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Silent Heritage: Investigating Ruxton’s Nigeria Collection at the Horniman Museum and Gardens

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Abstract

Museums which display all of their colonial collections are rare, and those which offer clear information on collection provenances and colonial histories in displays are rarer still. Absence and silence surrounding the colonial past in Europe’s museums places them at odds with international pressure to account for the custodianship of colonial-era collections. This is examined here through investigating the silent heritage of the Ruxton Nigeria Collection, held at the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London. Ruxton collected as a military official during Britain’s conquest of Nigeria. His collection is typical of assemblages throughout European ethnographic museums, dominated by “everyday” material heritage, not the “treasures” of elites which monopolise restitution discourse. How can provenance research be conducted upon quieter collections dating from the colonial era with little accompanying documentation? What are the potential impacts of such research upon restitution debates? From the available evidence around the Ruxton collection, it is clear that silences are more fundamental than just a matter of archival gaps, and if silences remain even after provenance research (which many museums are unable to conduct on all of their collections), then we need to question not only why and how collections are displayed, but how museums justify having them at all.

Keywords: Silence; Colonialism; Nigeria; Horniman; Collection

Introduction

Museums in the Western world are facing intense pressure to account for their custodianship of collections dating from Europe’s colonial era. Access to collections has increased; as Hopp and Fuhrmeister argue, “provenance research is now—and significantly only now—booming.”¹ But museums remain inadequately equipped to facilitate full understandings of the complex histories of colonial violence and displacement that lie within the objects cluttering their galleries and storerooms. Many museums hold collections for which they have no clear knowledge of provenance, with very little historical information given to visitors. The concept of “silent heritage” is useful, since discussing issues without naming them is circuitous and evasive, enabling marginalisation of the topic, when it is imperative that silences are addressed if museums are to reckon with their imperial pasts.

¹ Christian Fuhrmeister and Meike Hopp, “Rethinking Provenance Research,” *Getty Research Journal* 11 (2019), 213–31, 216.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, “object biographies” or “life histories” became popular concepts for discussing objects within academia. They primarily consisted of looking at a thing’s material properties, then discussing “what it meant,” the historical context.² But for Holtorf, the material identities of things are “contingent,” when studying objects we cannot “assume anything about *what they are*, but try to understand *how they come to be*.”³ Things are “meaningfully constituted”⁴ in the present; meaning is made and remade throughout a thing’s history. By not researching or displaying objects, museums halt a thing’s ability to be “meaningfully constituted,” and institutionalisation calcifies silences.

Objects cast into historical isolation within storage centres do not speak, as they can only be “heard” when used as mediators of social relations. Within museums then, object silence is not only provoked by archival absences, but emanates from the very presence of the things themselves. Even if all the available evidence about an object’s history is united, silence would remain, since the written word cannot be more than external noise; it is not manifest in an object. Framing objects as “silent heritage” addresses the fact that the bulk of museum collections will likely never see the light of day again after their accession: items are filed away into storage centres where museums can then avoid dealing with the reality that they do not know their histories, nor what their futures should be. Out of sight, out of mind, and away from public scrutiny.

In this paper, a methodology is advanced in which all the available evidence about and around a collection of “silent heritage” is gathered, the process illustrating that even once objects are contextualised, silences remain. After undertaking such research, if museums are unable to say anything meaningful about these silences, they would need to question not only why they display the objects, but why they have them at all. Both Garsha and Joy argue that creating inventories which document collection methods and origins⁵ as well as repatriating objects, is about “forging new futures predicated on the ethical insights of the consequences of past events.”⁶ In 1978, UNESCO’s director-general Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow called upon historians to “help others understand the affliction a nation can suffer at the spoilation of works it has created,”⁷ and such suffering occurs within communities, not only at the level of national consciousness. By furthering understanding of the implications of silent heritage within museums, space expands for not only dialogue but action on object futures.

These issues are especially acute in relation to collections acquired on registers of violence, from the looting and coercive collecting of domestic artefacts to the taking of enemy material heritage from sites of conflict. Investigating the contexts of acquisition and ownership demonstrates that violent colonial legacies are found not only in artefacts obviously relating to warfare, but also in “mundane” and intimate objects dating from the colonial era.⁸ They are not obvious forms of “war booty,” yet their acquisition intimates brutal force penetrating private and domestic settings as well as the battlefield. Coverage of restitution campaigns fixates on objects which belonged to and were sensationally

² Cornelius Holtorf, “Notes on the Life History of a Pot Sherd,” *Journal of Material Culture* 7:1 (2002), 49–71, 55.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jeremiah J. Garsha, “Expanding Vergangenheitsbewältigung? German Repatriation of Colonial Artefacts and Human Remains,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 22:1 (2020), 46–61, 61.

⁶ Charlotte Joy, *Heritage Justice, Elements in Critical Heritage Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 53.

⁷ Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, “A Plea for the Return of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to Those Who Created It,” *Museum International* 31:1 (1979), 58.

⁸ See Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2012).

looted by past elites, as demonstrated by Hicks, who argues, “looting skulls and weapons and royal and sacred objects was [. . .] a technology for performing white supremacy used to justify ultraviolence.”⁹ This focus does not account for the fact that the majority of ethnographic museum collections are not made up of human remains or sacred or royal regalia, but of “everyday” things belonging to the masses. The relativity of value needs stressing—it cannot be retrospectively judged that the loss of a king’s artworks, though it might have national ramifications, is more materially impactful and deeply felt than the loss of a village’s cooking pot—otherwise, the “great man” historical trope risks being recreated in the “great object.” Quieter collections taken from the material life-worlds of ordinary people, whose names have not lived on in infamy outside of their communities, are equally deserving of research.

The collection used for this study into “silent heritage” was donated to the Horniman Museum and Gardens by Major Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton in 1931. The Horniman, which has a collection of around 350,000 objects, mostly collected pre-1945, was built and given “for the people of London” in 1901 by wealthy Quaker tea merchant Fredrick Horniman.¹⁰ Situated in a leafy southeast London suburb, the museum has galleries of musical instruments, taxidermy, “world collections,” and “living collections” in the aquarium and grounds. The museum is popular with local families but is also a multidisciplinary research centre, housing a laboratory, library, educational facilities, and off-site storage. The Horniman is an innovator in the U.K. museum sector, opening Britain’s first permanent exhibition dedicated to African art and culture,¹¹ and addressing imperial pasts through projects, podcasts, and events.¹² Though it receives core funding, the museum operates at “arm’s length” from government.¹³ In 2021 the Horniman published the “Restitution and Repatriation Policy,” setting out procedures for making claims, with “a commitment to sharing information and transparency of process,” explaining that requests would be handled on a “case by case basis.”¹⁴

The Horniman’s Ruxton collection is representative of many museum collections. It was assembled under colonial (accordingly, coercive) circumstances pre-1945, and little is known about how or why the objects were acquired. Nearly all of the collection’s 178 objects, ranging from arrows to combs to ritual figures, were taken during Europe’s colonisation of Africa. Approximately 95 percent of the Horniman’s ethnographic collections are in storage,¹⁵ including 98.9 percent of Ruxton’s collection: only two objects from it are displayed, none have their acquisition listed, and very little precolonial context is provided. The museum’s silence around the collection creates a narrative which minimises the importance of historical information, implying that this information is excluded because it is irrelevant, rather than because the museum does not know.

If empirical acquisition data is an unknowable entity, then the nature of the knowledge required for curatorial practice and restitution requires scrutiny. Because of its silence,

⁹ Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 233.

¹⁰ Horniman Museum and Gardens [hereafter HMG], “Restitution and Repatriation Policy,” March 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/about-the-horniman/plans-policies-reporting/#~:text=The%20Horniman%20has%20now%20agreed,information%20and%20transparency%20of%20process>.

¹¹ HMG, “Our History,” accessed 14 February 2022, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/our-history/>.

¹² HMG, “Resetting the Agenda for the Horniman’s Future,” 26 July 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/resetting-the-agenda-for-the-hornimans-future/>.

