Materialization through Global Comparisons: the Findings at Ile-Ife from the Late 19th century to the 1960s

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Abstract

The debate over repatriation has only recently come to European attention. Arguments against it still prevail and rely on the interpretation of the things involved as universally appreciated pieces of art or craft, which have to be stored accordingly. However, at least from the Nigerian context, many intellectuals see these objects as proof of their history before colonization. Thus, the objects represent the desire to be free of the ongoing negative impacts of colonization. The article argues that these debates cannot be properly understood if the materiality and weight that these objects acquired over time and in global exchanges is not considered. In light of material religion, new materialist and global religious history approaches, the article turns to an example, which has been forgotten in repatriation discussions: the findings at Ile-Ife from the late 19th century to the 1960s. Materialization, in this context, is an intra-active, politically charged, and comparative process.

Keywords

history – art – mythology – Nigeria – new materialisms – material religion
1 Introduction

Although the debate has only recently gained the attention of European media, the necessity for repatriation of stolen artifacts has been on African intellectuals’ minds for quite some time now. At its core, the debate is about the disagreement over the meaning of objects. This struggle over matter can be seen in Wole Soyinka’s You Must Set Forth at Dawn (2007). In the autobiographical novel, the Nigerian author recounted how he was drawn into his own guerilla-style quest for repatriation, unleashed after the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) at Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 had unsuccessfully requested a Benin royal mask, its chosen symbol, from the British Museum. However, Soyinka’s search centered on another object entirely, from the city of Ife, which until today has been mostly forgotten in repatriation debates. He and three other lecturers at the University of Ife were convinced that the Ori Olokun was missing. The Ori Olokun is a brass head—though often called “bronze head”—or rather several brass heads since there are numerous copies today. The object displayed in the British Museum is 35 cm high, 12.5 cm wide and 15 cm deep and bears an intricately constructed headgear identified as a crown. This particular object was found in the 1930s excavations in Ile-Ife, after which it had been sold to finally arrive at the British Museum. Its facial characteristics are said to be very realistic with eyes, nose, and lips being in life-like proportions to each other. It depicts the head of the deity Olokun and/or the Ooni, king of Ife.

The theory that the Ori Olokun was missing, was counter-intuitive since a specimen was stored at the museum at Ile-Ife, Nigeria. However, Soyinka and his colleagues were sure that it was fake. According to official accounts, Leo Frobenius, the German anthropologist, had discovered the Ori first. Impressed by its artistry, he tried to take it with him to Germany, only to be stopped by the British. But was the head, which Frobenius was forced to return, the original? Convinced to know the location of the real thing, Soyinka and his colleagues finally took possession of the Ori, yet as he held it in his hands, he became skeptical about its authenticity. He felt it was too light to be the original. By sheer luck, he was able to hold the Ori Olokun copy stored in the British Museum.

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1 Soyinka, You Must Set Forth at Dawn, p. 188 et seq.
2 Even though Olokun is often perceived as female, Olokun is also sometimes presented as male. Olokun is not the only Yoruba deity (ódíríṣá) which has changed their gender or is worshipped as (n)either male (n)or female.
3 Soyinka, You Must Set Forth at Dawn, p. 192. Craddock et al. also discuss this. Craddock et al., The Olokun head reconsidered.
4 Soyinka, You Must Set Forth at Dawn, 204.
Museum. Weighing it carefully in his hand, it dawned on him: the original had been at the British Museum all along, a claim that was declared improbable since this particular object was also thought to be a copy.

Though most likely an exaggerated fictionalization by the playwright Soyinka, this story offers some insights into the structures of repatriation debates. In his narrative, the expected material weight gave Soyinka clues to its supposed authenticity. But the weight of the material mattered because it had a history and had been part of multiple comparisons. The material was just its weight and at the same time more than its weight. Via its genealogy, it had come to be part of different registers of art and history. It signified either universal or African art and it was weighty due to the (post)colonial struggle for history.

This question – where the material matters and in what ways – is central to this article. For Soyinka and his colleagues, the Ori Olokun was Nigerian cultural heritage that should be returned to its source. On the other side, the argument is often made that the objects should remain in Europe due to better storage facilities. Rather than a specific country’s historical heritage, they feature there as “art” or “craft” which is to be admired as a universally human achievement. Thus, they become part of a universal history of human capabilities. This perception makes the objects accessible and valuable even to people in Europe. At the same time, their ascription as “African art” demonstrates either astonishment at or recognition of an unexpected achievement and its concomitant tacit othering, because presumably, the description as “art” alone does not suffice. This is not to say that Nigerians do not see the Ori Olokun as art. The struggle for meaning of artifacts between “art” and “history” is not necessarily tied to either a European or African identity. Nigerians appreciated the findings as artistic as well because they are part and heir to the same comparisons. However, as the article will show, there are specific reasons why Nigerians emphasized the historical weight of the objects and were more engaged in writing concise accounts of Nigerian (precolonial) history. These histories were set up against the ways in which Europeans stressed the artistic,

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5 Soyinka, You Must Set Forth at Dawn, p. 215 et seq.
6 Craddock et al., The Olokun head reconsidered.
7 Gbadamosi, Africa’s Stolen Art Debate Is Frozen in Time; Habermas, Rettungsparadigma und Bewahrungsfetichismus.
8 See Savoy, Africa’s Struggle for Its Art.
9 For example, Feyisara Sopein quoted in Dennett, Nigerian Studies; Johnson, The History of the Yorubas; Ojo, The Origin of the Yorubas.
often concretely envisioned as “religious” or “mythical,” aspects of the artifacts whereby they marked the objects’ difference to European art.10

In a first step, the article explores material religion and new materialist approaches, since they place emphasis on the inclusion of materiality in the study of religion and the repatriation debates stress the importance of the materiality of the objects in question as well. Material religion and new materialist approaches are considered especially for their ability to take matter seriously without privileging rational subjectivity as interpretive master and/or naïvely assuming matter to be transparent in its meaning. The article follows Karen Barad’s agential realism, especially her focus on the co-generated processes in which matter takes shape.11 Barad calls these intra-actions. Yet, as Katharina Hoppe and Thomas Lemke have shown with their demand for relational materialism, Barad’s approach misses an account of the political, of the struggle within this co-production of materiality.12 However, for a postcolonial historical take, this is very important. To add this aspect, the article looks at Ernesto Laclau’s theory of comparison where a chain of equivalences is necessary to establish an item in the chain as the interpretative category.13 Yet, this chain is both contingent and persuasive as natural or material, each item sinking further into the chain by repetition of the chain. This take on comparisons can easily be understood in light of intra-actions where objects and subjects are, at the same time, generated and become generative in the process.

