

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

An Oddity Amongst Antiquities: A Mystery at the Bureau

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

A work of speculative fiction exploring a future in which descendants of those enslaved in the US and communities in sub-Saharan Africa use the stories, hidden histories, and spiritual value of stolen artifacts to reconnect communities that have long been separated by enslavement and colonialism and repair the social and spiritual harm that was caused.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT

This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

Dr. Ish Al-Hurra stood still at the bay of windows in her office. So still that if you came across her you might miss the soft movement caused by each breath as she stared out of the window. Those who knew her, however, would recognize her position as the one she most often returned to when in deep thought and contemplation. And if you could see her view, you would perhaps understand why it might seem as though her breath indeed had been taken away. Dr. Al-Hurra's window looked out onto the resplendent gardens of City Park in New Orleans, down Esplanade Avenue and, eventually, out to the vast and winding Mississippi River. She was afforded this spectacular view due to her office being situated on the top floor of the Bureau of Cultural Reclamation, one of New Orleans' newest buildings, right next to the New Orleans Museum of Art. Dr. Al-Hurra was the newly appointed Chief of the Bureau, although she had been working at the institution for the past fifteen years.

As a young scholar of African antiquities, cultural psychology, epigenetics, and Black Atlantic relations, Dr. Al-Hurra had begun at the Bureau in its early years, back in 2030, when a massive wave of voluntary efforts to repatriate African artifacts, repair harm to descendants, and pay restitution had begun to take place across hundreds of museums in the Americas and Europe. At first the voluntary effort was met with much applause, but soon enough the sheer volume of artifacts to be assessed, shipped, and housed proved unwieldy, and the Bureau was formed to navigate the complexity of the effort. As a young researcher, Dr. Al-Hurra had been tapped to join the newly formed Bureau due to her unique combination of interests.

Standing at the window, she took a deep breath as she remembered those early days. She'd spent her first few years working alongside the esteemed archaeologist Dr. Felix Addo, the Bureau's first chief. She blinked away tears and swallowed the growing lump in her throat. She missed him greatly. Dr. Addo had passed away six years ago, and she could still hear his boisterous laughter sometimes in the halls of the Bureau. When she walked by the altar dedicated to his memory every day she came to work, she would chuckle remembering one joke of his or another. He had been like a father to her, in the way that the best mentors can be, supportive, challenging, easygoing...he believed in her. And now, here she was, following in his footsteps.

She glanced briefly at the wall next to the window. It was filled with accolades and photographs with heads of state, museum leaders, and colleagues. She sighed. She was proud of her work at the Bureau thus far. Even as a young researcher she had developed many of its most successful programs, which had now cohered into an elaborate, yet clear, multi-layered process that involved an interdisciplinary, transatlantic task force. Early on, the Bureau had needed most to establish guiding protocols. With the return of higher-profile items such as the Benin Bronzes, more institutions began to rush to return their own artifacts, especially as governments were beginning to provide incentives for doing so. This seemed a quite noble and straightforward urge, but there



were nonetheless concerns that people in the Americas would lose connection to an important representation of African history and culture if all artifacts were removed from their collections. In addition, institutions in Africa wanted time to assess the authenticity of many of the artifacts before welcoming them home.

As these protocols were being developed, Dr. Al-Hurra had created a system of public communication so that any member of the public could learn about the artifacts as they were being processed. When assessing an artifact, she and her colleagues first attempted to establish the time period it had been created and its true country or region of origin. They then tried to establish its use and purpose. Not all artifacts were of equal significance. Some had been created for ritual and religious use, or to be buried with and house the spirits of those who had committed harm. Artifacts like these were never meant to be shared with the public, a fact repeatedly made clear by the priests on the advisory council. Others, however, were created as decorative household items, or were in fact mass-produced reproductions created specifically for the Western market.