¹³ HMG, “Plans, Policies and Reporting,” accessed 14 February 2022, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/about-the-horniman/plans-policies-reporting/>.

¹⁴ HMG, “Restitution and Repatriation Policy.”

¹⁵ HMG, “Study Collection Stores,” accessed 21 September 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/explore-the-collections/about-the-collections/study-collection-stores/>.

amplified by the unexceptional ubiquity of collections like it within Western museums, Ruxton's collection is not, nor has it ever been, the subject of restitution claims. This made it an appropriate case study for developing a methodology on how provenance research and analysis can be conducted on a colonial collection with very little documentation. Any collection taken from a country subject to colonisation, chosen at random from a Western museum catalogue, would have worked, because if the collection, or its history, were better known, it would become exceptional, and its discussion would not have practical use for those addressing silent heritage.

In November 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron stated at the University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, that within five years conditions needed to be in place for temporary or permanent returns of material cultural heritage from French museums to sub-Saharan Africa, as part of a project to “remedy” the ongoing trauma French imperialism inflicted.¹⁶ The subsequent state-commissioned report, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage* by Francois Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, introduced a process by which museums are now expected to address this ownership. Through examining the relational ethics between objects, memory, and communities, they presented the case for restitutions, arguing “the absence of cultural heritage can render memory silent and make the essential work of history [. . .] difficult.”¹⁷ They anticipated that “no one in France or Africa foresees the return of the entirety of these historically formed ensembles.”¹⁸ Restitution concerns particular objects, and “must be supported by a rigorous analysis of the historical, typological and symbolic criteria” in a case-by-case process, recognising that the object's placement within Europe is not a cultural deep freeze, but emotionally and aesthetically dialogical.¹⁹

The report's reception was seismic. Abdou Latif Coulibaly and Achille Mbembe praised the report's pragmatic and development-driven approach,²⁰ while Pitt Rivers curator Dan Hicks argued that it exposes the universal museum myth, which serves to obscure “the different modes of colonial acquisition.”²¹ But there was opposition from within the French museum sector, with former president of the Musée du Quai Branley Stéphane Martin arguing that the report's findings were flawed because of who the authors were: that as an economist (Sarr) and an art historian (Savoy) they made colonialism the foundation stone for discussing restitution, because it was a subject they were familiar with, and were motivated by a hatred of museums—they were not “museum people.”²² Parquette also notes that potential allies within French anthropology were alienated by the report's “inflammatory” language and comments.²³ Within wider academia, the motivations behind the report were questioned: was it driven not by desire to make amends for France's colonial history but “as a means of promoting soft power in Africa”²⁴ (based

¹⁶ Élysée, “Emmanuel Macron's Speech at the University of Ouagadougou,” 28 November 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou>.

¹⁷ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018), 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰ See Jonathan Paquette, “France and the Restitution of Cultural Goods: The Sarr-Savoy Report and Its Reception,” *Cultural Trends* 29:4 (2020), 302–16, 309.

²¹ Hicks, *The British Museums*, 232.

²² Paquette, “France and the Restitution of Cultural Goods,” 310.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Zoë S. Strother, “Eurocentrism Still Sets the Terms of Restitution of African Art,” *The Art Newspaper*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/01/08/eurocentrism-still-sets-the-terms-of-restitution-of-african-art>.

on the confinement of its scope to the sub-Saharan region)? And the report's reproduction of the contested statistic that "90–95% of African heritage is to be found outside the continent in the major world museums" drew criticism for reproducing the notion that African cultural production died with the advent of imperialism.²⁵

Nevertheless, these criticisms do not diminish the report's work in foregrounding the importance of object provenance in justifying ownership and display. Sarr and Savoy exposed how, by remaining silent on the history of collections in their care, museums facilitate misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the legitimacy of their ownership of international material heritage. This silence has built up over so many decades that it has created an opacity within museums, making even basic collection details difficult to uncover, not only for outsiders but also those within the museum complex. It is not just the Horniman which cannot account for all its collections. Of the British Museum's eight million strong collection, only 1 percent is displayed.²⁶ It features 4.5 million searchable items online, but only 1.9 million have images.²⁷ Thus the British Museum has approximately 3.5 million acquisitions from around the globe which cannot be studied or seen, and as a result, accounted for. Curatorial inaction on colonial-era collections shelters under such apparently helpless silence.

With the Ruxton collection, furthering an understanding of silent heritage comes through investigating the personal and historical context within which Ruxton operated, and demonstrating a methodology for how provenance research can be conducted upon a little-known colonial collection. The first part of this paper engages with Ruxton's existent archive, producing a biography of his colonial life. Part two investigates the collection, following object case histories and addressing the agency of people who created and cared for these objects prior to Ruxton. The objects are situated within the context of Ruxton's colonial life, leading to likely acquisition moments and providing a framework for discussing unethical provenance and contemporary curatorship. The concluding analysis uses the empirical contribution of this methodological process to argue for the importance of contextual research, and examines the implications of this within the context of the Sarr-Savoy report and surrounding debate. Much remains speculative about the Ruxton collection and others like it, but the reality that such ambiguities remain even after provenance research ends should never stop museums from confronting the silences within their walls.

Ruxton: A Colonial Life

The written archives at the Horniman contain little on Ruxton; his background and colonial life were pieced together from other archival depositories. The lack of knowledge surrounding the collection never needed to be a foregone conclusion. Kopytoff argues, "a person's social identities are [...] numerous [...] conflicting [...] the drama of personal biographies has become [...] the drama of identities."²⁸ Conflicts and compatibilities between various selfhoods of militarism, administrative rule, personal relations, and ethnographic interests animate Ruxton's biography.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ British Museum [hereafter BM], "Fact Sheet: British Museum Collection," accessed 21 September 2021, https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/fact_sheet_bm_collection.pdf.

²⁷ BM, "Press release: British Museum revamps online collection of over 4 million objects," accessed 18 May 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/British%20Museum%20revamps%20online%20collection%20of%20over%204%20million%20objects.docx>.

²⁸ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–92, 89.