In a second step, the article turns to the case study that this approach illuminates. The case study focuses on the antecedents to Soyinka’s story and the overall desire of Nigerians to gain these historical objects back, which was recounted in the beginning. It traces this desire back to the findings at Ile-Ife from the late 19th century to the 1960s and shows how a chain of equivalences was slowly built and gave these objects, e. g. the so-called bronze heads and the terracotta figures, their shape and form. However, even though a chain including “religion” – “antiquity” – “history” – “myth” – “art” was repeated again and again, each time a new category also surfaced as the one item to be presumably able to subsume all others in the chain. Through this process of negotiation of categories, different positions and subjectivities were also formed intra-actively. Nigerians came to emphasize “history” as the lens to interpret these findings, whereas European positions stressed “myth” or “art” as the

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10 For example, Fagg/Röthel/List, Nigeria - 2000 Jahre Plastik; Frobenius, The Voice of Africa Vol. 1.
11 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway.
12 Hoppe/Lemke, Neue Materialismen zur Einführung.
13 Laclau, On Populist Reason.
leading category. Both ends, however, remained connected by the same chain of equivalences inherited by each of them. Both treated the objects as material evidence. Thus, the article shows how objects in repatriation discussions have acquired their weight, while focusing on the co-production of materiality and the positions that argue with it.

2 Matter and Politics in Global Comparisons: Some Theoretical Explorations

Diagnosing an overemphasis on the intellectual and social aspects of religion, the material religion approaches set out to correct “these biases against materiality”¹⁴ in the study of religion. Scholars with this set of approaches see the material aspects as revealing new irreducible dimensions to the workings of religion. This also implies that they privilege pictures, artifacts, bodies, etc. in their works. On the other hand, investigations into the global exchanges of religious formations and the concomitant comparisons have prioritized written texts and have implicitly downplayed other material aspects.¹⁵ Thus, scholars in the field of global religious history have made themselves susceptible to suspicions of logocentrism, arguably replicating the inner logic of Eurocentrism against their volition. By contrast, material religion approaches are interested in a “fundamental critique of mentalistic stances that underpin Eurocentric presumed universalisms”.¹⁶ By omission, scholars of global religious history have affirmed the insinuation that global religious history is only applicable to intellectual discourses and ignores the material and real-life practices of religion worldwide. This article brings both approaches – material religion and global religious history – into a productive dialogue to show how global exchanges and comparisons are intertwined with the production of the material, and how the material becomes a central concern in these global debates. By looking at comparisons, this article also does not presuppose an intentional subjectivity that supplies a priorly fixed meaning but accounts for the co-production of subjects and identities in these exchanges alongside the production of the material. This focus on the co-production of “subjects” and “objects” ultimately destabilizes logocentrism. The co-production also is a central concern of material religion approaches, especially the ones that

¹⁵ Notable exceptions include Haustein, Global Religious History as a Rhizome; Meyer, What Is Religion in Africa?.
include new materialist approaches. Just like material religion approaches,17 new materialist approaches are diverse, but “what they have in common is that they approach materiality as generative”.18 Yet, material religion as well as new materialist approaches should not be treated as naïve, as if they perceived “material culture [as] self-interpreting or transparently accessible”.19

Contrarily to many other new materialists, Barad has a dynamic idea of matter, which lends itself more easily for the task of historicization: “Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentic, not a fixed essence or property of things. Mattering is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences.”20 Matter is, thus, the outcome of a process, which differentiates into distinct, nameable differences, but matter is also the co-agent within that process. Barad calls this intra-action, where the separability of differently nameable things is not assumed as given but is established in each action, intra-action. At its core, this means that actions are not brought about by rational subjects who are transparent to themselves, but that subjects and objects are the outcomes of intra-actions, which differentiate subjects and objects in the first place. Barad shares this approach with Judith Butler,21 who Barad cites and appreciates for the idea of performativity. According to Butler, actions are citations of earlier actions, their meaning is retroactively established, and not the outcome of a rational subject’s transparent decisions. Butler conceptualizes matter as processual materialization where a hegemonic discourse settles over time and thus produces the impression that there are naturally determined things within itself. Barad refers to this idea but criticizes Butler for ultimately making matter passive to discursive practices.22

Barad’s approach has merit because it does not have a strong essentialist conception of matter. Researchers who have applied Barad’s approach have produced highly fascinating studies showing how matter is constituted in different and conflicting ways.23 However, as her approach of agential realism suggests, matter has agency, even before it becomes entangled and differentiated in intra-actions. This agency of matter exposes Barad to the danger of essentialism yet again. Arguing for a relational materialism, Katharina Hoppe

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17 Hazard, The Material Turn in the Study of Religion.
18 Hazard, Two Ways of Thinking about Material Religion, p. 629.
20 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, p. 137.
21 Butler, Bodies That Matter.
22 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, p. 150 et seq.
23 Hoppe/Lemke, Neue Materialismen zur Einführung, p. 72.
and Thomas Lemke mention that “Barad lacks an understanding of the fact that the openness of the (re)configuration of the world that she emphasizes is always also a political, that means a controversial and contested project.”24 They suggest that “[i]n order to realize the analytical and critical potential of New Materialisms, it is of central importance to systematically include power asymmetries, relations of inequality and exclusion mechanisms in the relational materialist enquiry.”25 Thus, an addition to Barad’s model is necessary to make good on her promise of matter as processual and not fixed in advance.

