example, schools, often founded and run by Christian missionaries, were an important part of colonial rule. Children were trained to become good colonial subjects and the curriculum was highly influenced by a colonial worldview, representing Africa as a place with no real history and culture. In the past decades, postcolonial governments, after independence, started to create new curricula, and they also started new research and built new museums to uncover and honor their history. Besides this, also buildings and street names from colonial times were changed, not everywhere, of course, and the processes of these changes entail social debates and often start very late. It's important to mention that the demand for restitution of historical objects, including the "Akpini Royal Regalia", was an important part of all this. And still is.

**Aba:** In simple terms, I would say that restitution is a very complex process, and it's a process that involves restoration, a process that involves returning of heritage, that has been lost or stolen or illegally taken away from a group of people and returning its back to its proper place and its proper units. And those restoration process involves a lot of interest groups. So, it makes it's very dynamic and complex as well. So, in brief term, restitution means what has been illegally taking away should be legally returned back to the people.

**Susann:** I think something which is a bit complicated sometimes in the restitution debate is a focus on the legal terms. It is on one hand very important to think about what is legal, but then also it's very important to think who is setting the legal frame. A lot also a debate on legitimacy, I would say, and who has the agency to claim what and to define the process. So, I think this is something which also has to be considered is not just in terms of simple property rights that we can define this discussion in the past sometimes I mean, for a long time in the in the restitution debate, people sometimes claim, oh, this or that object was given as a gift. But it was still in not a legitimate context. So, I think it's also important to keep in mind it's not just a very narrow legal framework.

**Aba:** But I think as we narrowed it down to the African context, then we can say that's from the sixties, seventies. That was when we had a lot of claims for restitution of African cultural heritage. Again, because independent, African countries were now claiming for the return of their cultural materials to start building their nations, to start knowing themselves. So, in the African context, we will see that from the 1960s demands and claims on restitution heightened.

**Janine\_Mod:**

What I personally find striking is when thinking about restitution in Africa, it is almost impossible to calculate the number of objects that have been taken and that are currently in museums all over the world. There are estimates that mention more than 500.000 objects. Why do we not know the exact numbers? Well, on the one hand, museums do not necessarily publish what they hold. On the other hand, specific communities sometimes do not even know what has been taken from their heritage, as it has not been documented in European archives or locally. In the Kpando case, the people from the region learned merely by accident that the objects were stored in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

**Aba:** So what's happened was that an indigen, a Kpondo man who was teaching then in Germany, visited the museum in Berlin and was fortunate to see the materials. So, he reported to his people, chiefs and community, the people about the materials, the presence of the materials in Germany. And that is where the discussions and negotiations started from.

**Janine\_Mod:**

The first person to see the objects in Germany was Dzablu Kumah. He re-discovered the "Apkini Royal Regalia" in the Museum. And later, scientists from Ghana started to engage with the issue. For example: Wazi Apoh, who later published a book on the colonial history of the Kpando region, which is listed in the shownotes.

**Aba:** Well, later on, Professor Wazi Apoh did research as part of his postdoctoral research, visited a museum. He was able to see it. So, from 2015, he engaged and he's also an indigen. So, he engaged his chiefs and people. It was brought to the attention, confirmations were made, a number of research were done and he saw the collections himself. And from there they took it up and started the process, the restitution process started by demand. And the Chief officially wrote for the return of the royal materials.

*Traditional Borborbor music GATE 5*

**Aba:** The objects, as we said, are royal materials. And, you know, royalty and royal issues help in gain governance. So, it's about governance of the people, governance of the indigenous people. And these are the are royal materials. It's the power of the people, the authority of the chiefs and people. It has some spirituality to them. So, the people are looking forward to receiving them.