Of greatest relevance to the Bureau were artifacts that had been looted or coercively removed by European powers during the eras of imperialism and colonialism, or those that had been stolen in the twentieth century by mercenaries. All of these items were assessed and categorized by the task force and tagged for repatriation. Each returned item was sent alongside a restitution payment in the highest amount at which the returning museum had valued it in its collection. This payment represented the lost value of the item from the community from which it had been taken and allowed receiving institutions to invest in the increased infrastructure needed to house and display the artifacts. For many of those institutions, the artifacts would only remain in their care temporarily, as they needed either to be returned to the communities from which they had been taken or, in some cases, buried.



Early on, when this system was first put in place, many had brought up the unintended impact of removing large numbers of African artifacts from Western museums. Even though the role of museums at the time they acquired these artifacts was quite different from their current role, the National Education Association had written a compelling petition arguing that the educational relevance of African artifacts for American students could not be ignored. They also argued that significant harm would be caused by displaying artifacts from Europe without also displaying artifacts from Africa, Asia, and South America. This petition had engendered a series of convenings on the role of artifacts in the education process overall. Eventually, the participants had agreed that certain items would remain on loan to Western museums, that interpretation about those artifacts would be approved by the communities from which they had originated, and that there would be greater investment in exchange programs that allowed young people of African descent in the Americas to learn more deeply about the cultures of which the artifacts were part. Together they had realized that



artifacts and statues alone were not all that young people needed to learn about, and that they could benefit from much more information about the context and cultural wisdom of the communities that created them. This had led to the integration of extended reality technology that facilitated exchange and learning, travel programs, and live Portal conversations with artisans, religious leaders, and cultural organizers. Students had also begun using 3D printing technology to create artifacts of their own under the tutelage of master carvers in the Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Senegal, and Togo.

It was getting dark now, and Dr. Al-Hurra was beginning to see her reflection in the window. She'd been thirty-five when she first began at the Bureau, and fifty had crept up on her quite gradually. She took in her image appreciatively. How good was life! She had a fulfilling and exciting job that allowed her to travel, to work with communities across the world, to spearhead transformative and life-changing experiences. She was in good shape, having lifted weights for the better part of the last decade. Her five-foot-eight-inch frame wore her silky, flowy, specially tailored garments well. Her marriage was blossoming, and she'd fostered amazing friendships here in New Orleans and around the world. Now as the new Bureau Chief she was excited to be mentoring young researchers and educators and so curious about the new projects they would create.

Just one thing gnawed at her. Despite all of the success of the Bureau and its programs, there was one ambiguous artifact that consistently occupied her mind.

As if on cue, her assistant Jared knocked on her door and entered.

“Dr. Al-Hurra, so sorry to bother you. Uh, the Freedman family is here to see you...again.”

Her stomach clenched. She closed her eyes and nodded. Yes...the Freedman family. She had first encountered them years ago during a project in Africatown near Mobile, Alabama. The Freedmans were descendants of the Clotilda, the last known ship to traffic enslaved Africans to the Americas in 1860. The Clotilda had illegally operated after the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808, and her descendants and supporters had engaged in decades-long efforts to find the remains of the ship, establish a memorial and museum, and win reparations. When the ship had finally been raised, there had been several artifacts found on board, likely brought with the enslaved themselves or looted and stashed by the traffickers. Eventually all parties had agreed that the artifacts found on board would be returned to the country of Benin, where the Clotilda had originated, and that replicas of the artifacts would be displayed in Africatown alongside the remains of the Clotilda herself, as well as information about the families and their journey after landing. Because the people aboard the Clotilda had only left Benin five years before abolition, they had retained their language and cultural practices, including passing down the carving of masks and other artifacts. As a result,



the community contained a plethora of artifacts carved by artisans from the continent who had come to the US and continued their work. As such, special care had to be taken to differentiate artifacts carved on US soil and those brought with the enslaved, as well as those stolen by the traffickers and left on board the ship.

It had been tender and prolonged work, but it had ended quite successfully. Except for the mask. A rarity among artifacts from Benin.