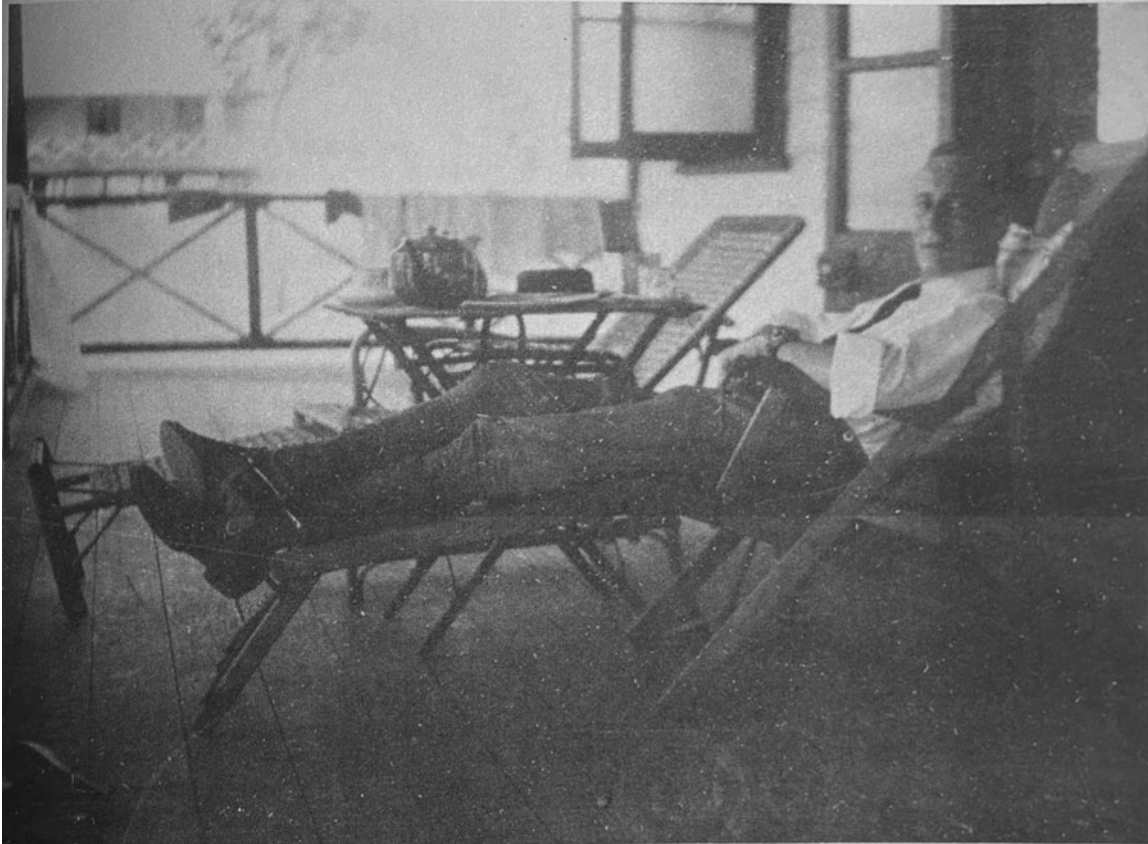


Figure 1. Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton as a District Officer. Sylvia Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones: Memoirs of Colonial Nigeria, 1907–1960* (London: Peter Owen, [1960] 1983).

Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton was born in 1873²⁹ to a family steeped in Empire. His father travelled the world throughout the 1850s on HMS *Penelope* (1829) and fought in the 1854 Crimean War; from 1863 to '65, he commanded HMS *Pandora* off western Africa, capturing Portugal's last slave ship as part of the British Navy's campaign against the slave trade on the West African coast.³⁰ Ruxton had two brothers who also entered colonial military service and his sister (Sylvia) became an anthropologist in Nigeria.³¹ Like her brother, she collected material cultural heritage,³² living out her last years in the family home decorated with silk "wall-paper" "commandeered" by a different brother during China's Boxer Rebellion. Upton made his career in the colonial service, continuing the family legacy as "direct representatives" of Britain's "power,"³³ as well as a family penchant for collecting while on colonial duty.

By 1895, Ruxton was a lieutenant in the Worcestershire Regiment of the British Army.³⁴ But in 1898 he found himself bored with British military life and secured a secondment to the Royal Niger Company Police.³⁵ The British were campaigning to conquer the Sokoto Caliphate's frontier of Ilorin in Northern Nigeria.³⁶ Aliyu argues that the regions' occupation effectively began when Ruxton "marched into Ilorin to relieve the West African Frontier Force. He was granted civil powers as Senior Executive Officer. [. . .] Had Ilorin given a stronger resistance, the conquest of the caliphate might have taken a different turn."³⁷ There are no casualty figures from the occupation, nor data on how Ruxton enacted his civil powers, but at age twenty-five he was actively involved in the violent military colonisation of Nigeria.

Ruxton was next sent to fight in the Second Boer War in South Africa, where he was wounded and then seconded to the Colonial Office, joining the newly established Civil Service of Northern Nigeria.³⁸ Military action defined Ruxton's life throughout the 1900s. He was a political officer to Ilorin on the first "Munshi" Campaign in 1900: a "substantial action" against the Tiv, justified by the British as retaliation for the disruption of telegraph line-laying across Tiv land and theft of copper wire for the lines.³⁹ From January 4 to March 9, British soldiers, armed with rifles and Maxim guns, burnt whole villages and fought the Tiv, who fought with bows and arrows and spears. Lord Lugard wrote that he regretted "the very great loss of life among these ignorant savages and the burning of scores of villages with their food. The Munshis, however, are a most intractable people."⁴⁰ Colonial archives commonly refer to the Tiv as "Munshi," a derogatory Hausa term.⁴¹

²⁹ Imperial War Museums, "Lives of the First World War, Life Story: Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton," accessed 24 September 2021, <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/lifestory/3868823#remember>.

³⁰ Michael Crowder, "Introduction," in *Stepping-Stones: Memoirs of Colonial Nigeria, 1907-1960*, ed. Michael Crowder (London: Peter Owen, 1983), 1-27, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³² BM, "Mrs Sylvia Hope Leith-Ross," accessed 1 September 2021, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG125487>.

³³ Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones*, 65.

³⁴ H. G. Hart, *New Annual Army List, Militia List, and Yeomanry Cavalry List*, vol. 62 (London: John Murray, 1901), 275.

³⁵ HMG, Papers from the Historical File: Ruxton, Upton Fitzherbert [hereafter RHF], Leith-Ross to Vowles, 25 June 1974.

³⁶ Adiele Afigbo, "The Consolidation of British Imperial Administration in Nigeria: 1900-1918," *Civilisations* 21:4 (1971), 436-59, 437.

³⁷ Sakariyau Alabi Aliyu, "Transmission of Learning in Modern Ilorin: A History of Islamic Education 1897-2012," PhD diss. (Leiden University, 2015), 52-3.

³⁸ Crowder, "Introduction," 15.

³⁹ Richard Fardon, "'Do You Hear Me? It Is Me, Akiga': Akiga's Story and Akiga Sai's History," *Africa* 85:4 (2015), 572-98, 579.

⁴⁰ Obaro Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 172.

⁴¹ David Craig Dorward, "Ethnography and Administration: A Study of Anglo-Tiv 'Working Misunderstanding,'" *Journal of African History* 15:3 (1974), 457-77, 458.

meaning “we have ‘eaten’ (them),”⁴² or “we have conquered them.” British colonials’ use of the term created the Tiv’s reputation as “savage, cannibalistic,”⁴³ which continued “officially until the 1920s, when it was discarded in favour of their self-designation, Tiv.”⁴⁴

Counter-enslavement-raiding patrols were crucial to Ruxton’s career, and included the 1901 Murchison Hills expedition⁴⁵ and the German Adamawa expedition,⁴⁶ where they murdered the local community leader.⁴⁷ In her memoirs Ruxton’s sister described the patrols:

Gathering up their men, rifles, ammunition and possibly, a machine-gun, they went off on a ‘scrap’ [. . .] no more anger against the black man they were about to punish than they had felt towards the English fox. But if [. . .] some local Chief had raided a village for slaves, well, he was fair game.⁴⁸

Within the imperial mind-set, shooting people was not only as banal as fox hunting, it was morally equivalent.

In 1905, Ruxton (now a captain) was posted to Gwandu, with headquarters at Jega, where he fined the Emir of Gwandu £5 for stealing salt, leading to “bitter relations” between the men.⁴⁹ The conflict escalated until Ruxton requested a detachment of infantry to Jega, reporting that the Emir intended to kill him, carried “a revolver and three daggers for the purpose,”⁵⁰ and was responsible for “four incendiary fires, which destroyed the police and other Government houses.”⁵¹ Lugard ordered Ruxton to find a “successor” for the Emir, since the British “could not carry out the policy of ruling through the native chiefs while such a man remained in power.”⁵² Shortly after Ruxton left, his replacement (R. P. Hillary) was killed⁵³ along with twenty-nine men after the Emir’s forces attacked, nearly wiping out British-led troops in the area.⁵⁴

From 1906 to ’13 Ruxton was the Resident of Muri Province. In 1906 he joined the Abinsi Campaign to “traverse the whole of Tivland, vanquishing the Tiv in one decisive campaign.”⁵⁵ Conflict had broken out between Hausa and Jukun within the Royal Niger Company’s Abinsi depot, which the Tiv had joined in support of the Jukun, though Ikime notes that “the records are silent on what was the role, if any, of the Niger Company’s agents during the fight.”⁵⁶ The conflict was the excuse Lugard needed to

⁴² Laura Bohannon and Paul Bohannon, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria* (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1953), 9.

⁴³ Dorward, “Ethnography and Administration,” 458.

⁴⁴ Bohannon and Bohannon, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 9.

⁴⁵ British Library, Endangered Archives Project [hereafter BL EAP], Northern Nigeria: Precolonial Documents Preservation Scheme, 535/2/2/9/18, 121/5/4, “North Bank Report on Munshi Country,” 27 April 1910.