This article is expanding on these issues by considering the comparative approach central to global religious history. Contrarily to common-sense ideas of comparison, this approach does not take the point of comparison, the category under which phenomena and objects are interpreted, as naturally given or a rational subject’s informed choice. Rather, it sees the point of comparison as retro-actively (or intra-actively to go with Barad) established, every time it is applied. Naoki Sakai writes that comparison hinges on two moments, one being “the postulation of the class of genus among compared items,” the other being “the occasion or locale where we are obliged to compare.”26 In other words, the postulate would not work if there were no need to compare and thus differentiate genus into species in a certain historical context. By splitting comparison into these two steps, Sakai gives us the chance to closely consider the occasion of obligation to compare as a constitutive moment. Yet, this process of retro-active affirmation of the postulated comparison by its specific occasion is also one laden with conflicts.

Ernesto Laclau sees the process of establishing one dominant point of comparison or category as a fight over hegemony. Hegemony is established by a subsummation of many particular items or instances under one of these items or instances, forming a chain of equivalences and making this one item the point of comparison.27 This process also implies the displacement and overshadowing of the other possible items that are now relegated to the chain, which rids the items of their particular priorly established meanings but does also not conflate the items entirely. The point of comparison then serves as the interpretative lens over the chain that in turn, lends it power by accumulation. This overshadowed chain becomes the body or matter of the now powerful point of comparison or category. This chain of equivalences, the body for

24 Hoppe/Lemke, Neue Materialismen zur Einführung, p. 78 et seq. The translations were done by the author.
25 Hoppe/Lemke, Neue Materialismen zur Einführung, p. 159.
26 Sakai, The Microphysics of Comparison.
27 Laclau, On Populist Reason, p. 95.
the point of comparison, is brought together under contingent circumstances, rather than by merit of inherent similarity of the single items in the chain.\textsuperscript{28} Yet, the more items are subsumed under this point of comparison, the more persuasive it becomes as the relevant point of comparison establishing similarity and difference under it.\textsuperscript{29} However, this process is highly volatile and prone to interruptions because the hegemonic point of comparison is not inherently qualified to fulfill this role.\textsuperscript{30} The chain of equivalences, the body might break open, revealing that its make-up is not natural but has become that way; and the point of comparison may be contested yet again.\textsuperscript{31} Adding this to Barad’s intra-action, means that the establishment of meaning and matter, of subject and object, occurs under the contestation and hegemonic accumulation of a retro- or intra-actively legitimated chain of actions, items, utterances, and so forth. This process is not driven by intentional subjects but by the repetition of equivalences. Paradoxically, this repetition does not only imply the affirmation of sameness but also of (relative) difference. Nameable difference refers to a genus by default, and thus ultimately acknowledges the legitimacy of the comparison.\textsuperscript{32}

What does this mean for relational materialism? On the one hand, including a theory of comparative practice takes into account power asymmetries, contestation, and political struggle. At the same time, it does not presuppose the existence of transparent human subjects as their prime agents. They also only become readable and nameable as such in the process of comparison. This means that intra-action unfolds into acts of comparison, which layer themselves over each other and thus materialize the things involved. This perspective lends itself to a historical study more readily, especially a postcolonial one where assumed power hierarchies are critically unfolded into the processes that make them. It also allows for the inclusion of positions that were previously excluded because they were considered powerless or insignificant to the bigger picture. This critical inclusion is a very important factor for a global religious history that traces the establishment of points of comparisons or categories, but also seeks to uncover where these categories break down and reveal their historicity.\textsuperscript{33} On the other hand, intra-actions are also a fitting

\textsuperscript{28} Laclau, \textit{On Populist Reason}, p. 69 et seq.
\textsuperscript{29} Laclau, \textit{On Populist Reason}, p. 96. He also calls this process “Naming” in reference to Saul Kripke.
\textsuperscript{30} Laclau, \textit{On Populist Reason}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{32} Sakai, \textit{The Microphysics of Comparison}.
\textsuperscript{33} Bergunder, \textit{Global Religious History in Theory and Practice}; Maltese and Strube, \textit{Global Religious History}; see also the other contributions in this issue.
approach for the historiographical enterprise in which global religious historians are invested. The historian herself is already always in the middle of things, the intentions, interests, and contexts are always an assumption to be made plausible by comparing and contrasting sources. Her study is also a product of the weight that the things she studies have already acquired.

In the next section, the case study will unfold how the perspective of an intra-actively formed chain of equivalences as a process of materialization can come into play practically. It will demonstrate how the findings of Ile-Ife fell in together with the building of a chain of equivalences, which implied the naming, grouping, categorization of the found objects. In the process of repetition of these acts, they acquired a body or materialized as specific meanings. However, these acts also gave shape to different subject positions in the debate over these findings, and were thus also intra-actively productive.