The origin of the mask had been disputed by the Freedman family. Or rather, not its origin, but its ownership. The Freedmans had claimed that this particular mask had been in their family's possession since their matriarch had been kidnapped in Benin in 1860. The story had been passed down from generation to generation. Her name was Awa, and she had been separated from her family at the shore. Her mother had thrust the mask into her hands as she whispered prayers of protection. The last thing Awa had heard was her mother telling her that she could use the mask to be with her always. Somehow, perhaps because she was so little, Awa was able to keep the mask hidden from her captors.

"Ahem," Jared cleared his throat to get her attention.

"Ah yes, the Freedman family. Please send them in," Dr. Al-Hurra requested, turning away from the window and stepping towards her desk.

Jared nodded and left, and within seconds returned with Jomo Freedman and his mother Beryl. Dr. Al-Hurra rushed forward and shook their hands.

"Jomo, Mrs. Freedman. What a pleasant surprise. Please, have a seat." She gestured to the soft chairs facing her desk and smiled thinly. She had been meeting the family like this intermittently over the past few years, and somehow their relationship had not moved beyond the formal niceties.

"Would you like some bissap? I have some in the fridge." She looked at Jared, motioning for him to bring the refreshing, deep red drink without waiting for their answer. No one could resist bissap, and her household consumed it voraciously, especially since her partner also grew up drinking the stuff in her native Jamaica. They had an entire backyard full of the plant and also brought in dried petals from the various places it grew. She jumped at any opportunity to invite folks to share in her love of the drink.

Jomo fidgeted slowly and looked at his mother. They nodded politely and then both turned to the shelf where the mask was displayed.



Dr. Al-Hurra cleared her throat. “Yes, of course. Uh, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this evening?” Internally, she rolled her eyes at her own politeness. They were of course here to get an update on the status of the mask.

Jomo smiled sheepishly, embarrassed for all of them. “Dr. Al-Hurra, we’ve been having this conversation for some time now. I think we can do without the formalities. We’re here to find out if the council has finally agreed to return our mask.”

Yes. She knew. The family claimed that the mask arrived with their ancestor Awa and had been passed down with its story until it was lost in the 1960s. The mask in her office had been part of a collection at the History Museum of Mobile and subsequently loaned to the Africatown Heritage House when it had been determined that it was crafted not long before the Clotilda had left Benin. This made it all but certain that it had been aboard the Clotilda, but there was no evidence to indicate that it had been in the possession of the Freedmans’ ancestor. With just a story and few photographs from before the 1970s, the living family members had had no way of identifying the mask or proving that it was indeed Awa’s. But when it had been displayed as part of the artifacts tagged to be returned to Benin, the current Freedman matriarch, Beryl, just knew. She had a feeling in her stomach. It was as though the image conjured by the story her grandmother told her and the mask on the television just matched up. Dr. Al-Hurra had heard the explanation before. And even though she had her doubts, there had been some reason why she could not just ignore the Freedmans and ship the mask to Benin with the rest of the artifacts.

After seeing the mask on television, the Freedmans had visited it almost daily in Alabama. Eventually, when it had been shipped to the Bureau in New Orleans, they had visited every few months. Now, with its return imminent, they had booked a bed and breakfast in the Bywater with the intent of visiting the mask every day. Interestingly, although they had asked about the decision of the council periodically, most of the time during their visits was spent just looking at the mask. Dr. Al-Hurra assumed that this was their wish again today.

Jomo began walking towards the mask and asked, “May I?”



Dr. Al-Hurra hesitated. She couldn’t let him touch it of course, but he stopped within one foot of the mask and began staring at it, his usual form of interaction. His mother, Beryl, stood and joined him. Typically, the mask was kept on the collections floor, so Dr. Al-Hurra had never been there during their visits. She’d usually met with them before or after. Witnessing it firsthand, she shifted uncomfortably. It was so quiet. Soon, they both closed their eyes and began whispering softly. She furrowed her brow, looking towards the door, hoping Jared would return with their bissap. What were they saying?

Were they speaking to the mask?