⁴⁶ “German” is in reference to the territory German Adamawa, rather than a German led expedition.

⁴⁷ BL EAP, Recovering the Endangered Archives of the Benue Valley, Central Nigeria, 532/1/19/41, “Upper Benue Report no. 29,” 10 Dec. 1901.

⁴⁸ Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones*, 57.

⁴⁹ Mahmud Modibbo Tukur, *British Colonisation of Northern Nigeria, 1897–1914: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Sources* (Dakar: Amalion Publishing, 2016), 356.

⁵⁰ Frederick Lugard, “Northern Nigeria: Report for 1905–6,” *Colonial Reports—Annual* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1907), 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Reynolds, “Good and Bad Muslims: Islam and Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34:3 (2001), 601–18, 606.

⁵⁵ David Craig Dorward, “The Development of the British Colonial Administration among the Tiv, 1900–1949,” *African Affairs* 68:273 (1969), 316–33, 317.

⁵⁶ Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria*, 174.

escalate occupation, launching an expeditionary force of “26 officers, 2 medicals, 12 N.C.O’s, 642 rank and file, 850 carriers, and 4 maxim guns.”⁵⁷ Ruxton led one of the campaign’s punitive expeditions, reporting that,

about 50 Munshi were killed. 76 Hausas and other strangers were killed at Abinsi and 163 are known to have disappeared at the time; of these 163 captives, 118 were recovered, 8 [. . .] murdered and 37 remain unaccounted for. The expedition itself suffered no casualties.⁵⁸

After another campaign conflict, Resident C. F. Gowers reported that his soldiers returned with thirteen bows and quivers, “which they stated represented men killed,” and they found “the juju in the village was smothered with blood, and a human hand and arm was found in one of the huts. [. . .] I requested Lieut. Woods to burn the village.”⁵⁹ Of the entire campaign, Lugard recorded that “600 corpses remain at site of Abinsi, numbers drowned, carried off unknown . . . propose to follow offenders, inflict punishment, recover property, captives.”⁶⁰ Villages were fined or burnt, and only the outbreak of the Satiru rebellion halted the British campaign.⁶¹ Ochonou argues that it devastated the Tiv,⁶² with at least six hundred and up to a thousand people killed or wounded.⁶³ Evidently, looting and violence against the Tiv were considered morally acceptable actions within Ruxton’s colonial world, implicating his ownership of Tiv material heritage.

Ruxton’s career progression increased his desk duties away from the battlefield. As the Resident of Muri he established administrative authority and collected taxes,⁶⁴ leaving behind colonial documents of inherent racialised threat: “the smaller people will be gradually taught to obey, [. . .] to understand that failure [. . .] will bring punishment.”⁶⁵ However, Ruxton was a “gradualist,” believing “no opposition would be offered to European penetration if it were carried out gradually and with the permission of the compound heads.”⁶⁶ He saw taxation as fundamental to “penetration,” arguing that “until the native pays a direct tax he does not acknowledge the authority of Government,”⁶⁷ though a lack of taxation traditions necessitated a “nursery’ period.”⁶⁸ But Ruxton was a minor enactor of Empire, he could not choose colonisation methods, and was pressured to “initiate a policy of simultaneous occupation and taxation.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Ikime argues Ruxton tried to pursue nonviolence policies, since he stated, “the country is certainly not ripe for the unrestricted advent of Europeans and still less for missionaries,” referencing “the free and independent character of the Munshi.”⁷⁰ Ruxton’s apparent ability to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ BL EAP 535/2/2/6/28, “Report annual on the Muri Province for the year 1906,” 11 Jan. 1907.

⁵⁹ BL EAP 532/1/3/17, “Muri Province Reports for [1906]: Report annual on the Muri Province for the year 1906,” 26 April 1906.

⁶⁰ Obaro Ikime, “The British ‘Pacification’ of the Tiv 1900–1908,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7:1 (1973), 103–9, 107.

⁶¹ Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria*, 175.

⁶² Moses Ochonou, “Colonialism within Colonialism: The Hausa-Caliphate Imaginary and the British Colonial Administration of the Nigerian Middle Belt,” *African Studies Quarterly* 10:2 (2008), 95–127, 109.

⁶³ Chinedu N. Ubah, “The British Occupation of the Sokoto Caliphate: The Military Dimension, 1897–1906,” *Paideuma* 40 (1994), 81–97, 87.

⁶⁴ Dorward, “Development of the British Colonial Administration,” 319.

⁶⁵ BL EAP 535/2/2/6, “Notes on Muri Province Munshi Tribe-Law and Customs,” 4 April 1907.

⁶⁶ Dorward, “Development of the British Colonial Administration,” 319.

⁶⁷ BL EAP 535/2/5/1/130, “Muri Province Report—June Quarter 1913,” 31 July 1913.

⁶⁸ Dorward, “Development of the British Colonial Administration,” 321.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ikime, “British ‘Pacification’ of the Tiv,” 109.

recognise Tiv heterogeneity and valuing of peace does not diminish the violence of his imperialist and racist language and actions.

Geneviève, Ruxton's French wife, joined him in Muri.⁷¹ She and her sister-in-law Sylvia wrote *Practical West African Cookery*, a guide to creating appropriate households for colonial wives. They categorised servants: "Coast Man," "Native Cook," "Simple Savage," along with the merits, deficits, and "prices" of each.⁷² They commoditised and fetishised Nigerians who, as in Ruxton's military reports, were only present to "serve" or be "punished."⁷³ Imperial violence enveloped all life, from the battlefield to the desk to the dining table. Geneviève and Sylvia's recipes melded European culinary traditions with Nigeria's "unknown produce,"⁷⁴ yielding "Yam and young onion soup," "Poulet marenge with mashed beans," and "Paw paw tart with custard."⁷⁵ Evidently food was enjoyed and respected in the Ruxton household, making his collection's profusion of culinary objects more comprehensible.

In 1907 Ruxton had introduced his sister Sylvia to Lieutenant Arthur Leith-Ross from the West African Frontier Force, though a year after their marriage he died of blackwater fever.⁷⁶ Sylvia remained and worked in Northern Nigeria for the rest of her life, living intermittently with Ruxton and donating a collection of mats to the British Museum.⁷⁷ From Sylvia and Geneviève, it is evident that the colonial gaze and collecting drive were not confined to the war-orientated male domain.

Ruxton left Nigeria in 1914, working in "intelligence" during the First World War,⁷⁸ producing further archival silences, though in 1917 he was serving on HMS *Strathebric* as lieutenant commander.⁷⁹ In 1920 he returned to colonial administration as Cameroon's senior resident,⁸⁰ making "the official proclamation of indirect rule policy," and becoming "tainted by reported British disrespect, arrest, and imprisonment of local chiefs in the early years of the administration."⁸¹ His "peaceful penetration" philosophy of 1907 to '10 was apparently behind him.⁸² He continued his collecting habit in Cameroon.⁸³

Until 1914 Britain ruled Nigeria as two separate nations, North and South. An "unhealthy rivalry" developed which "continued after their amalgamation."⁸⁴ Even on outbound ships "no purser would have dreamt of asking a Northerner and a Southerner to share the same cabin."⁸⁵ With his Northern past, Ruxton's 1925 posting as lieutenant governor of the Southern Provinces was thus "unusual and [. . .] resented," for "he had little feeling for the South, and did not mix well with his 'Southern' British

⁷¹ Crowder, "Introduction," 16.

⁷² Sylvia Leith-Ross and Geneviève Ruxton, *Practical West African Cookery* (Chichester: J. W. Moore, 1910), 15–16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁶ Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones*, 58.

⁷⁷ BM, "Mrs Sylvia Hope Leith-Ross," accessed 1 September 2021, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG125487>.

⁷⁸ Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones*, 81.

⁷⁹ British Navy Lists, *The Navy List for August 1917* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1917), 526i.

⁸⁰ WorldStatesmen.org, "Cameroon," accessed 24 June 2022. <https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Cameroon.html>.

