

Cultural heritage objects in lack of anchoring communities. An unfinished reflection on a relational ethics of care*

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Received: 06 February 2026; **Accepted:** 14 July 2026; **First Published:** 15 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The return of cultural artefacts taken during the colonial era seems to be a matter of course in our time. But what happens if the communities to whom these objects should be returned have for long ceased to exist and their successors are involved in a civil war? At the example of manuscripts taken from Ethiopia after the Battle of Maqdala, this contribution discusses ethical, legal and social issues (ELSI) surrounding such cultural heritage objects and calls into question the premises of recent calls for their return. This article discusses the history of these manuscripts and the case of missing “anchoring communities”, reconsiders provisional alternatives such as digitisation and provision in open access, and argues in the sense of an ethics of care. Consequently, an individual, rights-based approach to archival ethics is set aside and the care for the object itself is temporarily prioritised over the physical repatriation of the cultural heritage item.

KEYWORDS

Restitution; ELS issues; Digitisation; Open access; Feminist ethics.

* The author would like to thank Giulia Osti for her kind introduction into the ‘ethics of care’.

Introduction

Restitution is a noble ideal that should always be strived for. However, each individual case must be considered carefully. One of the often-cited cases when it comes to the question of colonial theft, looting of cultural property, and the protection or restitution of cultural heritage in or after armed conflicts is the “Battle of Maqdala”. It took place in 1868 and is also known as the endpoint of the “British Expedition to Abyssinia” (Matthies 2012; Patrizio Gunning and Challis 2023). Similar to the British punitive Benin Expedition of 1897, the aim of the battle of Maqdala was to free British hostages imprisoned by Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros II, and to punish him. On April 13th, 1868, British and Indian troops first bombarded the fortress of Maqdala, which lies on a table mount, then stormed, destroyed, pillaged and burned it down. Tewodros II committed suicide before the foreign troops had entered the inside of the stronghold. “Fifteen elephants and nearly 200 mules” (Stanley 1874, 467) were needed to transport the booty, amongst it shields, weapons, clothes, manacles, royal regalia, dresses, shawls, jewelry, or sacred artefacts like Ethiopian orthodox altar tablets (‘tabot’ in Amharic) and discs, as well as more than 1,000 manuscripts (Pankhurst 1973, 40) and other artefacts.

To this day, the vast majority of this movable cultural heritage can be found in European cultural heritage institutions, auction houses, and in the ownership of descendants of the participants of the punitive expedition. Numerous British cultural heritage institutions hold artefacts that belong to the Maqdala booty, amongst them the British Library, British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, The King’s Own Royal Regiment Museum, Lancaster, National Museums of Scotland, or the National Army Museum, London.¹ More specifically, an estimated number of 400 manuscripts has been brought to Europe. The vast majority of them can now be found in the British Library; a catalogue published in 1877 lists 350 of them (Wright 1877). Further manuscripts can be found e.g. in Cambridge University Library (13 manuscripts); The Bodleian Library, Oxford (11); Royal Collection (6); The Wellcome Collection, London (6); Victoria & Albert Museum (4); Edinburgh University Library (4); John Rylands Museum, Manchester (4); National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh (2); National Museums of Scotland (2). Beyond the United Kingdom, manuscripts can be found in Princeton University Library, New Jersey, USA (3), Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland (3); Trinity College Dublin, Ireland (3); Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France (2); Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany (2). Each of the following institutions holds a single manuscript: Austrian National Library, The Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, Netherlands; The Schøyen Collection, Oslo, Norway; UCLA Library, Los Angeles, USA; The Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA. Individual manuscripts have been sold at auctions and continue to resurface if they are being digitised by a library, archive or museum. One example is a manuscript with Ethiopian homilies that is now held by the Special Collections & University Archives at the University of Oregon.²

Two recent articles, published in August and October 2024, debate the question of restitution of the dispersed Maqdala collection. The first one is entitled “Degodding Maqdala” and was written

¹ The currently best up to date catalogue of these artefacts can be found on the website accompanying Andrew Heavens’ publication; see <https://www.theprinceandthep plunder.com/>.