3 The Findings at Ile-Ife and Their Materialization in Global Comparisons from the Late 19th Century to the 1960s

3.1 Antiquities at Ile-Ife: Myth over History

Ile-Ife had not been widely known for its artifacts until the end of the 19th century. In early 1902, the Lagos Standard featured an interview with the West African Christian intellectual Mojola Agbeb. Agbebi was asked about his “tour to the hinterland.” On this tour, he had visited many towns in the inner areas of the Yorubaland and had ordained a bishop for the Baptist Church, the missionary church to which Agbebi still belonged at the time. He stressed that the state of the European mission was in decline, having “effectively prepared the way for Islam,” which was a common fear among missionaries at the end of the 19th century. West African intellectuals at the time often made the argument that European mission would fail if Islam took over, in order to emphasize the need for a church independent of missionary oversight. Framed by this

34 The writings produced from the late 19th century onwards established that Ile-Ife had been in material exchanges – either with Phoenician traders (Leo Frobenius) or with the Benin Empire or the Nok of Northern Nigeria (William Fagg, Frank Willet). West African or Yoruba intellectuals postulated exchanges with biblical Israel, Arabia or Egypt. All of these exchanges would have effects on the point of entry chosen here. The 19th century is thus not the origin of the intra-actions that made materialities and subjectivities but rather, an entry point which helps to see that age, origin and distinctive points of exchanges were all part of the acts of comparisons, set against each other in the struggle over meaning. It does not mean that Ile-Ife’s material history necessarily starts at the end of the 19th century.

35 Interview with Dr Mojola Agbeb, with Reference to His Hinterland Tour.
argument for an independent church, Agbebi reported on “celebrated Relics” at the city of Ile-Ife, which he had seen there “in different groves ... concealed.” In summary, he emphasized: “The marvels of Ife are a reality and I was dumb-struck with what I saw.” This admiration was rather surprising, as Ile-Ife had up until this point mostly featured as a reference to opaque beginnings, to the “cradle of the (human) race” akin to the Garden of Eden. It was not until 1895, when the West African trader J. O. George wrote a historical account, that Ile-Ife featured in a more concrete sense. When read against the account of Ile-Ife given by the French missionary Reverend Baudin, George was actively demythologizing: Baudin wrote about deities breaking forth from the womb of the mother goddess and thus coming into existence at Ile-Ife; George saw these deities established by a quarreling human king, Oranmiyan. In George’s account, Ile-Ife’s mythology was an outcome of history. Agbebi, the reporter of Ile-Ife’s antiquities, had served as an informant for George’s history, which in turn probably influenced his own perspective on Ile-Ife as a site of “hidden marvels.” Even though Ile-Ife was a footnote in Agbebi’s interview 1902, this piece of news might have travelled fast for another reason: the European hunt for antiquities that was afoot in the 19th century.

This hunt was violently brought to West Africa with the “punitive expedition” to Benin City in 1897, where the British plundered, took its treasures, sold its many antiquities, and spread them across the whole world. In the European rush for antiquities buried in the colonies’ grounds, nationalist sentiments reared their head. Leo Frobenius was adamant to supersede the British. After his “discovery” of the Ori Olokun and other pieces at Ile-Ife, he recounted that Adolf Bastian, head of the museum of ethnology in Berlin, had not been inclined to believe his theory that Ile-Ife also housed great treasures at first. Frobenius took the “mythology” of Ile-Ife as proof, probably after having read Baudin’s account. In his travel report, The Voice of Africa, Frobenius noted that places like Ile-Ife were known even further North as “containing” evidence of an historic past, historic documents, an extreme antiquity.” Maybe coincidentally, in the German version, he used the words “wonderful relic” instead of “extreme antiquity.” This usage of words may point towards the probability that either Frobenius himself or his Northern informants had read or at least

36 George, Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and Its Tribes.
37 Baudin, Fetichism and Fetich Worshippers.
38 Baudin, Fetichism and Fetich Worshippers, p. 18.
39 George, Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and Its Tribes, p. 28.
40 Hicks, The Brutish Museums.
41 Frobenius, The Voice of Africa Vol. 1, p. 68.
known about Agbebi’s description of Ile-Ife in the newspaper. With Frobenius, the ascription of “history” and “myth” overlapped, but it served a different purpose than George’s or even Agbebi’s. To understand this purpose better, there is need to dig a bit deeper.

The European search for antiquities was partly motivated by the “discovery of Troy” by Heinrich Schliemann in the first half of the 19th century. Similarly, Frobenius had the idea that the ancient sunken city of Atlantis was buried at Ile-Ife. He asked his audience in On the Way to Atlantis (org. Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis):

Atlantis, the land that was already a fable land for the ancients! Atlantis, the land from which Spiritist and other societies draw wisdom! [...] What if I could pull up evidence of stone and bronze casting, ancient bricks and beautiful portrait heads, glassware and pearl jewelry from West African mire? If one day I can prove a statue of Poseidon in West African lands?43

The material (“stone and bronze casting, ancient bricks and beautiful portrait heads”) should prove him right, Frobenius argued, just like the material had supposedly proven Schliemann right. However, the materiality only came into view through his lens of “Atlantis”, a comparative practice which referred to these materials but also relegated them to the function of proof. But Frobenius actually just repeated an already established category, a fact which has yet to be fully acknowledged. In the quoted section, he mentioned that the “Spiritists” were concerned with Atlantis. It is therefore quite surprising that no scholar to date seems to have considered Frobenius’ reference to Atlantis in the context of esoteric-Theosophical Atlantis theories that proliferated around the exact same time.44 Only in brackets does János Riesz note that by “Spiritists,” Frobenius might hint towards the writing of the then Theosophist Rudolf Steiner.45 However, the matter of Theosophical influence on Frobenius’ Atlantis idea might even be more complicated than that. In 1901, the Lagos Standard printed the inauguration speech for the West African Psychical Institute, Yoruba Branch. The speaker was the West African Christian intellectual John Augustus Abayomi Cole. In his speech, he reminded the audience of the spiritual powers known within African practices and that these could not be used for evil purposes, if used appropriately. He also commented on

43 Frobenius, Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis, p. 1 et seq.
44 Lubelsky, Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy.
45 Riesz, Leo Frobenius und der Atlantis-Mythos, p. 338.
the “unfortunate” state of “the Negro race,” particularly the slave trade and colonization:

This Negro race had a past as I proved to you before. We belong to the Lemurian group of the ancient races. Our ancestors drove through the streets of Poseidonis. On the authority of Socrates our cities were submerged in the great deluge which buried Atlantis – the great African cities [...] were buried in the ocean on account of our abuse of knowledge; and if we must get back to the point from whence we fell, we must pay debt ‘even unto the uttermost farthing.’