⁸¹ Mark Dike DeLancey, Mark W. Delancey, and Rebecca Neh Mbuh, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 272.

⁸² Fardon, "Do You Hear Me?," 579.

⁸³ HMG, "Ruxton," accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/search/collection/?keyword=ruxton&continent=&submit-filters=>.

⁸⁴ Crowder, "Introduction," 20.

⁸⁵ Leith-Ross, *Stepping Stones*, 39.

colleagues.”⁸⁶ It ended his career,⁸⁷ as a policy he instigated in 1929 created conflict with female market traders, sparking widespread violence and humiliation for the British. Ruxton had introduced “indirect rule in the guise of the Native Revenue Ordinance”⁸⁸ and campaigned for a market trading poll tax, but this was refused in favour of a flat rate “levied varying from district to district.”⁸⁹ Ruxton assumed a true income tax would still be introduced, which triggered “rumours about the government’s intentions, and led to the disturbances.”⁹⁰ Over two months, tens of thousands of women revolted, British troops killed over fifty and wounded over fifty more,⁹¹ while “punitive expeditions burned or demolished compounds, confiscated property, [. . .] and took provisions.”⁹² Despite their losses the women were successful, causing the planned taxes to be scrapped.⁹³ This period became known as the Women’s War, or Ogu Umunwanyi.⁹⁴

Ruxton enthusiastically contributed to the burgeoning discipline of anthropology throughout his life. He gathered information not only on taxation traditions and leadership structures, but on material heritage and occult beliefs. He described the Tiv as “Fetish worshippers [. . .] fetishes are represented by various objects,”⁹⁵ and wrote invasively about their bodies, from mouths as “really most disgusting” to “large numbers of [. . .] enlarged testicles.”⁹⁶ He found fault with their “moral characteristics” and “inability to obey orders, [. . .] to understand being kept waiting or being uncomfortable, [. . .] if not allowed to smoke their attention soon wanders.”⁹⁷ How he gained such “knowledge” is undisclosed, yet the extent of his power over the Tiv, to invade their culture, violate their bodies, and control their behaviours is evident.

Weaponry dominates Ruxton’s collection and his reports display a preoccupation with arms, writing that in Muri, “principal weapons are the bow and arrow, spear, matchet and Munshi knife.”⁹⁸ But he collected “data” beyond this, reporting of Tiv death practices, “if the dead man was a favourite, [. . .] goods are put on the grave, [. . .] witches [. . .] take the body away and eat it.”⁹⁹ Ruxton was imposing a discourse upon the Tiv. As Shelton argues, such writings constructed a “concept of tribe in Africa” to “enforce colonial settlement policies.”¹⁰⁰ Creating tribal narratives furthered colonial domination. But his collecting of disparate objects from the Tiv without commissions indicates interest in their culture beyond furthering colonial control, though this was an outcome, since power is a “multiple and mobile field of force relations wherein far-reaching, but never completely

⁸⁶ Crowder, “Introduction,” 79.

⁸⁷ Ifeoha Azikiwe, *Nigeria: Echoes of a Century, Vol. 1: 1914-1999* (Bloomington, Ind.: Author House, 2013), 102.

⁸⁸ Crowder, *Stepping-Stones*, 91.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91–2.

⁹¹ Judith Van Allen, “Aba Riots or the Igbo Women’s War? Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6:1 (1975), 11–39, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁵ BL EAP 535/2/2/6, “Notes on Muri Province Munshi Tribe-Law and Customs,” 4 April 1907.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Shelton, “Unsettling the Meaning: Critical Museology, Art and Anthropological Discourse,” in *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future*, ed. Mary Bouquet (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 142.

stable, effects of domination are produced.”¹⁰¹ The location of his collection within a U.K. museum shows that effects of Ruxton’s domination perpetuate into the contemporary era.

After retiring in 1930 Ruxton continued contributing to anthropology, critiquing Malinowski’s “Practical Anthropology”¹⁰² in “An Anthropological No-Man’s Land.”¹⁰³ Ruxton invested in anthropological knowledge forms throughout his life: when donating his collection to the Horniman he wrote, “I hope the ‘Jujus’ will now find a respectable home.”¹⁰⁴ Ruxton’s written material is tendentious, containing only the narrative desired by the British for posterity, for as Foucault argues, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power.”¹⁰⁵ Foucault’s equation between knowledge and power¹⁰⁶ is a well-rehearsed creed within academia, but for Graeber it minimises the reality that power predominantly stems from the threat or infliction of brute force.¹⁰⁷ Between these positions Ruxton becomes a curious agent of history, beyond his use of knowledge as a tool of power he used “brute force” as a military official, and silence to legitimise the ethics of his collecting.

The Collection

The Horniman received two sets of donations to the Ruxton collection: 175 objects from Ruxton in 1931, and three from Sylvia in 1979.¹⁰⁸ The collection is small but varied, indicative of common making and collecting trends. There are 164 objects from Nigeria, five from Cameroon and four from Palestine. Most are from Nigeria’s North, with around fifty from the Benue River region, and the rest unspecified except a bowl from Borno and a bullet from Ilorin. Cultures of origin from the Horniman’s database include Fulani, Tiv, Hausa, Yoruba, Nupe, Jukun, Bamun, Mumuye, and Mundang.

Nuances of object uses get lost within museum pedagogy. Describing a collection as containing weapons, domestic tools, or ritual artefacts is useful only with a critical eye keeping at the fore the cultural mutability of things. Nevertheless, the Ruxton collection objects share common themes: the slave trade, horses, smoking, the body, food, and religion. He collected approximately seventy objects relating to conflict and hunting, including six poison spears, a battle axe, and twelve arrows (judging from their small size they were for hunting, not warfare). Arrows are typical in ethnographic museum collections, being conveniently shaped and sized, made of durable materials, and commonly available.¹⁰⁹ Ruxton collected around forty domestic objects, including a butter dish, two ladles, and a toy. About twenty-seven relate to the body and adornment, including three skirts, a comb, and four fans, and he collected definitively ritual use objects: two masks, nine figures, and three ceremonial stools. There are also six musical instruments, including three sets of drumsticks. He collected smoking pipes, blacksmiths’ tongs, and riding boots. Materials include wood, shells, plant fibre, stone, snakeskin, feathers, leather, clay, iron, brass, raffia, and copper.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 101–2.

¹⁰² Bronislaw Malinowski, “Practical Anthropology,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 2:1 (1929), 22–38.

¹⁰³ Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton, “An Anthropological No-Man’s-Land,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 3:1 (1930), 1–12, 2–3.

¹⁰⁴ HMG, RHF, Letter to Dr. Harrison, 30 April 1931.

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 101.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 71.

¹⁰⁸ HMG, “Major Ruxton,” accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/agent/agent-6289/>.

¹⁰⁹ HMG has 2,788, the BM has 18,824 (not necessarily from colonial acquisition).

Prior to Ruxton, we do not know who owned, used, or cared for these objects. Some of the Horniman's descriptions are opaque, from "furniture" for an item described as "part of a seat"¹¹⁰ to one simply called "Natural Object."¹¹¹ How reliable is the information around the collection? How does the Horniman know which culture they belonged to? Item 31.142 is labelled "cosmetic container (personal adornment), culture: Hausa; Fulbe; Islamic." The documentary evidence is a handwritten 1973 label reading, "Leather Cosmetic / Container used for storing caseterite [sic] / or antimony / Hausa or / Fulani or / Islam Converted tribes / Widespread in N Nigeria [Ms Abu] / 9/7/73."¹¹² We know this is a powder bottle, it is West African, and is in storage. But the Horniman does not tell us who owned it, why this bottle in particular was used to carry powder, the powder's use, why it was collected, and how it came into the Horniman's possession.