*Traditional Borborbor music GATE 5 kurz hoch, und unter Zitat*

**Quote\_01 Togbui Opeku VI,**

*"Woƒe teƒe sia vava gana dzideƒo mí be míafɛ kesinɔnuwo mebu o. Nya siwo*

*katã míegblo la, wonetsɛ de dɔwɔwɔ me eye woalée ɔe agbalě dzi be le yleti  
wuievea mea, ne wogatrɔ va la, agbalě siwo míawɔ la nade mía dzi.»*

**Overvoice: Wazi Apoh**

“Their coming today has given us some assurance that our heritage is not lost. All the things that were said, they should put it in documents, they should work on it and research. They should put all that we have said into practice and record it in a book so that when they return in December, the book that they will write would help us.”

*Traditional Borborbor music GATE 5 kurz hoch, weiter unter Aba*

**Aba:** During the IGF 5, we did interviews with representatives of the Chiefs and then some people in the community. In one of our interviews at the palace, at the Royal Palace where we had Assembly of Elders and Sub-Chiefs present, that information that they have been suffering for a while now and they think that the absence of these royal materials are causing the mishaps that is happening to them. They also believe that, for instance, during our interview in the middle of the interview, there was a heavy downpour. A heavy downpour. And the people told us that their ancestors are happy with the discussions we were having with them, and that is why they were raining down on us.

*Traditional Borborbor music GATE 5 und darüber Atmo Heavy Rain, nach 3 Sekunden darüber noch Atmo different voices, chatter of the conversation, Aba anschließen und unter ihr nur Musik*

**Aba\_12:**

I remember during the interview, one of the Elders mentioned that they would prefer that even in returning the materials, the processes through which the materials were taking away, they were taking from Kpando through Togo through Germany. So, they we're expecting that the materials should similarly pass through that to welcome them back in other to accomplish all the spiritual backings that have been lost along the way. They should pass through all of those routes in order to regain and reassemble all the powers that we have back in the royal materials before they were taken. So that is how precious and how significant they are. You can just see how the materials are going to be to the royal, the royal palace, and then the community as well.

**Janine\_Mod:**

The IFG 5 research group not only interviewed the people of Kpando but they also became part of the process of restitution and helped to involve the key Ghanaian and German stakeholders. They held workshops in Berlin and Accra – the latter one with the German ambassador to Ghana participating. Scientists from Germany, Ghana, and other countries collaborated on questions of restitution. This created confidence in the people of Kpando to push their case forward.



**Aba:** The new king has also officially written to the German ambassador in Ghana requesting for the process. From the German side the officials from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin have gone through the process and are ready to retribute. They are asking for the government's hand in this because they want to retribute through the governments and not to an individual king. So that is the stage that it's in now. Ghana has set up a committee in charge for restitution issues, so the case is now in the hands of the committee in charge of restitution issues.

**Janine\_Mod:**

We asked the Ethnological Museum in Berlin for a statement on this issue. They did not want to give an interview due to the ongoing process on this case. But the press office gave a short statement via E-Mail:

**Quote\_Statement Press Office:**

“In recent years, the Ethnological Museum has conducted intensive provenance research on these objects in collaboration with researchers from the University of Ghana. This has revealed that some of the Kpando objects contain human remains from other regions. The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation is, in principle, prepared to return the objects. However, in order to initiate a restitution process, the involvement of the state level on the Ghanaian side is necessary - especially in order to find the right interlocutors, as several people and groups are affected due to the human remains incorporated.”

**Janine\_Mod:**

As you can see, the process of returning the objects is very complex, but ongoing. However, the German responsibility in terms of restitution does not end once the objects have been returned.

**Susann:** Also, the Humboldt Forum should do a much stronger drop in not just displaying objects and then maybe having some information leaflets which are usually not available about restitution claims, but in showing if they show objects and also to show the history of it and show the history of claims to bring these objects back and then once objects have left, also shows the history off of that story, because I think this is very important also in the history of understanding each other to know what happened and how this happened and to continue the debate. The story shouldn't be just over by bringing back an object, of course this is like a crucial step, but from at least from a German perspective, it's not over with it. We have to take also the German colonial past very seriously and our in our memory practice and our discussion about the past.