Abayomi Cole emphasized like many of his West African peers that (West) Africa “had a past.” In 1895, George had written a history that served to contextualize the development of myths as an outcome of human history. However, Abayomi Cole did not seem to care for this demythologization but he also cared for the past. He argued that the Atlantic slave trade was not a series of acts of senseless violence and domination but actually a way to “pay a debt” as to ultimately return to this glorious West African past. According to him, this past included having been part of the Lemurian races and driven through the streets of Poseidonis, and it was buried with Atlantis. The mention of Lemuria as well as Atlantis suggests a Theosophical inspiration. Abayomi Cole had declared himself a Theosophist some years earlier and had referred to many Theosophical ideas. Atlantis was quite popular among Theosophists and beyond in the late 19th century. The founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Blavatsky’s own development seems to insect with Ignatius Donnelly’s Atlantis book of 1882, where he argued with Friedrich Max Müller, among others, that the Aryan race originated in Atlantis. Another Theosophist, Charles Webster Leadbeater, later saw the civilizations of Egypt, India, Mesopotamia, and South America originating in Atlantis. Abayomi Cole now inserted (West) Africa there as well. African cities were buried alongside Atlantis. This burial in the Atlantic Ocean happened “on account of our abuse of knowledge.” Likely, this refers to the esoteric debate on black magic in the late 19th century. Especially African practices fell into the category of black magic, as

46 The West African Psychical Institute Yoruba Branch.
49 Lubelsky, Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy, p. 351.
many esoteric outlets of the time affirmed. Helena Blavatsky warned in 1888 that, in fact, any act of magic may become black magic.\textsuperscript{50} She emphasized the value of theoretical occultism over practical magic, an idea that Abayomi Cole adapted. Thus, as has been shown, Frobenius was not the first person to speak of Atlantis in the West African context. Yet, to Abayomi Cole, it meant that a restoration of precolonial, pre-slave trade glories was possible. To Frobenius, as will become clear soon, it signified a continuity with the European historical imaginary. Atlantis eventually disowned West Africans of the materials at Ile-Ife.

Riesz argued that Frobenius’ usage of Atlantis showed a positive change in the perception of Africa, making use of one of the most popular myths at the time.\textsuperscript{51} Atlantis allowed Frobenius to speak of Africa – instead of with contempt and condescension – with awe and with great enthusiasm. However, contrary to Riesz, I think an important differentiation needs to be made. While Frobenius held the materials, which he deemed the remnants of Atlantis in the highest regards, he hardly contained his contempt for the Ile-Ife inhabitants: “[The Ilifian’s] intellectual poverty struck me repeatedly as being his most distinguishing quality. This [...] at first seem surprising and unintelligible, on remembering that Ilé is the religious centre [...] these people are managing an hereditary estate [...] The people of Ifé lie, like a slumbering dragon, over the gold of a prehistoric treasure-house.”\textsuperscript{52} He contrasted the importance of Ile-Ife as “religious center” and “prehistoric treasure house” with the people living there and their supposed “intellectual poverty,” likening them to “a slumbering dragon.” There are many more, at best backhanded compliments, at worst terrible insults in his book. On the one hand, he clearly revered Ile-Ife for its ancient treasures; on the other, he showed mostly disdain for the people “slumbering over them.” The insulting tendencies become even more scandalous when we look at Frobenius’ greatest “discovery”: the Ori Olokun or Poseidon’s head, which he described as such upon encountering it in the grove:

Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrusted with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa’s Poseidon! [...] Then I looked around and saw the blacks, the circle of the sons of the venerable priest; his Holiness the Oni’s friends, and his intelligent officials. I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of

\textsuperscript{50} Tillett, *Modern Western Magic and Theosophy*, p. 19.
degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classic loveliness.\textsuperscript{53}

Frobenius was certain that because this was Atlantean work, it could not be left with the “dull-witted proles” who, according to him, did not understand the worth of what they were given. Time and again in his books, he stated that “this great skill in art” could not have been developed by the indigenous themselves, belittling them in the most paternalistic way. These comments make it difficult to agree with Riesz that Atlantis was Frobenius’ means of honoring African cultures. It only made it possible for him to understand his findings as part of an extended European history, and thus easier to take these findings with him (or attempt to do so). Thereby, he excluded, indeed never even took into consideration, what the West African intellectuals to whom he most likely owed the idea of “Atlantis” and the insight into its “relics,” most desired: that Ile-Ife was the proof of their glorious pre-colonial past, which they might even be able to return to. In this sense, the past only featured as “mythology” for Frobenius. “History” was the origin that extended beyond the African shores, making it continuous with the European, even German, ownership that Frobenius clearly desired. Thus, as we have seen, “myth” became a point of comparison by subsuming other items under it and making them count in a newly arranged materiality of ‘Atlantis’. In this comparison, the voices of West African intellectuals, who had other interests, were taken up but turned upside down. Even though the idea of “Atlantis” was peeled back in the 20th century, the body of equivalences in this process stayed the same, materializing the findings of Ile-Ife even further, while another item in the chain took over as point of comparison: “(African) art”.