The Horniman knows Ruxton collected the container, but this information is not included on the public webpage; only through understanding catalogue number systems or searching for Ruxton can a visitor know it belongs to a larger collection. This is tautological. It is not possible to search for a collection unless the name of the collector is already known, meaning when visitors find an object on the database, it is not clear what it was donated alongside. Nowhere is it communicated that cosmetic container 31.142 was collected in the early twentieth century by a colonial military official. Though there is little conclusive information, the exclusion of what is known demonstrates that silence remains the guiding ideology for curation. These scraps of information indicate a violent past, even if just for a cosmetic container, its ubiquity rendering it unremarkable within museum collections. Silent heritage easily slips through the cracks: "Cosmetic container" has 16,241 search results from the Horniman's public database,¹¹³ with 961 from Africa alone.¹¹⁴ It is a curatorially awkward object, difficult to display when lacking its own empirically verifiable history, beyond being recognisable as a type. But by isolating particular objects from Ruxton's collection and studying their typological histories alongside the context of Ruxton's life, the proliferation of acquisitional violence becomes clear. The objects selected here demonstrate the collection's range, how silent heritage is a mutable category even if objects have easily discoverable illustrious histories, and the ethical implications of owning intimate items displayed without context.

Cuirass

This cuirass is kept at the Horniman's storage centre. Though designed for protection it indexes violent encounters. The metallurgy is precise, with a leather rim for comfort. It has worn smooth, some nails are missing, as is the shoulder's stitch-work, the iron is discoloured from old polish and oxidisation. Thread of different textures and colours, mismatched nails, and reworked areas of leather indicate multiple repairs. An object list in the Horniman's files reads "Cuirass, was common among the Fulanis of Adamawa, worn under their robes when engaged in slave raiding expeditions."¹¹⁵ According to Mouctar Bah, "the Fulani were [...] given the name Adamawa. [...] Adamawa became the largest

¹¹⁰ HMG, "Furniture," accessed 28 September 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/31.166/>.

¹¹¹ HMG, "Natural Object," accessed 28 September 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/31.156ii/>.

¹¹² HMG, "Cosmetic Container (Personal Adornment)," accessed 28 September 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/31.142/>.

¹¹³ HMG, "Cosmetic Container | Search Results," accessed 11 October 2021, webpage no longer active.

¹¹⁴ HMG, "Cosmetic Container | Africa | Search Results," accessed 10 October 2021, webpage no longer active.

¹¹⁵ HMG, RHF, 126 Sloane Street Object List.



Figure 2. Cuirass. 31.134. © Horniman Museum and Gardens. Accessed 9 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/31.134/>.

supplier of slaves to Sokoto [. . .] equipped with [. . .] cuirasses.”¹¹⁶ Poulter argues collecting “items related to slavery helped legitimize [. . .] the perceived barbarity of African people [. . .] amongst the reasons given to justify military intervention on moral grounds.”¹¹⁷ Collecting material evidence of slave-raiding expeditions legitimised Ruxton’s presence not only in West Africa but on violent campaigns, and echoed his father’s legacy.

The cuirass is unusual for West African armour. The first reference to an iron cuirass was in the regalia of “a prince of Songai in the 1580s.”¹¹⁸ Armour was normally “quilted cloth,” for “chain mail [. . .] metal plate armour was much rarer.”¹¹⁹ Collecting an item of rarity indicates Ruxton’s potential awareness of the region’s material culture. But who owned it is now material knowledge beyond living memories. Evidencing the slave trade alongside colonial subjugation makes this an ethically complex object, and the collecting of the cuirass is incongruous. Collections of armour are common in aristocratic homes, such as at West Dean, where Ruxton’s wealthy neighbours lived.¹²⁰ But Ruxton belonged to the middle classes: the Horniman received the collection from his Sussex cottage.¹²¹ From West African battlefields the cuirass travelled to a retired colonial army

¹¹⁶ Thierno Mouctar Bah, “Slave-Raiding and Defensive Systems South of Lake Chad from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century,” in *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*, ed. Sylviane A. Diouf (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 15–30, 16.

¹¹⁷ Emily K. Poulter, “Silent Witness: Tracing Narratives of Empire through Objects and Archives in the West African Collections at the Manchester Museum,” *Museum History Journal* 6:1 (2013), 6–22, 12.

¹¹⁸ Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History: The Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 123.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²⁰ West Dean was the James family’s home, the collection contains armour and weapons taken on the James brothers’ travels through Eastern Africa during the Mahdist period.

¹²¹ Address of Little Drove, Singleton, Sussex, cross referenced between HMG, RHF, Letter to Dr. Harrison, 30 April 1931 and Letter to Mrs Leith-Ross, 10 July 1974.

major's rural cottage, before being tucked away in a London museum's storehouse. The infliction or threat of lethal force caused this dislocation: disengagement from understanding this context becomes if not inexplicable then unjustifiable in a society which aims to critically engage with its past.

Coat of Chainmail

The coat of iron chainmail is labelled as “Fulani; Hausa” dating from the nineteenth century.¹²² Since metal cannot be carbon dated only knowledge of chainmail idiosyncrasies or accompanying archival material could corroborate this date. An object list in the Horniman's files reads, “Chain Armour. Presented by a nephew of the Emir Bobo of Jola. Worn by the Fulani chiefs, probably manufactured in Wadai or Darfur. Cost 10 or 12 slaves.”¹²³ This was a status object, slavery again potentially performing as Ruxton's justification. In 1902, the new Emir of Yola, Bobbo Ahmadum, “sent large presents of horses and cloth” to Ruxton, although “the presents were ‘allegedly returned,’” as the Emir was “attempting to ingratiate himself with the Germans as well as the British.”¹²⁴ African rulers used gifting strategically; as Poulter argues, though Europeans looted frequently “on many other occasions objects were obtained via processes of negotiation [. . .] or as gifts intended to establish relationships. [. . .] Africans acted strategically in their own [. . .] interests.”¹²⁵ There is no further corroborating evidence that the Horniman's chainmail is the one Ahmadum gifted and Ruxton was ordered to return.

But to argue there is not enough evidence for a correlation between the returned gift and Ruxton's collection begs the question: how often did Emirs of Yola and their relatives offer prestigious chainmail coats to minor colonial officials in the early twentieth century? Because to argue this is not the same chainmail would be to argue it happened at least twice to Ruxton. This is improbable, chainmail coats are not ubiquitous in early twentieth-century collections from West Africa acquired by minor colonial officials. Either way, the evidence remains that it was gifted, and precolonial biographies can be remapped onto objects where the agency of previous owners guided the acquisition, such as the Emir's. The chainmail destabilises a Eurocentric history in which Ruxton is the catalyst of acquisition by indexing the Emir's strategies of influence through gifts. Currently, neither Ruxton's nor the Emir's names and histories are displayed. The chainmail has a complex heritage born from violent interactions, but the museum has privileged its silence.

Ibeji Figures

The two *ibeji* or *era ibeji*¹²⁶ figures in Ruxton's collection are also stored. Number 31.48 has facial indentations denoting scarification, a worn smooth nose, earrings of frayed string, colourful beads ringing the body and strings of cowries from the wrists. Ibeji means “twin” in Yorùbá. In traditional Yorùbá beliefs, twins have a “combined soul, when a new born twin dies, the life of the other is imperilled [. . .] an artisan will be commissioned to carve a small wooden figure as a symbolic substitute for the soul of the deceased

¹²² HMG, “Coat (Body Covering (Armour: Body Armour)),” accessed 30 September 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/31.133/>.

¹²³ HMG, RHF, 126 Sloane Street Object List.

¹²⁴ Tukur, *British Colonisation of Northern Nigeria*, 356.

¹²⁵ Poulter, “Silent Witness,” 9.