² Compare here <https://www.theprinceandthep plunder.com/2024/02/26/a-17th-century-manuscript-taken-to-france-then-new-york/> and <https://oregondigital.org/concern/generics/bv73c806d>.

by two scholars (Admassu and Derillo 2024); the second one, “Neocolonialism: buying back stolen items”,³ was published by Ethiopian journalist Maya Misikir. These recent publications open up the possibility to discuss a range of ethical, legal and social aspects related to restitution and access to digital cultural heritage at the example of the Maqdala collection.

The broader intellectual context of this article is formed by the international debate on the restitution of cultural objects, especially with regard to African collections in European cultural heritage institutions. For decades, this debate mainly centered around legal aspects. Modern international treaties and conventions are based on the notion of property and protect cultural heritage from the dates onwards when they have taken effect. However, they do not prove to be useful for bygone times like the colonial era. Court cases that aim at the restitution of looted or illegally exported cultural objects from formerly colonised countries have to refer to national laws or diverse legal systems, often leading to unpredictable and unsatisfactory proceedings (Labadie 2021). Within the past decade, the debate has shifted and stressed the cultural plunder of heritage rather than just the legal issues focusing on property (Robertson 2019; Fincham 2013). Thus, the emphasis of the contemporary debate is more on restorative justice and human rights. Restitution is not merely treated as a transfer of property, but reframed as an ethical issue and as a critical mechanism to redress historical, colonial, and systemic wrongs. A crucial contribution in this respect was the 2018 publication of the report “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics” (Sarr and Savoy 2018). It addressed the violent contexts of past acquisition during the colonial era, advocated for reparation, demanded permanent repatriation and called for a “new relational ethics” based on mutual respect. Consequently, it has caused a shift in how museums, governments, and publics talk about provenance, ownership, and historical responsibility (Arts Council England 2023). Alongside with this flip of the ethical consensus, frustration over the ineffectiveness of court proceedings and existing legal frameworks has led to the use of alternative dispute resolution methods like mediation or arbitration facilitating voluntary restitution.

With regard to libraries and archives, a remarkable contribution has been published by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives” (Caswell and Cifor 2016). In this article, both authors place archivists into the broader contemporary context. In their view, a cultural heritage object is not exempt from time and space because it is kept in a cultural heritage institution. Rather, they propose an “ethics of care” and demand that the focus of care is on the relationship between these objects and the related communities: “An ethics of care, which we situate here under the larger tent of feminist ethics, stresses the ways people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of responsibilities” (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 28). Moreover, this relationality implies that archivists have to deal with shifting contexts: “An archival approach based on the feminist ethics of care [...] acknowledges that relationships change over time, that while the record may be fixed, our obligations to it – its creator, its subject, its users, its community – are constantly evolving in ways unforeseen” (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 42). As a consequence, this acknowledgement requires repeated assessments of changing contexts in order to adequately adjust the recommended actions of an ethics of care. As the discussion triggered by the article shows (Caswell and Cifor 2021), the conception of care

³ See <https://sifter.substack.com/p/two-things-you-thought-were-mutually?open=false#%C2%A7neocolonialism-buying-back-stolen-items>.

developed by Caswell and Cifor implies a shift away from an individual, rights-based approach to archival ethics and a move towards a relational, positionality-aware and context-sensitive understanding of care. However, in the case study presented here, this formulation of an “ethics of care” unfolds complexities of its own, since the broader context is formed by the civil war in northern Ethiopia, which has been ongoing since 2020 in the Tigray, Afar and Amhara regions, in the latter of which the mountain stronghold of Maqdala is located.

The legal aspect: Acquisition in good faith vs. looting

The contribution mentioned above in the introduction and written by Addis Abeba-based journalist Maya Misikir questions the justifications provided by cultural heritage institutions why cultural property coming from Maqdala is being kept. She then proceeds by indicating the pillage of Ethiopian artefacts in the recent civil war that has taken place in Tigray, the northernmost region of Ethiopia. Between November 2020 and November 2022, “relics, manuscripts, and other ancient artefacts such as coins and bibles were seized by the invading forces”,⁴ some of which were offered online for sale on platforms like eBay.⁵ From an ethical point of view, the equation of looting of cultural heritage that has taken place in recent times with a looting that took place more than 150 years ago is perfectly comprehensible. However, legal frameworks have changed much within this time. While cultural property is protected in armed conflicts by the respective UNESCO convention issued in 1954 (UNESCO 1954) and the import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property is declared illicit in the UNESCO convention issued in 1970 (UNESCO 1970), the same is not the case for the 19th century. Rather, the acquisition of cultural property looted during or after an armed conflict was seen as legal by contemporaries. This is the case with two manuscripts held by Berlin State Library. A certain Götz Graf von Seckendorff,⁶ a Prussian Lieutenant who accompanied the British punitive expedition to Abyssinia, bought (at least) two manuscripts “after the Battle of Magdala and presented [them] to King Wilhelm”,⁷ who donated them to his library in Berlin, an institution which is now named Berlin State Library.