3.2 Excavations at Ile-Ife: African Art over History

One might think that Frobenius’ racist bias would soon be overcome, and to some extent it was. Yet, the chain of equivalences, “antique” – “bronze” – “heads” – “art” – “religion,” etc., which Frobenius for the most part only repeated, grew stronger, making the materials found in the 20th century even more meaningful for all the parties involved. In 1938, Frobenius led new excavations, and in 1953, the Fagg brothers took over, followed by Frank Willett in 1957/62–63, where workers stumbled upon some finds by accident, which were followed by more professional excavations at the site. These excavations brought more and more objects to the surface, specifically a series of brass figures and heads as well as terracotta fragments of full figures and heads. The

\textsuperscript{53} Frobenius, The Voice of Africa Vol. 1, p. 98.
addition of the terracotta material, which was used in other parts of Nigeria as well, and the style of this new series of finds, showing more “markedly African proportions” with bigger and more narrowly placed eyes, noses, and mouths, led to the perception that “the art of Ife is essentially indigenous,” as Willett expressed it.\(^{54}\)

The excavations can be seen in continuity with each other as Frank Willett was inspired by the Faggs\(^ {55}\) and the Faggs took a significant portion of their inspiration from Frobenius. The Cambridge educated brothers William (Archeology and Anthropology) and Bernard Fagg (Classics, Archeology and Anthropology) had been connected with Nigeria since the late 1930s. Bernard had worked in the colonial administration in Nigeria since 1939 and became director of the Nigerian Antiquities Service. William had been employed as assistant keeper in the British Museum, Archeology section, since 1938 and travelling in and out of Nigeria, curated objects for museums. This time, however, the excavations would not have been possible without significant Nigerian participation. Adesoji Aderemi, Ooni\(^ {56}\) of Ife, supported the excavations, having taken some artifacts as royal possessions. He also allowed for objects to be taken to England for several material analyses, which compared the Ori Olokun copy in royal possession and the one in the British Museum.\(^ {57}\) Aderemi, who took the throne of Ile-Ife in 1930, was the longest-ruling Ooni of recent memory. Unlike his predecessors, he was educated in a missionary school and succeeded as a businessperson, owned a car before he even ascended the throne. He actively aided in the process of restoring Ile-Ife to what he and Nigerian historians saw as its former greatness and making it known far beyond its borders. Yet, his own interpretations and interests, which will come into focus below, were never given any prominence by the Faggs or Willett, probably because they assumed that he shared their views on Ife’s material antiquity. Yet for him, the excavations were significantly contextualized by what he and Nigerian historians established as “oral tradition” or “oral history,” which to an extent, served to counter the Faggs’ and Willet’s categorization.

The objects found under the leadership of the Faggs or Willett were categorized as Primitive or Tribal Art, whose distinctive feature was an “energetic” instead of a “material” orientation. For an exhibition in 1961–1962 in Munich, William Fagg wrote in his introduction:

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\(^{54}\) Willett, *Bronze Figures from Ita Yemoo, Ife, Nigeria*, p. 192.


\(^{56}\) The Ooni is one of the royal titles in the Yoruba-speaking Southwest of Nigeria.

\(^{57}\) Moss, *Further Light on the ‘Olokun’ Head of Ife*, p. 120; Craddock et al., *The Olokun head reconsidered*. 
But what is the fundamental difference between the ‘pre-industrial’ and
the ‘industrial’ form of culture and art? To this question we get an answer
most readily from anthropology [...] According to this, it seems that tribal
cultures rely on certain ideas of power, soul, mana, etc. [...] Because of
the fundamentally different ontological character with regard to the
nature of being, many scholars have called them ‘dynamic’ or ‘dynamis-
tic’, for all of them it is true that the primordial substance is not matter
but energy [...].  

Fagg relied on anthropology to supply with the basic ideas of African ontology,
he also called it “African philosophy.” The claim is that members of “industrial”
cultures – unless they are also part of another culture – cannot really un-
derstand this ontology. The concept of Primitive or Tribal Art which Fagg referred
to, was inspired by Carl Einstein, a German art historian and author, who took
the essence of this art form to be “religion.” One of Einstein’s early works, N***
Sculpture (Orig.: N***plastik), was the first to regard African objects as art. To
achieve this, he advocated a “formal analysis” to lessen the impact of negative
stereotypes. However, Einstein also had a clear idea of what African art was at
its core: “The art of the African is first and foremost religiously defined. The
images are worshipped like they might be by an ancient people.” Religion
was the defining factor of African art, and its treatment (“worship”) was
compared with a European ancient past. That this categorization of African
art was positioned against/opposite European art was also made explicit in
other places:

While the European work of art is subject to emotional, even formal
interpretation, insofar as the viewer is called upon to perform an active
optical function, the N*** work of art is unambiguously determined for
more than formal reasons, namely also religious ones. It means nothing,
it does not symbolize; it is the god who preserves his completed mythe-
tical reality, into which he incorporates the adorant, transforming him too
into a mythical and suspending his human existence.  

As a European piece of art could be understood in terms of emotions or of
formal analysis, African art meant nothing and symbolized nothing besides its

59 Einstein, Negerplastik.
60 Einstein, Negerplastik, p. xii.
61 Einstein, Negerplastik, p. xv.
intended religious function. Fagg, in fact, continued in this vein, expanding on the juxtaposition with Europe, or: the “industrialized” countries, even further:

It is, then, by the accident of history that the Africans and other tribal peoples have developed in other directions [...] because they never underwent the philosophical and scientific revolution which leads to industrial civilization. The categories of tribal thought tend to be of a ‘poetic’ character – relying on analogy, metaphor and symbolism – rather than inductive or scientific. And these categories inform their arts, visual and musical, and all that they do.62

According to Fagg, one of the most important differences between industrialized cultures and tribal ones is the regard or disregard given to science: the African art is “poetic,” not scientific. Contrary to Einstein, African art actually symbolizes – but in quite basic ways, analogically and metaphorically. In Fagg’s words, this difference sounds like an appreciation of tribal art, and it might have been meant that way. Yet, it also assigns “African art” a place different from (European) art, while this difference is dictated by the comparison to (European) science and civilization and what is perceived as its past: religion and closeness to nature. Fagg and others, while appreciating African art, thus excluded the West African intellectuals (among them, the above mentioned Abayomi Cole) that had already participated in the discourse on science and religion by the turn of the century.63 One could even trace back their assumption that “African art” was focused on the spiritual as inherited from the theosophical adaptations among West African intellectuals in the late 19th century. However, similar to Frobenius, taking over this priorly used chain of equivalences, it was given a new interpretative lens intra-actively.

