

Curating Legacy Collections: Archaeology, Museum Management, and Cultural Diversity in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of Archaeology and Museum practice as institutions of diversity and creative inquiry. Building on Graham Connah's excavated materials stored in the National Museum, Benin City, the research investigates the management and curation of legacy collections. The study was conducted by a diverse team of Nigerian scholars, including Hausa, Benin, and Yoruba researchers, whose varied identities and perspectives shaped the process and outcomes.

By bringing Archaeological expertise in excavation and documentation with Museum practices of preservation and interpretation, the work demonstrates how disciplinary boundaries can be unsettled and reimagined. Curating legacy collections emerges not only as a technical exercise in conservation but also as a Creative Practice of Negotiating Cultural Memory, identity, and representation. Diversity within the research team itself served as a laboratory for intersectional thought, where aesthetics and ethics converged in the shared responsibility of safeguarding heritage.

This study argues that the convergence of Archaeology and Museum, Resource Management, enriched by cultural diversity, provides a framework for inclusive heritage management. It highlights how intersectionality can function both as a method and practice, connecting disciplines, communities, and histories while ensuring that collections remain meaningful for academic research, public engagement, and future generations.

Keywords: Graham Connah Collection, Curation, Archaeology, Museum & Heritage Management, Benin City, Cultural Diversity, Sustainability, Cultural identity, Representation, Accessibility

Introduction

Legacy collections refer to archaeological materials excavated many decades ago that remain stored in museums. Often under-studied, poorly documented, and rarely accessible, these collections are more than just boxes of potsherds. In the Nigerian context, they serve as tangible evidences of the historical development of the West African sub-region. They embody stories of trade, subsistence, ritual, and adaptation, and their neglect represents a missed opportunity to connect earlier research with current debates on heritage and identity.

These collections are especially important because they bridge the gap between colonial Archaeology and contemporary heritage management. They reveal not only the material culture of past societies but also the intellectual history of Archaeology itself shifting from extractive colonial practices to postcolonial struggles for representation, ownership, and inclusivity.

Graham Connah's Contribution and the Benin Sequence

Graham Connah's work in Benin City (1961–1964) remains a foundation of Nigerian Archaeology. He was a world-renowned archaeologist who substantially contributed to African Archaeology, particularly Archaeology of Benin in present day Edo state, focusing on the culture and history of the Benin Empire. Connah tried to overcome the challenges and difficulties he encountered while trying to shed light on the famous People who contributed to the art of the city. He worked closely with and maintained evidence from oral traditions, documentary, artistic, and anthropological data.

His excavations moved beyond the art and historical focus on bronzes and terracotta to investigate domestic occupation layers,

ceramics, faunal remains, and the monumental Benin Moats. His book *The Archaeology of Benin* (1975) was groundbreaking in applying rigorous stratigraphic methods to an urban African context, situating Benin within wider debates on African urbanism and state formation.

Nevertheless, for decades, the collections derived from Connah's excavations have faced what scholars describe as a curatorial crisis common to postcolonial institutions. At the National Museum, Benin City, these materials have been affected by poor climate control, deteriorating paper records, and limited digital accessibility. As Onuegbu (2022) observes, the post excavation life of these artefacts has remained stagnant, caught between colonial era museum structures and modern Nigerian management. This situation underscores the urgent need to move from passive storage to active curation.

Colonial and Extractive Archaeology

Early figures such as Shaw and Fagg were white, British scholars, whose work was conducted for Western audiences. Their discoveries were lived realities for local communities, not revelations. This positionality shows the colonial lens through which Nigerian material culture was first interpreted, privileging external expertise while sidelining indigenous knowledge. Recognizing this distinction is essential to avoid reinforcing the Western expert model and to align Nigerian archaeology within its own cultural and historical contexts. To appreciate the importance of legacy collections, it is necessary to revisit the history of Archaeology in Nigeria. Early researchers such as Thurstan Shaw and Bernard Fagg laid the foundations for identifying major cultures like Nok and Igbo Ukwu. While their discoveries were significant, Andah (1995) critiques these efforts as largely extractive, privileging high status art objects over the everyday artefacts of daily life.