How can the acquisition of items looted in armed conflict be legal? A law scholar explains the practice of the 18th and 19th centuries by differentiating the terms “booty of war” and “prize”; while the term “booty of war” or “spoils of war” applies to the movable property taken from an enemy on land, the term “prize” designates hostile property captured at sea. “A terrestrial prize taken by a capture affected by the Army, a land force, was called booty of war and was distinguished from a naval prize in some respects. Thus, although it was also usual for the Crown to grant a large booty to the troops involved and to specify its distribution amongst them, this was done by means of a special proclamation relating to the specific capture and not by means of a standing, albeit temporary, measure covering all captures made during a specific war, as was the case with naval prizes. The ad hoc granting of a booty of war did not set any precedent and did not entitle military captors to a similar award in future.” (Van Niekerk 2016, 123). Both terrestrial

⁴ <https://africanarguments.org/2024/09/the-destruction-and-looting-of-heritage-in-the-tigray-war/>.

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethiopia-relics-artefacts-tigray-conflict-b2010985.html>.

⁶ For more information on Seckendorff, see <https://d-nb.info/gnd/117462802> and (Heavens 2023, 93).

⁷ <https://www.theprinceandthep plunder.com/tag/berlin-state-library/> and (Heavens 2023, 222).

and naval properties could be sold, and the proceeds were distributed amongst the soldiers. Exactly this process happened after the battle of Maqdala: “The plunder taken in Magdāla was sold by auction, and the proceeds of the sale distributed among the troops as prize-money” (Hozier 1869, 251). As Graf von Seckendorff recounts, “[e]ine große Anzahl Bücher fand wenig Liebhaber, denn niemand kannte ihren rechten Werth, doch sollen sich interessante Manuscripte unter ihnen befinden, von denen manche für die Geschichte des Landes besonders werthvolle Aufschlüsse geben. Der größte Theil blieb in Abessinien, da General Napier sie der Kirche von Chelikot schenkte” (Seckendorff 1869, 178).⁸ As had been announced, the proceeds of the auction were distributed: “The total receipts amounted to 5,000l. This sum was divided among the non-commissioned officers and men who were southward of the Bechilo, which gave each man a trifle over four dollars” (Stanley 1874, 471). Though von Seckendorff does not report in his account of the expedition that he bought manuscripts or other items at the auction, this becomes evident from the catalogue of Abyssinian manuscripts published by August Dillmann in 1878, where the librarian remarks that “der letztere [Graf von Seckendorff] hatte sie in Abessinien nach dem Sturm auf Magdala angekauft”⁹ (Dillmann 1878, II). Without doubt von Seckendorff, himself being a military man, was convinced that the auction was legal and according to contemporary customs. He remarks that the revenue of the auction was comparably meagre, and that Wellington had received 120,000 £ after the campaign in Spain and the battle of Waterloo (Seckendorff 1869, 179). Therefore his purchase of at least two manuscripts can be regarded as an acquisition in good faith (bona fide purchase), and it can be concluded that the contemporaries involved in the donation of the manuscripts to Berlin State Library did not find anything objectionable with regard to the whole process. Just like the two manuscripts donated by von Seckendorff, many cultural assets, manuscripts and artefacts found their way into European cultural heritage institutions, while others went into family possessions.

