

Botswanan Heritage in UK-based Memory Institutions

This dataset (doi: [10.5281/zenodo.4607430](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4607430)) was created in 2021 as part of a project to assemble data on the representation of Botswanan collections in UK-based memory institutions.

Dataset creation was led by by Elvira Thomas as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded “Making African Connections” project (makingafricanconnections.org), with support from team members at the University of Sussex (James Baker, Nicola Stylianou) and project partners in Botswana (Scobie Lekhuthile and Gase Kediseng from the Khama III Memorial Museum and Winani Thebele from the Botswana National Museum).

Summary

- The dataset was produced to make an estimate of the number of artefacts of Botswanan heritage currently held in UK-based memory institutions. 40 museums were contacted during research and 19 museums were able to confirm that they held artefacts originating from Botswana.
- Due to the various limitations of the project (detailed below) this dataset does not claim to represent the totality of Botswanan collections in UK-based memory institutions. In turn, it should not be used as the basis for making such claims.
- The dataset only records the number of artefacts in UK institutions which were made before Botswana’s independence in 1966. This decision was made in response to the concerns raised by project partners in Botswana regarding the lack of heritage made during this period that is currently held in Botswanan museums.
- A secondary aim of the project was to reflect on wider patterns that appear in the representation of Botswanan heritage in UK-based memory institutions. Specific issues which are highlighted in the dataset are:
 1. The number of artefacts within a particular institution which have geographical documentation no more specific than ‘Africa’, ‘Southern Africa’ or ‘South Eastern Africa’.
 2. The number of artefacts within a particular institution with no specific date or time period recorded for when the artefacts were made.
 3. The use of the offensive and inaccurate terms ‘bushman’/‘bushmen’ in catalogue records relating to Botswanan artefacts.

- Two separate columns are used to distinguish between a) the number of catalogue records which use these terms in object description and b) the number of catalogue records which use these terms as quoted from original accession or display labels.

Summary of dataset columns

Column A 'Museum'

This field records the names of museums which were able to confirm that they held artefacts relating to Botswana.

Column B 'Online Collections Database'

This field records whether or not a museum has an online collections database.

Column C 'Number of catalogue records in online collections database'

This field records the number of online catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts in the museum's online collections database. Where there is no online collections database, N/A is recorded.

Column D 'Number of catalogue records (via private correspondence) for artefacts from Botswana'

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts reported to be in the museum's catalogue. This information was obtained via private correspondence. Where no private correspondence took place (e.g. when a museum had an online collections database) N/A is recorded.

Column E 'Number of catalogue records linked to 'South East Africa''

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that are linked to the term 'South East Africa' (or variations thereof). For museums with no online collections database, N/A is recorded where the information was not volunteered.

Column F 'Number of catalogue records linked to 'Southern Africa''

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that are linked to the term 'Southern Africa' (or variations thereof). For museums with no online collections database, N/A is recorded where the information was not volunteered.

Column G 'Number of catalogue records linked to 'Africa''

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that are linked to the term 'Africa'. For museums with no online collections database, N/A is recorded where the information was not volunteered.

Column H 'Number of online catalogue records linked to 'Bushman' or 'Bushmen''

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that are linked to the terms 'Bushman' or 'Bushmen', typically in a field for cultural group, style, or people, and excluding those recorded in Column I. For museums with no online collections database, N/A is recorded.

Column I 'Number of online catalogue records linked to 'Bushman' or 'Bushmen' as quoted from original accession or display labels'

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that are linked to the terms 'Bushman' or 'Bushmen' as quoted from original accession or display labels. For museums with no online collections database, N/A is recorded.

Column J 'Number of catalogue records without data for date or period of production'

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that do not contain data on when an artefact was made.

Column K 'Number of catalogue records with a named individual(s) as owner/maker'

This field records the number of catalogue records for Botswana related artefacts that name one or more individuals as the owner(s) or maker(s) of the artefact.

Column L 'Number of artefacts acquired after 1966'

This field records the number of artefacts acquired after 1966 (the date of Botswanan independence). Where this information is not available, 'none recorded' is recorded.