Suddenly it felt like the room was spinning. The wind blew in through the window, twirling the curtains into a sail. Jared entered the room with the tray of bissap and glasses. At the same time, the lights in the room flickered then went dark, and the walls began trembling. Dr. Al-Hurra grabbed her desk and Jared, mouth open, stumbled, struggling to keep the bissap from falling. Dr. Al-Hurra looked at the Freedmans. They just stood there, as though they couldn't feel what was happening. What was happening? She stared at the mask in disbelief. There seemed to be a blue glow emanating from its eyes and mouth.

“Wwwhaaa—?”

Jomo opened his eyes and reached forward with both hands, taking the mask up by its sides. Before she knew it, he had placed it on his face. It seemed to conform to the shape of his face, as though disappearing into him. The mask itself was indiscernible except for the faint glow.

He began whispering again...

“Mi do gbe nu hennumɔ ce. Nyε we nyí Jomo. Un dò États-Unis. Un gosin Mɔbilu, dò Alabama. Tógbó ce nɔ nyí Awa. É wá fí dò tɔjihun ɔ me, Clotilda xwè mɔkpan díe. É vívì nù mì dɔ un mɔ we, gudogudo tɔn ɔ.”

Surprised, Dr. Al-Hurra realized that Jomo was speaking in Fon. Fon? How does he know the language? She was overwhelmed. She was processing too much. Should she call someone? Jared had successfully saved the bissap, setting down the tray on her desk. He looked at her in alarm. Somehow doing nothing felt appropriate for the moment. She sat back and gathered what she knew of the language to understand what Jomo was saying.

“Eεn nɔví nyɔnu, é dò wen nɔví nyɔnu. Un na dɔ nù nɔ ce. É dò akpá ce tɔlɔ. Eεn, mǐ na mɔ mǐdée gbè dɔkpo. Zaanǎ. Eεn.”

“Yes auntie, of course auntie. I will tell my mother. She is right here beside me. Yes, one day we will meet in person. Soon. Yes.”

Dr. Al-Hurra was confused.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had happened, everything was back to normal. The mask was back on the shelf. Dr. Al-Hurra rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

Jomo and Mrs. Freedman sat down and looked thirstily at the bissap. Jared poured them glasses as Dr. Al-Hurra looked at them questioningly.

Jomo sipped his drink and then spoke.

“The mask that was given to my ancestor, Awa, allowed her to communicate with her family in Benin. Every day she was able to speak to them, and this allowed them to stay connected even though they were so far away. They are using a mask too. Two masks were made hundreds of years before Awa was taken. These masks allowed the two wearers to communicate. Our family was able to use the mask for this purpose for one hundred years until we lost our mask in the 60s. The mask only works when members of our family are in possession of them both. This is the first time in seventy-five years that we’ve been able to communicate. But we were able to quickly catch each other up to what has happened. The mask belongs to our family. We have much to say to them.”

Dr. Al-Hurra stared in shock.

Jomo finished his glass of bissap, stood up, picked up the mask, placed it in his bag, held his hand out to help his mother stand, and the two walked out of the office.

Dr. Al-Hurra and Jared looked at each other. They both knew that neither of them would mention this day to anyone else ever again. But she had questions. Never before had an artifact glowed, come to life, and been used to communicate across the Atlantic to someone who purportedly had a similar artifact in their possession. And what exactly had happened with the lights and the wind?

She was in shock. She couldn’t move. Neither of them could. The Freedmans were leaving with the mask. *The Freedmans were leaving with the mask!*

As though coming out a trance, Dr. Al-Hurra shook herself free and ran out of the door behind them. In her fifteen years at the Bureau she had never allowed a single artifact to leave the building without her express approval. She looked around. The Freedmans, and the mask, were nowhere to be found. It was almost as though they had disappeared. She turned around to find Jared close behind her. Their eyes locked, confirming the bizarre experience they had just shared. She needed to find that mask! It belonged in the Bureau’s custody! Or did it? Given what they had just witnessed, she knew somewhere deep down inside that there must be some truth to what Jomo had shared. But, but, that would be impossible. She could feel her worldview being torn in two.