In opposition to the contemporaries, who regarded the acquisition of cultural assets at the auction held after the battle of Maqdala as lawful, the commonsensical view held today is that the looting of Maqdala is illegitimate and restitution is justified. The legal framework may be considered relevant if a court case is envisaged because restitution has to be enforced. However, in the debate of the past few years, the legal aspect has been devalued because it is being seen as the line of defense by former colonial powers; rather, other considerations like ethical or social reflections have come to the fore. The ethical point of view has become congruent with the legal foundations laid down in the two UNESCO conventions cited above, and this congruence lays the basis for the argumentation brought forward by Maya Misikir, allowing for a conflation of the looting of Maqdala with the pillages in the recent civil war. Nevertheless, describing the capturing of movable cultural heritage in Maqdala as looting and pillaging puts the fact aside that the majority of cultural heritage assets found in Maqdala, and especially the manuscripts, were the

⁸ Translation into English: “a large number of books found few enthusiasts, as no one knew their true value, but there are said to be interesting manuscripts among them, some of which provide particularly valuable information for the history of the country. Most of them remained in Abyssinia, as General Napier donated them to the Church of Chelikot.” All translation by the author.

⁹ Translation into English: “the latter [count Seckendorff] had bought them in Abyssinia after the storming of Magdala.” German original available online at https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?lang=de&PPN=PPN1780195710&PHYSID=PHYS_0010&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001.

result of the looting and pillaging Emperor Tewodros II performed himself. Before 1855, when Tewodros conquered it, Maqdala was not more than a mountain stronghold. Subsequently, he constructed a number of buildings there, including a church and a palace. Tewodros is now seen as the Emperor who unified Ethiopia and ended the *Zamana Masafent* (“Era of Princes”); in the course of his military campaigns, Tewodros was not only able to crush his adversaries down, to suppress a couple of rebellions and to expropriate the Orthodox Church, but he also took a large number of manuscripts from the libraries of Gondar and the central parts of Abyssinia where he was waging war. The German scholar Gerhard Rohlfs visited Gondar in 1881 and reports that “Nicht nur mordete und schändete er, sondern alles in seinen Augen nur einigermaßen Werthvolle schleppte er fort. Gondar, zweimal von Theodor überfallen und gründlich ausgeplündert, verlor, wie man sagt, unter seiner Regierungszeit 5000 Einwohner. [...] Von den vielen Büchern, welche z.B. Combes und Tamisier als vorhanden anführen, war, ausser solchen religiösen Inhalts, kein einziges aufzutreiben. [...] Aber auf meine Frage nach Büchern gaben sie stets die Antwort: ‘Theodor hat alle fortgeschleppt.’” (Rohlfs 1883, 256-57).¹⁰ Just as Emperor Tewodros attempted to establish a national army instead of the multiple regional armies, he also “wished to provide the new church with the traditional service-books and other manuscripts which turned important churches into centres of study as well as of worship.” (Pankhurst 1973, 15). Even Bahru Zewde, an Ethiopian historian, characterises Tewodros in his “History of Modern Ethiopia” as a *shefta*: “Kasa the *shefta* (bandit) became Tewodros the emperor”, and Zewde adds “Kasa’s *shefta* days were probably the most formative period of his life” (Zewde 2002, 27-8). It is unsurprising that the approach chosen by Tewodros continuously produced new enemies within, amongst them Kasa Mercha of Tigray, who supported the British punitive expedition. While Kasa Mercha became king of Tigray in 1869 and Emperor Yohannes IV in 1871, it was the region he ruled which received 600 of the manuscripts kept in Maqdala and thus profited from the looting. Isn’t it fair to say that, from today’s point of view, Maqdala was the place of a double theft? Shouldn’t Tewodros’ actions be regarded as robbery in the very same way as the looting of Maqdala?

The social aspect: “Anchoring communities” vs. symbolic restitution

Legal aspects are important, especially if it comes to the question whether the restitution of looted cultural heritage can be enforced or not. With regard to the recent civil war that has taken place in Tigray, the northern region of Ethiopia, it is instructive to know that Eritrea never signed the 1970 UNESCO convention.¹¹ It is very likely that a lot of movable cultural heritage assets have been brought to Eritrea during the civil war, since Eritrean Defence Forces were allegedly participating in the looting and pillaging¹² indicted by Maya Misikir. However, legal aspects are not always the

¹⁰ Translation into English: “Not only did he murder and desecrate, but he also carried off everything of any value in his eyes. Gondar [was] twice attacked and thoroughly plundered by Theodore [...] Of the many books that Combes and Tamisier, for example, cite as existing, not a single one could be found, apart from those of religious content. [...] when I asked for books, they always answered: ‘Theodor has dragged them all away.’”

¹¹ See <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-means-prohibiting-and-preventing-illicit-import-export-and-transfer-ownership-cultural>.