**Janine\_Mod:**

Let's briefly look back to the restitution case of the "Benin Bronzes", which I mentioned at the beginning of the episode: it is striking to me how the whole debate of German colonial responsibility is overshadowed by discussions about the "correct" return of the Bronzes and its conditions. What I have learned is to listen carefully to the African perspective.

**Aba:** One of the main issues affecting us in Africa is our inability to tell a lot of the past histories. Our inability to tell a lot of the past histories means that the next generation are going to lose a lot of information, a lot of knowledge on our pasts. So, as we research into restitution, we should also be able to look at aspects that would help build us forward. Aspects, that will help us build the African narratives in owning ourselves. If our forebears were able to do all the things that we are seeing and especially the material culture that we are now asking for, then the current Generation should be able to do better by building upon them. But we can only do better when we know the past. So, researchers should focus on that.

**Susann:** One big challenge is also that to now not all museums have published their archives. So, once you don't know what exactly is where, you only have numbers. So, I think one important step also is to have published the archives, but also bring these archives into debate, bring it into the school with bring it into discussions, bring it into museums so that that people also relate to it and know about it and can discuss it. But so that I think is something which also is part also of the restitution process in a way. It's not only about specific cases. So, I think once we think about restitution debate, we really have also to rethink how to frame research cooperation and how to how to support and sponsor African knowledge production in a way that this is not just defined by some German or any other university or scholar, but that is defined on the continent. And I think it is very important within the restitution debate to find new ways to counter this very strong imbalance.

**Janine\_Mod:**

In summary, European-Western institutions are beginning to think about how they can work together with partners from the Global South on an equal footing. Although efforts are being made to involve African partners, these efforts are still taking place within a framework of structural inequality and marginalization. One key aspect of restitution and decolonisation is to provide access to archives, materials, and museums. Objects that are currently stored in museums in Europe and other parts of the Western world should not just be found by "chance" by African researchers. It is important to provide an infrastructure that enables systematic and extensive research. Therefore, one approach could be to ease Visa and travel restrictions to Germany for example and other places all over the world that are relevant for research. This of course also touches upon the question of political responsibility.

**Susann:** “We really should in the process of restitution listen to what and how African people I mean and they of course so many actors how they do want to shape this process of restitution.”

**Janine\_Mod:**

To come back to the “Apkini Royal Regalia”: I asked Aba what she thinks will happen when the objects will finally be back in Kpando.

*Borborbor-Musik, DZORDZORME EFO GERSHON*

**Aba:** I'm sure the materials will be celebrated when they are brought back. They'll be celebrated. The people will be very happy. I am very sure that they will be the best to receive them at various levels right from the airports. When they arrive there, they'll be chiefs and people meeting them in Accra. I'm sure there will be a dare by getting back to Kpando. The materials will be celebrated when they are back.

*Musik kurz hoch*

**Janine\_Mod:**

When the time comes and the objects are returned, we will, of course, report on this via the Max Weber Foundation's social media channels. We have linked other websites that report on this case, so you can stay updated on the latest news. And in the meantime, I would once again suggest to watch the documentary by Martin Doll, which we have also linked in the shownotes. Here you will be able to see a part of the research group's conversation with the chiefs of Kpando and find more background information on this particular restitution case.

*Music Max Weber Stiftung*

**Janine\_Mod:**

We hope this episode has given you a better understanding on the importance of decolonisation and restitution. We are happy, as always, to receive feedback on this episode via e-mail or on our social media channels. The next episode of this podcast will be in German, but we will continue to produce content on the research from different institutes in English as well. The German Historical Institute in London has its own podcast, which is entirely in English, and we include the link in the shownotes. My name is Janine Funke and I say, Bye, bye for now!