On the one hand, the very tangible, material, even scientific world of archaeology and dating methods and history told her that she was responsible for maintaining the Bureau’s protocols of repatriation and restitution and diplomacy. Everything worked like



clockwork: parties agreed, artifacts were exchanged, monies were transferred, students were taught traditional crafts, technology was employed. It was crisp and smooth and clear. It made sense.

On the other hand, the unexplainable world of spirituality and time travel and folded space-time and astral projection and ancestral connection and story...or whatever it was that had happened...called to her, unleashed something in her intuition. A different kind of truth. Something so true it felt heavy in her belly like a rock. Solid.

She needed air. Did she really want the artifact back, or did she want to learn more about what the Freedmans were experiencing? Did she crave what they had described?

Then it came to her. The GPS! She remembered that each artifact had been tagged with a chip that allowed the Bureau to digitally track its name, catalog number, and location. They had created this system in case of attempts to steal artifacts during shipment. The chips were undetectable by the human eye and only the Bureau staff had access to the device to install, detect, and remove them. And she could log into the system and see exactly where the mask was at this moment.

Dr. Al-Hurra ran to her desk and logged into her Artlink interface. She tapped her earpiece.

“Salaam, Mustafa!” She voice-activated her personalized AI assistant.

“Wa alaikum As-salam Dr. Al-Hurra. How might I support you this evening? You’re working late tonight?”

“Thanks Mustafa. There’s an artifact that until recently was located in my office.”

“Ah yes. Of course. Mask #457296 originated in what is now Benin in 1250 CE. Transported to what was then the United States in 1860...”

She interrupted him. “Thanks Mustafa. Yes, that’s the one. I need to know its whereabouts.”

Silence. The AI processed. Was Mustafa judging her for losing the artifact? Why wasn’t she able to move in time? Where had the Freedmans gone so quickly? She shook the thoughts out of her head. She needed to move systematically. She glanced at Jared, who was cleaning up the tray of bissap while listening to everything. She trusted Jared implicitly, but wondered if she should call in any of her team. Or even alert security. Her gut said not yet. There was something else she needed to know first.

Mustafa chimed to get her attention.





“They are located at 1600 N. Rampart Street in the Marigny neighborhood. I can guide you there.”

“Okay thank you, Mustafa. Jared, uh, will you come with me?”

She wasn’t afraid of the Freedman family, but felt almost as though she needed Jared with her to corroborate any additional unexplainable occurrences. Any additional...

“Mustafa, as we head there, can you check the database to see whether there have ever been reports of artifacts becoming, uh, activated?”

“Activated?”

“Um, yes. Maybe whether any light or sound has been known to emit from them. Or if any have ever changed form when worn?”

This line of inquiry felt silly. Mechanics like lights or amplified sound made no sense for a thirteenth-century artifact. She felt confused but didn’t want to admit it to herself. This defied every possible understanding she had of the science.

The only potential explanation was if it was a contemporary reproduction. But dating methods had shown that it was for sure from the thirteenth century, one of the rare wooden artifacts to survive that long. If the Freedmans were right about it being a family artifact belonging to their ancestor, then it would have been in their family for centuries before it was given to Awa.

She and Jared took the elevator down to the first floor. Mustafa had already brought a vehicle around to the front and programmed it to 1600 N. Rampart. They all sat in silence, not knowing quite what to expect when they arrived.

Twenty minutes later they were at their destination. She knocked on the door. Jomo opened it, not looking at all surprised.

“Thanks for joining us, Dr. Al-Hurra. We were hoping you would come.”

She looked at him quizzically and stepped in. Jared went to follow, but Jomo put his hand up to stop him.

“I’m so sorry brother. But this is for family only.”

Family? Dr. Al-Hurra was confused. She entered the home, shaking her head.



“Please have a seat. And some tea.”

She sat. Earlier only Jomo and Beryl had come to the Bureau. But now, the rest of the Freedman family was sitting around the room. Jomo’s two sisters, his uncle...

“I know you must be very curious. I want you to be comfortable. We’ve been speaking with our relatives at length now that we have the mask. Your family is from Mali, yes? The Al-Hurra family?”