Although the Faggs continued to follow Frobenius’ line of thought in this regard, they also disagreed with him significantly on one point: the origin of the Ife art. Instead of outside Africa, they looked for historical connections within the Nigerian context. They were quite convinced that the classical Ife art, especially the terracotta heads, were inspired by the Nok of Northern Nigeria. This they established by comparison of the full figures found, and by the exclusion of the heads, which showed more naturalistic features.64 Whether these similarities to the Nok were causal or mere coincidental, Fagg was unable to verify, though Frank Willett later became increasingly convinced of the possibility of

62  Fagg, Tribal Sculpture in the British Colonies, p. 695.
63  Bachmann, ‘The True and Scientific Religion’.
64  Fagg, Nigerian images, p. 29.
a historical connection through “Ife myths,” which suggested that “some elements of Ife culture were brought in from outside.”65 However, what Willett reported as “myths,” at that point in time, was likely taken from the historical accounts of the Yoruba Christian intellectuals Feyisara Sopein and Samuel Johnson, who both envisioned Ile-Ife as being founded by a small group from a Muslim context, either Bornu or West Asia.66 The naturalistic “bronze heads” (made of brass), on which Frobenius had placed much emphasis, were explained as a royal exception used for burial rites and royal shrines. By disregarding the bronze heads as royal exceptions, Ife art thus became wholly dependent on its supposed nature as “African art.” It now literally had no outside relations. It was African, or: tribal through and through. This entailed that the Fagg brothers as well as Willett silently folded in the contributions of Nigerian historians into the chain of equivalences. Yet, they disregarded the interpretative lens of these historians, their category under which they assembled these equivalences of “myth” – “art” – “religion,” and more.

This disregard can even be seen with the most important Nigerian supporter of the excavations, the Ooni Adesoji Aderemi. Before the second excavations by Frobenius in 1938 began, Aderemi had written that even though only oral traditions of Ile-Ife were known and “to a critical mind like mine [sounded] fabulous,”67 it was Ile-Ife’s glorious (pre-colonial) history. To him, it was quite sure from all historical accounts written in the early 20th century that “Ife is the oldest Yoruba town.” Yet, with the 19th century came its downfall. It was no more regarded superior among the Yoruba towns. “This is a pity, indeed, but something must be done to bring it back to life; its resurrection is in the hands of the educationists.”68 Aderemi, himself the first missionary-educated king of Ife, aimed for the economic and political development of his town. The pre-colonial history served as a positive foil in this context to explicate the need to return to former glory. Aderemi was also involved in nationalist and post-colonial politics. He became the first Nigeria-born governor of the Western Region of Nigeria from 1960–1962.

His interpretation of Ife and by extension of its material was also not singular to him. Just before his reign, from 1955 to 1960, the Western Region financed the “Yoruba Historical Research Scheme.” Its director was the historian Saburi Oladeni Biobaku, who became the first Nigeria-born Registrar at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1953. One of the Scheme’s researchers, Isaac Adeagbo

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67 Aderemi, *Notes on the City of Ife*, p. 4.
68 Aderemi, *Notes on the City of Ife*, p. 6.
Akinjogbi, wrote: “The purpose of the Scheme is to research into, and record as much as possible of, the history of the Yoruba Empire.”69 This Yoruba Empire, with Ile-Ife as its origin, was imagined as the precolonial predecessor of the Western Region, which would legitimize the Western Region as Yoruba terrain far beyond its colonial creation. There was only one problem, which Aderemi had alluded to: there were almost no written or other material sources available for that Yoruba Empire. This lack of sources motivated Biobaku and his research associates to look elsewhere: tradition narrated by “traditional palace historians” at Oyo and the other kingdoms as well as by “ritual” practitioners.70 The excavations of the mid-20th century were part of this scheme.71 As the excavations progressed, the artifacts that surfaced were also taken into account. The Nigerian historians were not the only ones to investigate these sources. They acknowledged a significant overlap with ethnographic research, but as Akinjogbin wrote about the example of traditional ceremonies, they found different things: “Anthropologists are quite familiar with it [the traditional ceremony], but they only see it as something which gives an insight into the religious instinct of a people. In many of the enactment ceremonies, religion is not the central theme, it is history.”72 For the Nigerian historians, “history” was the category under which traditional practices, oral sources, and even the material artifacts gained meaning. However, their work did not happen in a vacuum. They had to account for the chain of equivalences that had been in play since the late 19th century, established by the West African intellectuals and Frobenius, and continued by the Fagg brothers and Willet. “Religion,” which, as shown above, served as the defining quality of “African art,” was also included by Nigerian historians, but relegated to a place far back in the chain. The historians explained it as an aspect they had to divest history of. “Supernatural exaggeration” had to be peeled back, as Biobaku explained: “[G]ods and goddesses, giant and goblins, often stalk traditional accounts and no historian would swallow them all, hook, line, and sinker. He must divest oral evidence from its overlay of romanticising and supernatural agencies.”73

This materialist-secular orientation points us to the underlying agenda of the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme. It was part of a governmental development program. It produced small pamphlets for usage in schools, government

69  Akinjogbin, Enactment Ceremonies as a Source of Unwritten History, p. 168.
70  Biobaku, The Use and Interpretation of Myths; Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba History; Akinjogbin, Enactment Ceremonies as a Source of Unwritten History.
71  Willett, Excavations at Old Oyo and Ife.
72  Akinjogbin, Enactment Ceremonies as a Source of Unwritten History, p. 172.
73  Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba History, p. 45.
This output was meant to contribute to the development of the Western Region: knowing about its own history and by the implication of the Scheme’s secular-oriented outlook, divesting itself of “blind beliefs and traditions.” To an extent, the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme walked in the steps of early West African and Yoruba Christian intellectuals who had written demythologizing historical accounts. They also, though not quite explicitly, opposed the focus of the Fagg brothers and Willett, which had been first and foremost a religious or “spiritual” interpretation of tradition and the artifacts connected with it. Interestingly, both ends of this process demonstrate how contentious the materialization of the findings of Ile-Ife was in the mid-20th century.