Producing an estimate

Winani Thebele has argued that more nineteenth century Tswana artefacts are held outside Botswana than within it and that identifying where these collections are and how they are, or are not, being used is of great importance for future research and cooperation (Thebele, 2019). In light of Thebele's claim, the project set out to produce an estimate of the number of artefacts originating from Botswana held in UK institutions. This research was conducted by investigating the collections of 40 museums in the UK, via private correspondence and examination of online digital collections databases. 19 of these museums were able to confirm that they held artefacts of heritage originating from Botswana. Within the institutions included in the project, 1,027 artefacts have been registered by the museum as coming from Botswana. However, this number is likely to represent only a fraction of the actual number. Due to the colonial collecting practices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the period in which many artefacts were collected), there are many omissions in the

resulting archival material. A large number of artefacts in the UK's memory institutions are recorded as relating to geographical locations no more specific than 'Africa', 'Southern Africa' or 'South Eastern Africa'. During the project, museums were not asked to provide data relating to the number of objects in African collections with non-specific geographical details, however three museums kindly volunteered this information. This data has been recorded in columns E, F and G. Unfortunately, since the project was conducted under the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the large majority of museum professionals contacted were working from home and had limited access to catalogues on site. As a result, some museums were unable to confirm if they held any Botswanan artefacts.

Post-independence collections

While the project set out only to record objects made before Botswana gained its independence in 1966, some of the artefacts included in the dataset were collected after this time. In cases where an artefact was collected post-1966 and no documentation exists relating to when it was made, there is the possibility that these artefacts were made for the burgeoning tourist market post-independence. Without a closer look at these objects and consultation with experts in Botswanan heritage and descendant communities, it is difficult to make an accurate estimate about when and why they were made. For this reason, a column in the dataset records the number artefacts which were recorded as being acquired post-1966. In some cases, accession numbers in archival records pertained to the date the artefact was collected, however due to a lack of consistency, collections which provided no specific date for when artefacts were recorded have been marked as 'none recorded'.

Names and dates

A secondary aim of the project was to reflect on wider patterns that appear in the representation of Botswanan heritage in UK-based memory institutions. For example, a large majority of catalogue records record no specific date relating to when artefacts were made (refer to column J). In some cases, objects were attributed to a particular ethnic group such as the Tswana and San/Basarwa peoples, however only one artefact out of the 1,027 catalogue records found recorded a named individual as the creator or original owner of the artefact.

The omission of dates and named individuals in the archives is a result of nineteenth and twentieth century collecting and cataloguing practices that did not consider such details important for understanding 'ethnographic' artefacts (Kingdon, 2019). Most museums contacted during the project expressed interest in these details or described their efforts to

redress issues in the documentation of their African collections. However, this research highlights the fact that problematic legacies of nineteenth and twentieth century collecting practices endure in the online presentation of Botswanan heritage by UK museums. The consistent lack of attribution to named individuals and common lack of dates give the overall impression that heritage from Botswana, and more widely African heritage, is frozen in the 'ethnographic present', a timeless heritage with no authors (Ames, 1994).

Ethnic groups in Botswana reflected in UK collections

The appearance of outdated terms relating to Botswana and its peoples, (such as 'Bechuanaland') and offensive terms (most notably 'bushman'/'bushmen') appeared in many records. In some online catalogue entries, a clear distinction is made between information which the museum chooses to provide today, and information quoted from original accession notes (Column I). Outdated terms often appeared in these quoted sections. However, in some cases the term 'bushman' is recorded as the cultural group from which the artefacts were obtained (Column H).

Another issue raised by this research was the fact that while there are a diverse range of ethnic groups living in Botswana, many of these ethnic groups also live in other countries in Southern African. For example, an artefact which is recorded as being of Tswana origin, could not be included in research if there was no specific geographical data relating it to Botswana. While there is a high possibility that an object of Tswana heritage originates from Botswana, it might also originate from South Africa or another bordering country. Even in the case where an object is directly related to Botswana in a catalogue entry, we often find that other countries are also listed, meaning that we cannot assume the object originates from Botswana.

Conclusion

As a result of the limitations outlined above, only a small proportion of artefacts from the research could be included in the estimate of the number of artefacts of Botswanan heritage held in the UK. This not only reflects the legacy of colonial collecting practices but also the haphazard drawing of boundaries by European colonialists who failed to consider the identities of the people living in the areas they were dividing. Highlighting these limitations also brings to light the many obstacles which source communities could be presented with when attempting to access information about their heritage currently held in the UK.

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