African Journal of Religious Studies

Decolonising the Archive: A Theoretical Framework for Digital Repatriation and Liturgical Reconstruction in Ethiopia

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Published: 14 December 2024 | **Received:** 19 August 2024 | **Accepted:** 16 November 2024

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Abstract

Background:

The digital repatriation of sacred objects and archival materials taken from Ethiopia during conflicts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is a pressing cultural concern. Contemporary digitisation projects (2021–2026), frequently initiated by Western institutions, can perpetuate colonial paradigms of ownership and access, neglecting the needs of source communities for spiritual and liturgical renewal.

Purpose and objectives:

This article develops a theoretical framework to decolonise archival practice. Its objective is to reorient the paradigm of digital repatriation from providing mere digital access towards actively enabling the reconstruction of indigenous liturgical practices within Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo and related religious contexts.

Methodology:

The framework is constructed through a synthesis of critical archival studies, postcolonial theory, and indigenous methodologies. It analyses contemporary project discourse and ethical debates from 2021 to 2024, focusing on the intersection of digital heritage, religious practice, and restorative justice.

Findings/Key insights:

The analysis identifies the core principle of 'liturgical re-contextualisation', whereby digital artefacts must be re-embedded within living spiritual ecosystems. The framework argues that projects must centre Ethiopian ecclesiastical authority in metadata creation and ceremonial protocol, transcending the model of the passive digital repository.

Conclusion:

Decolonising the archive for Ethiopia necessitates a fundamental shift from preservation-centric to participation-driven revitalisation. The framework posits that the primary measure of success is the enabled application of repatriated materials in contemporary worship and religious pedagogy.

Recommendations:

Ethiopian religious institutions should hold lead roles in co-designing digital platforms. International holding

institutions must cede curatorial authority and provide unrestricted, high-fidelity digital data. Future research (2024–2026) should document the tangible impact of digitally repatriated items on specific liturgical rites.

Key words:
Digital repatriation; decolonising archives; liturgical reconstruction; Ethiopia; cultural heritage; sacred objects.

Contribution statement:
This article provides a novel theoretical framework that redefines digital repatriation as a process of liturgical and spiritual restoration, offering a structured approach for scholars and heritage professionals working with Ethiopian materials.

Keywords: *Digital repatriation, decolonising archives, liturgical reconstruction, Ethiopian cultural heritage, postcolonial museology, digital humanities, restitution*