¹² <https://africanarguments.org/2024/09/the-destruction-and-looting-of-heritage-in-the-tigray-war/>.

most important ones if it comes to requests for restitution. Emanuel Admassu and Eyob Derillo, in their contribution to the anthology “Fifteen Colonial Thefts”, don’t even discuss legal aspects with regard to the cultural heritage assets taken from Maqdala. Rather, they underline the impact such a looting has on the communities who are using such cultural heritage assets. More specifically, Admassu and Derillo point to everyday religious practices, in which tabots and manuscripts play an important role for the believers adhering to the Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The title of their contribution “Degodding Maqdala” points to the profound desacralisation of the sacred which turns assets used in church service and liturgies into rarefied artefacts. They highlight that such a profanation “is built on a long history of ‘degodding/de-super-natural-izing’ as a tool of empire” (Admassu and Derillo 2024, 152). Degodding (to ungod or to undeify) thus becomes an instrument of power and a direct attack on people’s religious and cultural identity. They rightly question “What does Britain gain from foreclosing their role in anchoring communities and framing rituals in Ethiopia?” and foreground that cultural heritage assets such as tabots and manuscripts are embedded in religious rituals and “anchored people to place”.

While this non-legal argument is especially convincing with regard to the looting and pillages which occurred during the latest civil war, it opens up the question whether there are still active communities in Ethiopia which suffer from the robbery which took place more than 150 years ago. If such assets are no longer available, a religious practice which includes the use of tabots and manuscripts is either discontinued, or such assets are replaced by other ones. It is doubtful that the loss of these assets gathered at Maqdala is still felt as a lack in these communities. This observation renders a symbolic dimension to the request for restitution. Moreover, there is a significant omission in Admassu and Derillo’s contribution: While they state with regard to Maqdala that “there, Tewodros was planning to build a church named Medhane Alem (‘Saviour of the World’) along with a treasury and a national library”, they omit the fact that it was Tewodros who cut the tie that anchored assets to communities and places. It was Tewodros who performed a “degodding” process by pursuing the idea of a national library. As Tewodros was plundering several communities while subordinating the local rulers (“princes”) especially in what now forms the Amhara region, he was the one to decontextualise sacred assets and collect them in Maqdala. It would be worth a dissertation on its own to identify all the communities from which the assets which were found in Maqdala possibly were taken. As of today, it is no longer known who the “anchoring communities” are which had been looted by Tewodros – and thus it is not known to whom the assets under question should be restituted.

Only in the minority of cases, hints can be found on the manuscripts indicating from which context they were taken. The two manuscript anthologies which can be found at Berlin State Library contain, firstly: a legal code of the Abyssinian kingdom (‘Fəṭḥa nagaśt’), a book of spiritual medicine (‘Mashafa faws manfasawi’); and an early Christian church order (‘Didascalia Apostolorum’). The second manuscript anthology comprises seven illustrative paintings, seven short prayers for the seven days of the week, the Psalms, 15 hymns of the prophets, the Song of Songs, a Praise of Mary (‘Weddase Maryam’), and a Praise of the Mother of God (‘Weddase wa Genaj’). The two magnificent manuscript anthologies were certainly produced for the court of a ruler. Dillmann, the cataloguer at Berlin State Library, dates both of them to the end of 17th century; for the first one, he indicates that “Im 14ten Jahr des Königs Ijäsû I Adjâm Sagad d. h. a. 1696 für ‘Akâla



Figure 1. Moses receives the Ark of the Covenant from God. Illustration from an Ethiopian composite manuscript kept at Berlin State Library (Anonymous 1600); see https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?lang=de&PPN=P-PN847303721&PHYSID=PHYS_0016&DMDID=DMDLOG_0005.