Bronzes, terracotta, and prestige items were celebrated as markers of African civilization, while ceramics, shells, and lithics the materials that reveal subsistence strategies, technological adaptation, and social organization were often overlooked. This imbalance created a distorted narrative of Nigerian Archaeology, one that emphasized elite artistry while neglecting the lived realities of ordinary people. Legacy collections, therefore, hold the potential to correct this imbalance by highlighting the everyday objects and contextualizing the spectacular.

Intersectionality as a Systematic Tool

Typically, curation is understood as a technical exercise focused on conservation, cataloguing, and storage. In this project, we approached curation as both a social and intellectual process, recognizing that heritage management is inseparable from questions of identity, representation, and cultural negotiation. Hence, intersectionality provided the analytical framework, allowing us to examine how overlapping identities ethnic, disciplinary, and institutional shaped the interpretation of artefacts and the practices of preservation. By utilizing process diversity within the research team, we treated curation not only as a matter of technical expertise but also as a collaborative dialogue across cultural perspectives.

Team Composition and Internal Diversity

The research team was intentionally composed of scholars from Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, namely Hausa, Benin, and Yoruba, alongside other contributors. This composition was designed to serve as a laboratory for intersectional thought. Rather than relying on the traditional Western Expert model, which often dominates African heritage projects, we adopted a Collaborative National model that prioritized local expertise and cultural knowledge.

Hausa scholars contributed to understandings into long distance caravan trade and northern connections, situating artefacts within broader trans-regional networks. Benin scholars emphasized local memory, continuity, and symbolic meanings tied to the city's historical identity while the Yoruba scholars highlighted ritual practices and indigenous aesthetics, offering interpretations rooted in cosmology and symbolic traditions. This internal diversity ensured that artefacts were not interpreted through a single lens but through multiple, overlapping perspectives. It also created a reflexive environment where the team critically examined its own positionalities, acknowledging how identity and heritage intersect in the act of curation. The curatorial process was structured into four distinct phases, each combining technical precision with cultural interpretation.

Review and Retrieval

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), established by Decree No. 77 of 1979, is the federal agency responsible for preserving, conserving, and presenting Nigeria's cultural heritage in Nigeria. It oversees more than 50 national museums, 65 monuments, and two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove. Its mandate includes archaeological research, artifact documentation, conservation, exhibitions, and public engagement, making it the central authority for safeguarding Nigeria's material culture.

We began by re-cataloguing Connah's 1960s excavation labels against modern NCMM records. This phase involved cross-checking handwritten field notes with current museum inventories by identifying discrepancies in artefact numbering, provenience, and classification, creating a unified catalogue that integrated legacy documentation with updated metadata. This inspection was crucial for establishing a reliable baseline. It revealed gaps in earlier documentation and allowed us to reconstruct the excavation sequence with greater accuracy.

Conservation

Conservation focused on stabilizing fragile materials, particularly iron slag and mollusks. These conservation techniques included mechanical cleaning to remove encrustations without damaging surfaces, controlled humidity storage to prevent further deterioration, and the application of reversible consolidants for fragile specimens. This highlighted the tension between preservation and accessibility. While conservation aimed to stabilize artefacts, it also raised questions about how much intervention was appropriate, especially when dealing with materials that carried symbolic or ritual significance.

Ethnographic Consultation

The final phase involved interviewing local Benin artisans, particularly members of traditional guilds, to compare excavated motifs with contemporary practices. This ethnographic component provided insights into continuity and change in craft traditions, contextualization of artefacts within living cultural frameworks, and a reflexive dialogue between past and present, bridging archaeological interpretation with community memory. By engaging artisans directly, the project moved beyond academic analysis to incorporate community voices. This consultation reinforced the idea that heritage is not static but dynamic, shaped by ongoing practices and interpretations.

The methodology combined technical rigor with cultural inclusivity. By treating curation as a social and intellectual process, we demonstrated how intersectionality can function as both a method and practice. The multi-ethnic team composition ensured diverse perspectives, while the three phase workflow integrated checking, conservation, digital documentation, and ethnographic consultation. Together, these approaches transformed the Connah Legacy Collection from a neglected archive into a dynamic resource for scholarship, public engagement, and cultural negotiation.