¹²⁶ The Horniman refers to the objects as *ibeji*, while the National Museum of Scotland [hereafter NMS] refer to their collection as *ere ibeji*, *ere* meaning “sacred image.” See NMS, “Ere Ibeji Figures,” accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/stories/global-arts-cultures-and-design/ere-ibeji-figures/>.

twin.”¹²⁷ Families, particularly mothers, would care for ibeji: washing, feeding, clothing, and in some regions singing and dancing with them.¹²⁸ Regional differences dictated shapes, hairdos, facial expression, and scarification, bead colours referred to deities, cowries “remind of the twins power either to bestow riches or to inflict misfortune,” and they sometimes had “facial smoothing and a patina due to frequent ritual.”¹²⁹

Ibeji are not uncommon within museums: the British Museum alone catalogue 211 online.¹³⁰ Their collection of ibeji from William Fagg still have the names of families attached,¹³¹ but nowhere does the museum explicitly state how these “symbolic substitutes” for deceased children left their families. There are not many recorded accounts of ibeji acquisition, but a member of the public recounted to the BBC how they acquired theirs: “These figures were given to me as a personal gift in 1961, by HH the Ataoja [Chief] of Oshogbo, Oba Adenle the Second [. . .] they had come from the family shrine of a family that had converted to Islam and therefore removed their pagan images from their home.”¹³²

Nearly a hundred years before, the missionary Reverend Joseph Gomer had also collected an ibeji through the actions of a local ruler:

A girl passed [. . .] with an image ornamented with beads in her hand. I asked her to show it to me, and offered to buy it. She said it was a woman’s child, and she was going to wash it. I spoke to the king, asking him to get it for me. He sent for the woman, who said that she gave birth to twins, and one died. She had this image made, and believed that the spirit of the dead child now dwelt in it and minded the family. She could not part with it. I had taken my revolver with me [. . .] I showed it to the king [. . .] if he would get the image for me I would give him the revolver, and an Arabic Bible [. . .]. He saw the husband, and they began making country fashion [. . .] to get the spirit out of the image. By two o’clock next day Foora Boanda, the king’s son, brought it to me.¹³³

Hart hypothesises the figure Gomer collected is one at the Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley (they have 127 ibeji),¹³⁴ whose accompanying documentation says it was “given.”¹³⁵ But as Gomer’s account illustrates, though he could view the figure as given or traded, this perspective silences the mother’s agency. After professing she cannot part from the ibeji she is silenced, her will secondary to a king’s and a missionary’s material desires. These two accounts show how past collection acquisitions of ibejis were enabled through religious conversions and the desires of elites and Westerners, not those of “ordinary” mothers. The Horniman’s archives contain no reference to ibeji, but Ruxton would have collected them between 1898 and 1929, between the times of Gomer’s and the

¹²⁷ Fernand Leroy, Taiwo Olaleye-Oruene, Gesina Koeppen-Schomerus, and Elizabeth Bryan, “Yoruba Customs and Beliefs Pertaining to Twins,” *Twin Research* 5:2 (2002), 132–6, 134.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 135–6.

¹³⁰ BM, “Ibeji,” accessed 14 July 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/x115907?id=x115907&page=1#page-top>.

¹³¹ See “Ibeji,” accessed 1 October 2021, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1951-12-234.

¹³² BBC: A History of the World, “Object: Ibeji (Twin) Figures (Nigeria, Yoruba),” accessed 1 October 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/TRN6Fr55R-WyDi1Lo_b77g.

¹³³ Gomer, 2 October 1877, quoted in William Hart, “Trophies of Grace? The ‘Art’ Collecting Activities of United Brethren in Christ Missionaries in Nineteenth Century Sierra Leone,” *African Arts* 39:2 (2006), 14–86, 19.

¹³⁴ Hearst Museum of Anthropology, “Ere Ibeji,” accessed 29 June 2023, https://portal.hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/?anonymousdonor_txt=&f%5Bhasimages_s%5D%5B%5D=yes&objname_txt=ere+ibeji&op=AND&per_page=100&q=ere+ibeji&search_field=advanced&sort=objname_sort+asc&text=&view=masonry.

¹³⁵ Hart, “Trophies of Grace?,” 21.



Figure 3. Eloyi mother and child figure. 31.41. © Horniman Museum and Gardens. Accessed 7 October 2021, webpage no longer active.

BBC contributor's accounts. Their facial smoothing indicates frequent use, making tourist manufacture unlikely, and their specificities are traceable to communities. By dint of their existence, we know two children died at birth and were held in remembrance by a family: the *ibeji* had a history as a soul's material embodiment before Ruxton's acquisition, a heritage his collecting rendered silent.

A colonial military officer collecting intimate objects seems incongruous: they were created to enact private relations of care, love, and grief. From symbolic substitutes for deceased children they became souvenirs of Ruxton's time spent enacting brutal violence against Nigerians in the ranks of a conquering British army. Clearly this brutality was not confined to battlefields or public arenas; it penetrated domestic settings and the intimate machinations of families. Within the imperial context, how Ruxton acquired the *ibejis*, while important, is not the only information needed to judge how unethical contemporary ownership and display could be without due reference to the heritage of *ibejis*, and their collector's identity.

Eloyi Figures

Both wooden Eloyi figures in the Ruxton collection depict a woman breastfeeding a child and are considered exceptional works within African art history. Number 31.41 sits at the Horniman's World Gallery entrance, the display reading "Afo maternity figure, Nigeria, 1875," while in the Perspectives case, 31.42's label dates it to the twentieth century and reads, "It reminds me of my three children [. . .] you can't see a disability, you just see a family unit."¹³⁶ The figures have been displayed in Dakar, Paris, Zurich,

¹³⁶ HMG, "Always Part of the Story," accessed 18 July 2022, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions/always-part-of-the-story>.

New York, Essen, and The Hague,¹³⁷ used to promote the Horniman¹³⁸ and prized as rare art.¹³⁹ Nothing references Ruxton's acquisition. They are labelled "Afo," a derogatory term the British co-opted. According to Craven, "the Kanuri called the Eloyi "Aho," a word I was told meant "let us go away and rest"¹⁴⁰ in reference to their viewing the Eloyi as "slaves," though they had a "joking relationship."¹⁴¹ The Hausa term "afuwa," meaning clemency or mercy, also contracts to Afo. Regardless of meaning and whether it is Kanuri or Hausa, Afo is not their self-designation, and as Craven argues, using "Eloyi" instead of "Afo" is "a matter of respect to the culture, which was subjected to absorption into the dominant Hausa states."¹⁴²

Since entering the Horniman's care the Eloyi figures have received international attention. In 1981, Kasfir wrote that such figures are "owned by individual villages and brought out annually for the Aya ceremony, [. . .] women make gifts of money and sacrifice food to the figure in the hope of increased fertility."¹⁴³ The Horniman's database dates their creation to 1875, though in 1975 a curator noted that "1875 seems to have crept in in the 1970s: it has been repeated ever since [. . .] and could of course, well be right."¹⁴⁴ Equally, the date could well be wrong; it is uncorroborated. But Craven argues they were likely made in the late nineteenth century due to facial scarification particularities.¹⁴⁵ Similar objects made specifically for tourist markets did not emerge till later, as the British did not begin taking control of Eloyi land or routinely interact with them till after 1900,¹⁴⁶ meaning the Horniman's figures were not intended to be commodities. They would have been "kept in a ritual room within [. . .] shrines [. . .] occasionally brought out during the dry season."¹⁴⁷ Their existence was for community use.

Ruxton lived near Eloyi lands between 1901 and 1902, and during the 1906 Tiv campaign. There are no records of such figures being traded or gifted, but there are looting accounts: Craven reports of a "dispute over a ritual earth figure [. . .] which [. . .] was captured. [. . .] The Eloyi wanted it back," and that their oral histories "sometimes reached between 100 and 200 years."¹⁴⁸ The Eloyi may have lost the figures before Ruxton's acquisition; currently the archives contain too many omissions, and without visual records, oral histories cannot empirically differentiate objects. Kasfir argued the figures' origins are "open to considerable questions."¹⁴⁹ The nature of Ruxton's acquisition cannot be irrefutably proven, but his possession is anomalous. Rather than focussing on European acquisition, which we may never know the details of, it is the perspective of forceful deaccession from the Eloyi which requires scrutiny. As material mediators of Eloyi cosmologies these figures were not created for colonial ownership. The Horniman is exhibiting objects never intended for such public display, least of all within a British museum which silences their complex, conflict-ridden history. But these are not relics

¹³⁷ HMG, RHF, Letter from V. E. Vowles to Mr Boston, 6 June 1975.