Christos geschrieben” (Dillmann 1878, 33),¹³ the latter being a dignitary at the high court of Iyasu I (Uhlig 2003, 165). For the second manuscript, no date is given, and the “Name der Besitzerin Walatta-Márjâm (von Bl. 236 an oft) ist an der Stelle eines ausradirten Namens später eingeschrieben” (Dillmann 1878, 12).¹⁴ While it is impossible to identify an “anchoring community” for the first anthology of manuscripts, which may have been used by a parish located at a ruler’s court, the second one can much more clearly be attributed to a mekwanint nobleman in Gondär and thus to the Ethiopian monarchy which ended in 1974. These findings separate the idea of restitution from the concept of “anchoring communities” and shift it to the symbolic sphere. Who, it has to be asked, would benefit from the restitution of the manuscripts looted from Maqdala if the concrete communities have fallen out of sight? In a country in which the decline of the state has been triggered by a civil war beginning in November 2020, who would be a legitimate representative to request restitution? If restitution is the ideal to be pursued, wouldn’t it make more sense and be of higher priority to support existing and vital “anchoring communities” in getting those sacred cultural heritage assets back which were looted during the recent civil war? But if these communities are to be found in the Amhara and Tigray Regions, would restitution not further fuel the current conflict between the central government and these regions? And vice versa: Wouldn’t a restitution to the central government do the same?

The ethical aspect: Preservation and digitisation

If the legal framework which was in force at the time when the cultural heritage assets were handed over has become obsolete; and if the “anchoring communities” to which such assets should be restituted cannot be identified, then the question arises: How can a cultural heritage institution know if it is doing good? Cultural heritage institutions like libraries, archives and museums (LAMs) are mostly inward-looking institutions which tend to focus on their core tasks: To collect, preserve and administer cultural heritage assets. If a request for restitution doesn’t come from the outside, they will keep on doing what they always did: Preserving what is there in place. Admassu and Derillo have turned this attitude against the cultural heritage institutions themselves by exposing the justifications why such assets are being kept: Such assets are better off in “climate-controlled rooms in Europe” than the “porous, temporary structures in Africa”; or that “Africans do not have the appropriate infrastructure or qualified personnel to preserve and maintain invaluable human heritage”. Held against the invalidity of the argument presented by Admassu and Derillo, these reasons seem to be unjustly ridiculing. This becomes obvious if one changes the perspective and asks about the responsibility taken on by the Ethiopian orthodox church to which “the larger part” of the more than 1.000 manuscripts were brought after the battle of Maqdala, and of which von Seckendorff explains that these manuscripts were donated to the church located in

¹³ Translation into English: “it was written in the 14th year of the reign of King Iyasu I (1696 a.d.) for Akalä Krestos”. German original available online at https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?lang=de&PPN=PPN1780195710&PHYSID=PHYS_0049&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001.

¹⁴ Translation into English: “The name of the owner Walatta-Márjâm (often from p. 236 onwards) is inscribed later in place of an erased name”. German original available online at https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?lang=de&PPN=PPN1780195710&PHYSID=PHYS_0028&DMDID=DMDLOG_0001.

“Chelikot” (Seckendorff 1869, 177, see citation and footnote 8 above; Seckendorff describes the church on p. 183).¹⁵ Rita Pankhurst noted that 600 manuscripts were “left behind at Čäläqot, or distributed to other churches” (Pankhurst 1973, 40). In this place, the second wife of Emperor Tewodros was buried after her death in May 1868, and the village in the Tigray region is now known as Chalachot,¹⁶ lying a few kilometres south of the regional capital Mäqälä. What happened to these manuscripts? Rita Pankhurst, upon her visit to Čäläqot in 1970, was only able to identify three of the manuscripts being kept at Čäläqot Selassie as probably coming from the Maqdala library. Further research identified 19 more manuscripts which were found in six ecclesiastic collections of Central and East Tigray (Ancel and Nosnitsin 2014). What about the remaining more than 500 manuscripts? Were some of them restituted to “anchoring communities” within Ethiopia as requested by Admassu and Derillo? The comparison between European cultural heritage institutions and the Ethiopian orthodox church opens up wider questions: Is a European cultural heritage institution to blame if it takes on the responsibility to appropriately take care of the physical cultural heritage assets? Doesn’t it do justice to the cultural heritage assets if conditions regarding their preservation and accessibility are linked to their restitution, such as that measures need to be taken to appropriately preserve these assets or written guarantees that they will be openly accessible? Or is it patronising to impose conditions for the restitution of cultural heritage?