However, both ends are implied in each other, producing objects and subjects intra-actively. For the Fagg brothers and Willett, the excavations brought to the surface objects of African art. This art was at its core religious and invested by acts of worship and traditional ontology. For the Nigerian historians, these objects were part of a long chain of evidence of pre-colonial history, which needed to be divested of its religious overtones in order to be grasped fully. For them, knowledge of their history was a prerequisite for the material development of the state that was soon to become independent. The findings of Ile-Ife were important to both ends in their material qualities, exposing their age, artistry, and value, but they were also always treated as evidence of something else. As such, they acquired those very qualities while serving as objects in a chain of equivalences that was repeated over and over again. Their materiality served as evidence for the interpretive lens.

This interpretive lens, on the other hand, was not simply the selection of intentional subjects. It was inherited, taken over, and adapted for various reasons intra-actively. Against the backdrop of each other, European treasure-hunters, curators, and anthropologists, as well as West African intellectuals and Nigerian historians, used different ends of the chain of equivalences, making different items their categories. The reason why this never seemed conflictual before was that they both had to acknowledge the same items in the chain. Even the negotiation of difference kept the chain intact, materializing Ile-Ife’s bronze heads, terracotta fragments, and heads and other findings as “ancient” and “artful” evidence material, even though different interests were constituted in this intra-active process.

74 Ojo, The Origin of the Yorubas.
75 George, Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and Its Tribes; Dennett, Nigerian Studies; Johnson, The History of the Yorubas.
4 Conclusion

This article has argued that restitution debates today cannot be fully understood without attention to the conflictual ways in which the objects to be restituted acquired their weight, their significance as materiality, in the first place. This materiality must be accounted for, but in a way that is not naïvely framing materiality as transparent. To understand this in context, this article has focused on an example that is often forgotten alongside the more prominent Nigerian Benin bronzes: the findings at Ile-Ife, some of which still remain in European possession.

Tracing the artifacts found at Ile-Ife from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, this article has shown how these objects were understood in different ways, yet each new position also folded into its understanding a chain of previously established items. A chain of equivalences, “myth” – “history” – “deities” – “religion” – “antiquity,” and more, was built and repeated, even though each position that was formed in the process also set a different priority. West African intellectuals in the late 19th century adapted Theosophical-esoteric ideas of Atlantis, occupied with the aim of accounting for a glorious past lost and the possibility to gain it back. European treasure-hunters built on these equivalences, but divided them into a present which was determined by “myth” and “religion,” whereby the lost past could only be truly appreciated by Europeans. This had significant effects on the materiality, as the latter position justified the extraction of the materials for “save-keeping,” an argument that is still used today in restitution debates.

The 20th century brought about reevaluations, but ambivalences remained. Finding another set of objects, European curators and anthropologists, though aided significantly by Nigerians, used another item in the chain as lens: “art.” This category served as appreciation of the material qualities of the objects, but at the same time, this art was also differentiated significantly from European art by “religion.” Historical connections were again made, but this time only within the Nigerian context, further tribalizing the “African art” even further and excluding the very objects that had served to suggest European (“Atlantean”) connections. All the while, these curators and anthropologists were aided by and worked side-by-side with Nigerians writing historical accounts of the Yoruba Empire, with Ile-Ife at the center. These historians, due to their investment in the development of the nation soon to gain independence, built on the chain of equivalences but displaced “religion” as interpretive lens. Supernatural ideas were only superficial to the history they sought to uncover. In acknowledging religion as a factor, they also repeated it as part of the inherited chain of equivalences. Whereas the European curators and
anthropologists folded historical accounts into their understanding of the findings at Ile-Ife as “myth,” the Nigerian historians did the same with them, taking “religion” in the chain, but displacing it. Both positions, however, materialized the Ile-Ife findings through this shared but contested chain of equivalences. These intra-actions gave the artifacts weight as material evidence, even though to different interpretative ends.

This article has made use of material religion and new materialist approaches in order to take materiality more seriously and avoid logocentric implications, without essentializing materiality as transparent or static in its meaning. Especially Karen Barad’s agential realism and Katharina Hoppe and Thomas Lemke’s relational materialism came into focus as useful theoretical approaches, as both did not presume a fixed essence of matter. Instead, Barad drew attention to the processes that produced subjects and objects at the same time intra-actively. Thus, the idea of an intentional subject in charge of the application of meaning to matter is provincialized. Matter is taken to be co-generative, not only the end of meaning-making but also a potential (co-)agent in it. As Hoppe and Lemke pointed out, this approach lacked an understanding of politics, of conflict and struggle. The addition of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of comparison provided exactly that, while still staying true to the provincialization of an intentional subject as the origin of meaning. In this theory, meaning-making was not a linear project, but was constituted by a struggle for hegemony in which a chain of items was subsumed under one of these items. This item served as the chain’s interpretative lens, yet it only acquired this status through the chain of other equivalences. Through repetition, these otherwise contingent equivalences acquired a natural status, a materiality. The materiality was, thus, generated as well as generative. The article has attempted to show how this approach to unfolding and historicizing the chain of equivalences and the contingent intra-actions that link them can shed new light on the weight of objects and the various positions that claim them in contemporary restitution debates.

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