¹³⁸ HMG, "Horniman Museum and Gardens Posters General: Afo Mother and Children, 1966," accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/ARC/HMG/PR/001/001/006/>.

¹³⁹ See Sidney L. Kasfir, "Female Figure," in *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection*, ed. Susan Mullin Vogel (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 163.

¹⁴⁰ Anna Craven, "The Art and Material Culture of the Eloyi (Afo) People, Nigeria 1969/70: A Photographic Essay," *African Arts* 51:1 (2018), 46–63, 47.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 63.

¹⁴³ Kasfir, "Female Figure," 163.

¹⁴⁴ HMG, RHF, Letter from V. E. Vowles to Mr Boston, 6 June 1975.

¹⁴⁵ Craven, "The Art and Material Culture of the Eloyi," 46.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁹ Kasfir, "Female Figure," 163.

of an unrecoverable past; they contain opportunities to engage with communities who were deprived by the same colonial encounters the Horniman benefits from.

Conclusion

Provenance research tends to focus upon famous collections of “high art” and the material heritage of elites with well-documented histories. This is understandable, since comprehending and “listening” to objects does not translate into praxis without vast streams of wealth, time, and labour. As Hicks explains, “even the British Museum claims that it continues to be unable to publish a definitive list of its Benin collections, while many non-national museums [. . .] have very limited curatorial capacity to engage.”¹⁵⁰ The Ruxton collection’s “cosmetic container” illustrates this, as just one amongst nearly a thousand such containers in a collection of some 350,00 objects.¹⁵¹ According to Joy, many curators agree with M’Bow’s words on care and restitution, “yet feel powerless to put them into practice.”¹⁵² But if researching silent heritage is unfeasible within the Western museum complex, what is the purpose of ownership?

If knowing such basic details as what collections contain is beyond a museum’s faculties, then not only display but ownership requires critique. Inherent in the lament of powerlessness is the acknowledgement that Western museums own more than they can ever understand or display. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s cosmopolitan (and ahistorical) argument against restitution posits the protection of cultural heritage as an issue for “people and not peoples.”¹⁵³ Local connections cannot eclipse global connections, as both are made “in the imagination”, though this does not diminish the reality of either.¹⁵⁴ In Appiah’s vision of cosmopolitanism, material cultural heritage is a shared inheritance which everyone has an equal right to enjoy. Restitution requests prioritising local connections then would be a form of patrimony. But were this argument made in good faith, it would be logical to move objects to where they could be displayed, to half-empty museums like Greece’s Acropolis Museum¹⁵⁵ or Senegal’s Museum of Black Civilisations,¹⁵⁶ rather than left in the overfilling museum storage centres of the global north where only a select few curators, conservators and researchers can experience them. The inability to justify ownership is the valid syllogism of the inability to justify display, unless museums are explicitly and willingly granted custodianship by communities to protect material heritage otherwise at risk.

This paper has examined how provenance research can be conducted upon quieter collections from the colonial era that have very little accompanying documentation, and the potential impact of this kind of research upon restitution. Discussing restitution is necessary if such issues are not to be confined only to famous and elite collections. It requires developing a methodological approach beyond relying upon detailed records or personal diaries, such as Michel Leiris’s diaries of the 1931–33 Dakar-Djibouti mission,¹⁵⁷ or Captain Herbert Walker’s account of the 1897 looting of Benin City,¹⁵⁸ whose existence often

¹⁵⁰ Hicks, *British Museums*, 237.

¹⁵¹ HMG, “About the Collections,” accessed 6 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/explore-the-collections/about-the-collections/>.

¹⁵² Joy, *Heritage Justice*, 51.

¹⁵³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 121.

¹⁵⁴ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 135.

¹⁵⁵ See Bronwen L. Wickkiser, “Missing Stones Speak: The New Acropolis Museum and the Mysterious Case of Vanished Athenian Imperialism,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 18:1 (2010), 149–58.

¹⁵⁶ Joy, *Heritage Justice*, 44.

¹⁵⁷ Michel Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, trans. Brent Hayes Edwards (London: Seagull Books, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Hicks, *British Museums*, 162.

dictates what is provenanced or restituted, and what is not. This approach means gathering together all the available yet fragmented evidence around the collection. Biographical information about the collector was the starting point for this study, since Ruxton's name was the reason for the objects' commonality as a "collection." Then, specific objects were studied in greater depth, placed in contexts of communities and histories of similar objects. Potential locations and ages were mapped over the collector's biography, proving that even research on silent heritage can clarify provenance, enabling analysis of what is, and is not, recoverable about a collection's history.

The process did not result in empirical provenances for the six objects in question here, let alone the other 172 objects Ruxton collected, but nevertheless proved indicative of the ethics of displaying, storing, and owning the collection. The Eloyi figures could be identified by their communities' self-designation, not "Afo." With intimate things, not knowing how they were acquired can still be a productive form of knowledge: comparative histories demonstrate precedents of theft around *ibeji*, meaning this method cannot be ruled out when there is no evidence stating otherwise. The multitude of seeming "dead ends" within provenance research can be utilised in curation, as they call into question the ethics of displaying collections about which nothing is empirically known. If museums with colonial-era collections find they do not know what they are displaying or why said objects are in their possession, they should think carefully about why they are displaying, or owning, them at all.

The Horniman is working to redress the colonial violence behind collections. In 2021 their "Reset Agenda," was unveiled, promising to "consult people and work in partnership," "address the history of the Horniman business and of institutional collecting," and "engage wider audiences."¹⁵⁹ The Horniman has run projects developing new practices around Kenyan and Nigerian collections at the Horniman and other U.K. museums¹⁶⁰ and addressing how not displaying objects is an access barrier for community members; by opening up collections they hope to improve understanding for "informed decisions" on the future care of collections.¹⁶¹ The Horniman's history is not substantially different to other European museums, but these projects stand out within a sector evasive of its imperial roots.

Despite such projects, collections like Ruxton's remain untouched, their ubiquity and silence a sticking point for museums, and probably why the Ruxton collection has been neglected since arriving at the Horniman in 1931, with only select "exceptional" objects isolated for display (though never for provenance research). The museum has not only been silent on the history of the collection, but the fact that the objects are part of a collection at all. The interplay between heritage object silences and the silence of the museum around such collections enabled this investigation to highlight how ill-equipped museums currently are to answer questions about both the histories and futures of their collections.

Sarr and Savoy recognised this difficulty. Though making clear that not every African object collected before 1960 in Western museums is expected to be restituted, they advise restitution "without any supplementary research regarding their provenance" if objects are "presumed to be acquired through inequitable conditions."¹⁶² One such condition is acquisition "by way of military personnel or active administrators on the continent during

¹⁵⁹ HMG, "Resetting the Agenda for the Horniman's Future," 26 July 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/resetting-the-agenda-for-the-hornimans-future/>.

¹⁶⁰ HMG, "Rethinking Relationships and Building Trust around African Collections," accessed 8 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/project/rethinking-relationships/>.

¹⁶¹ HMG, "Community Action Research: African and Caribbean Collections," accessed 8 October 2021, <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/project/community-action-research-african-and-caribbean-collections/>.

¹⁶² Sarr and Savoy, *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 61.

the colonial period.”¹⁶³ Research beyond knowing Ruxton was a military officer would not be needed to justify a restitution request, but since most collections are not subject to requests (due to objects’ internal and external silences), this increases the importance of providing contextual information for such collections.

The narratives which emerged from researching the Ruxton collection show there is still more we do not, but should, know, more unanswered questions, some potentially unanswerable. Most colonial-era ethnographic museums have not provenanced all their collections, this being a task almost impossible to complete, and its commencement inevitably leads to confronting what they should do with objects which remain silent. Applying the outlined methodological process to silent heritage research highlights how museums do not, and most likely cannot, know much of what is in their collections. Given these unknowns, justifying not only a collection’s display, but its ownership, requires interrogation.

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¹⁶³ *Ibid.*