The Connah Legacy Collection

The Connah Legacy Collection represents one of the most significant assemblages of archaeological materials in Nigeria, housed at the National Museum, Benin City and in the university of Ibadan and one other museum institution across the country. Excavated between 1961 and 1964, these materials were recovered from key sites such as the Clerks' Quarters and the Museum compound, offering a stratified record of Benin's urban and cultural history. While the collection has long remained underutilized, its reassessment provides critical information on continuity, trade, ritual practice, and the dynamics of cultural contact in West Africa.

Ceramic Analysis and Ritual Continuity

Ceramics form the backbone of archaeological interpretation in West Africa, serving as durable markers of technological traditions, trade networks, and ritual practices. The ceramic assemblages from Connah's excavations reveal a remarkable continuity in the improvement of potting techniques across centuries. Rouletting patterns were carefully inspected by Yoruba and Benin researchers, who identified distinctive designs on vessel surfaces. These patterns suggest sustained interaction between Benin and the Yoruba hinterland, pointing to regional trade and shared technological traditions.

Parallels with caravan trade were also noted by Hausa scholars in the team, who observed similarities between certain vessel forms and those used in long- distance caravan trade across Northern Nigeria. This situates Benin within broader trans-regional exchange systems, bridging inland urban centers to northern trade routes. Beyond utilitarian purposes, some vessels appear to have been employed in ritual contexts. Their continuity across stratigraphic layers suggests enduring symbolic practices,

reinforcing the idea that ceramics were not merely functional tools but integral to cultural identity and spiritual life. This ceramic evidence underscores the importance of legacy collections in tracing both technological stability and cultural adaptation.

Marine Shells

The most intriguing component of the Connah Legacy Collection is the presence of marine shells in inland Benin City. Their recovery from stratified contexts raises critical questions about trade, contact, and cultural symbolism. Indicators of maritime trade on the shells provide evidence of pre-European and early contact maritime networks. Their presence suggests that Benin was integral to coastal exchange systems long before European intervention, linking inland communities to Atlantic trade routes.

Curating these shells required precise taxonomic analysis. Determining whether they originated from the Lagos Lagoon or further down the Atlantic Coast has implications for reconstructing trade geography and the scale of maritime connections. Marine shells often carried ritual or prestige significance in West African societies. Their deposition in inland contexts may reflect symbolic practices, elite consumption, or ritualized exchange, rather than purely economic trade.

Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges faced in curation included poor documentation, fragile conservation conditions, and limited accessibility, which have hindered systematic study. Without digitization and updated cataloguing, these materials risk remaining invisible to scholars and the public. However, re-examining ceramics, shells, and other archaeological materials through intersectional collaboration enriches interpretation. Yoruba, Benin, and Hausa perspectives ensure that artefacts are contextualized within diverse cultural

frameworks, avoiding narrow or colonial readings.

Ceramics reveal long term stability in technological traditions, situating Benin as a center of cultural resilience. Vessel forms and marine shells suggest strong evidence for Benin's participation in both inland caravan trade and coastal maritime networks. Multi-ethnic collaboration in interpretation ensures inclusive heritage management, incorporating diverse voices in the curation process.

The Museum of West African Art (MOWAA) represents a promising new model of private-public partnership. By combining philanthropic funding with institutional expertise, MOWAA can provide the financial and technical support that NCMM currently lacks. Such partnerships should be encouraged and replicated across Nigeria to strengthen heritage infrastructure. Legacy collections should also be integrated into object-based learning in Nigerian secondary schools. By exposing students to artefacts and their histories, museums can foster pride, historical literacy, and a sense of ownership over cultural heritage. This approach transforms collections from passive archives into active tools of education and identity formation.

Conclusion

Curating the Connah Legacy Collection is more than a technical exercise or a cleanup of old boxes but is instead an act of cultural reclamation. The intersectional approach adopted by our team demonstrates that when Nigerians of diverse backgrounds collaborate on their shared past, the result is a richer and more nuanced insight into history.

Legacy collections are not relics of the past but they are seeds of future research. If tended through conservation, digitization, and inclusive interpretation, they will provide the data for the next century of African Archaeology. By addressing infrastructural

challenges, embracing decolonized practices, and reforming heritage policy, Nigeria can transform its museums into vibrant institutions of cultural diversity, intellectual sovereignty, and public engagement.

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