She stared at him blankly.

“Well, we know that in precolonial Africa, when this mask was made, we didn’t necessarily have these different countries.”

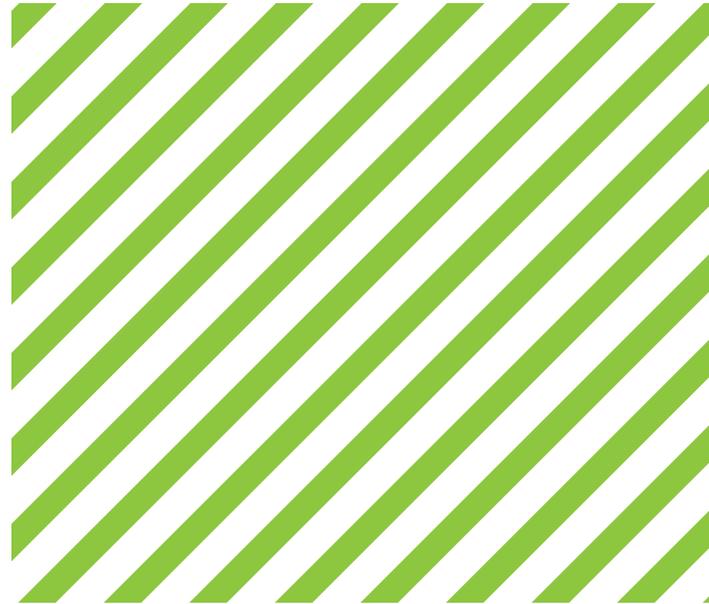
“Yes, of course. That’s well-known,” she snapped, even shocking herself a bit.

Jomo smiled and blushed.

“Well, our family name was chosen here in Alabama after abolition. Like so many other newly freed folks, they chose the name Freedman. Our ancestor Awa was fifteen then, and having been separated from her family she was taken in by another that called themselves the Freedmans. Or so we thought. But then we learned she was among those who knew her original family name. Like the others on the Clotilda, she remembered it. And since she had the mask, she was in communication with her family back in Benin. It turned out that her mother was from the Fon people, and her father was from Mali. Her family name was Al-Hurra, meaning ‘she who is free.’ She had translated her name to the English of the same meaning. Well, almost. So many others were doing it, and it just made sense at the time.”

Dr. Al-Hurra tried to process what she was hearing...

Jomo picked up the mask and handed it to her. “Dr. Al-Hurra, I believe we are related. Would you like to meet your family?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aisha Shillingford (she/her), is the Artistic Director of Intelligent Mischief, a multi-disciplinary creative studio, unleashing the power of Black radical imagination to shape the future. She is an anti-disciplinary artist, world builder, designer, and cultural strategist originally from Trinidad & Tobago. She is an alumna of Laundromat Project's Creative Change Fellowship, a member of the New Museum Incubator, and an inaugural Fellow at the Race Forward Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy. Her written work has been published in *Black Discourse* and *Grantmakers in the Arts*. Her collage work has been commissioned by the Movement for Black Lives, Root Rise Pollinate, and Creative WildFire and licensed by Nonprofit Quarterly and the Center for Third World Organizing.

Aisha has a BA in Environmental Analysis & Policy, an MSW in Social Innovation, and an MBA in Social Entrepreneurship. She has studied Graphic Design, Futures Design, Design Fictions, Design Thinking, and Streetwear Design. She has been a Lead Community Organizer at the Muslim American Society Boston Chapter, and at Close to Home DV Prevention Agency, Director of Racial & Economic Justice at the New Economy Coalition, Senior Associate at Interaction Institute for Social Change, and Deputy Director of Innovation Strategy at Movement Strategy Center. She loves sewing, cooking, and riding bikes. Her collage, text-based, installation, and experiential design work conjures Black utopias, imagination, climate hope, solidarity economics, marronage, and dreamspace. She draws on themes of fugitivity, opacity, and afrosurrealism in her work.





Center for the Future of Museums

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