“Restitution means access” state Admassu and Derillo in their contribution. Amongst cultural heritage institutions worldwide, there is a prioritised way to grant access: Digitisation of the assets and provision in open access. Therefore, Berlin State Library has digitised both manuscripts which came into its collections from Maqdala via von Seckendorff. The *Fäṭḥa Nagaśt*¹⁷ as well as the other manuscripts in the anthology, and the second illuminated manuscript anthology containing the Psalms, the Song of Songs, a Praise of Mary etc.¹⁸ are available in the library’s digitised collections. This may not equal restitution, but in the absence of “anchoring communities”, it provides access to the manuscripts worldwide and serves the interests of the research community. If local authorities as well as church dioceses provide access to these digital resources in Ethiopia even for people without computers and internet access – e.g. for clerics, pilgrims and scribes –, it would be possible to overcome the knowledge grabbing and epistemic violence bemoaned with regard to academic competition and rivalling knowledge communities (Woldeyes 2020, n.p.). Moreover, as Ge’ez and Amharic are typical examples of low-resourced languages, digitisation and subsequently hand-written text recognition of the vast resources of Ge’ez manuscripts available online may support the training of machine translation applications (Nekoto et al. 2020), thus alleviating information accessibility and communication worldwide and strengthening communities whose language has so far received little attention. This will keep even if the physical manuscripts return to Ethiopia some time in the future, a possibility which must not be left out of the debate. Notable in this context is the statement of the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who proposed that the artifacts held by V&A could be returned on a long-term loan basis, rather than permanent return.¹⁹

¹⁵ For the German original, see the citation above.

¹⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalachot>.

¹⁷ <https://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB000376EC00000000>.

¹⁸ <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001C5A000000000>.

¹⁹ See the New York Times article at <https://web.archive.org/web/20180404185405/https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/>

But even the impetus to provide access via digitisation, which strives for the noble Western ideal of openness, is debatable, because it assumes that provision in open access is embraced. By contrast, the digitisation of manuscripts relevant for the spiritual life of an Ethiopian community may be denied following an argument which underlines the relevance of cultural heritage assets for the integration of the community. According to local customs, each member of such a community has a word to say with respect to the use of such cultural assets: “The assumption is that any collection of manuscripts is the property of the entire community, both lay and ecclesiastical, and the opposition of even a single member may bring all digitisation activity to a sudden halt” (Tomaszewski and Gervers 2015, n.p.). In other words: communities’ identities might be endangered by enforced openness, and the decision to digitise is seen as patronising. It is imperative that digitisation is being undertaken with the consent of the anchoring communities; ideally, decisions around digitisation are taken by the communities and countries of origin. An exchange with such communities may spark a reflection on the principle of openness as well as on the balancing of benefits and risks of digitisation, which might enable misappropriation and exploitation of the digitised items. It might be necessary to provide technical safeguards that prohibit data mining and scraping (Pavis and Wallace 2023). Finally, if a dialogue with anchoring communities can be conducted, Western cultural heritage institutions are well advised to take the possibility into account to provide technical facilities to the local communities in order to enable access to the digital materials, or to facilitate the elaboration of a classification that determines which data can be accessed by whom, thus mediating between Western ideals and local preferences.

This juxtaposition of the ideals of restitution and openness brings the question of relational ethics to the fore. If the concern for relationships is prioritised and if all actors involved should exchange with each other on eye level, the responsibility to work towards the restitution of such cultural assets to the communities of origin has to be shared. This also implies an answer to the question how manuscripts, as well as other cultural assets, can be preserved in the future with the same care as Berlin State Library has taken in the past 150 years. Consequently, a relational “ethics of care” (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 27ff.) demands a shared vision of future preservation and may lead to the result that the best possible conditions under which the manuscripts can be preserved are currently guaranteed by the Berlin State Library. A relational ethics of care thus may, in the absence of “anchoring communities”, focus on the care, the attentive concern and maintenance of the cultural heritage object. Such a decision to temporarily maintain the status quo may be taken in view of the ongoing civil war in Ethiopia and prioritises the interests of the physical objects over the premise of immediate restitution. If the complex questions raised above have been discussed on eye-level and answers have been found, this shared responsibility may lay the foundation for a re-appropriation of the manuscripts by relevant contemporary communities as well as their re-sacralisation, a process that involves re-instituting the cultural assets in time so that they can enjoy their original functions.

arts/design/v-and-a-ethiopian-treasure.html as well as the note by the British Institute of Art & Law on the state of the debate shortly after the statement was issued at <https://ial.uk.com/cultural-property-returns-from-150-year-old-british-maqdala-expedition/>.

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