

Open access from Aotearoa to West Africa

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Academic editor: Victoria Passau ♦ Received 5 February 2026 ♦ Accepted 12 March 2026 ♦ Published 8 April 2026

This article examines how open cultural heritage practice connects Aotearoa New Zealand and West Africa through shared questions of authority, authorship, and digital access.

In August 2025, Auckland Museum’s Wikimedian in Residence, Anjuli Selvadurai attended Wikimania¹, the annual global conference of the Wikimedia movement, held in Nairobi, Kenya. Often referred to as the ‘Silicon Savannah’, Nairobi is a leading centre within Africa’s technology and innovation ecosystem. The 2025 theme of, ‘*Inclusivity, Impact, Sustainability*’, championed grassroots initiatives across East and West Africa.

Wikimania brings together a global community of open knowledge contributors, including those working in the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector. These practitioners collaborate with Wikimedia to provide open access and freely useable content for public use. Through platforms such as Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia; Wikimedia Commons, the free-to-use multimedia repository; Wikidata; the structured multilingual database, and Wikisource, the digital library of free textual sources, individuals, communities and GLAM institutions can preserve, share and connect with their cultural heritage with fewer barriers.

The reach and visibility of Wikimedia platforms enable GLAM institutions to extend access to authoritative content, collections and research beyond their physical walls. Yet expanded access raises questions of authorship, ownership and consent as cultural safety and contextual nuance remain central when working with open cultural heritage (Richardson and Taylor 2025). How, then, can knowledge be shared while ensuring cross cultural understanding and collaboration?

This article presents insights from two West African local advocates for open access: community leader Harriet Bayel from Ghana and architectural historian Asuru Lutherking Petercan from Nigeria.

Advocating for open cultural heritage

Open access to digital cultural assets centres on the democratisation of knowledge, encouraging audiences to be engaged participants in examining, researching and creatively interpreting shared cultural material. Increasing access to GLAM collections in this ever-developing technological environment comes with ethical considerations around data sovereignty, copyright laws, licensing flexibility, and navigating how generative AI may intersect with Indigenous knowledge systems (Sharathbabu 2024).

In 2015, as part of the [Future Museum](#) strategy, Auckland Museum released over one million collection records and made copyright-cleared collection images available under Creative Commons licences, joining an emerging global movement of open access GLAM institutions (Richardson and Taylor 2025). This initiative expanded access to the Museum’s collection and data, enabling offsite engagement in new ways.

By 2017, the Museum began working with Wikimedia platforms to increase engagement with collections, facilitate offsite learning, and connect with local and global knowledge seekers and communities.

Advocacy for open access has been supported by initiatives such as [The Open GLAM Survey](#), launched in 2018. This resource documents access policies and practices of GLAM institutions across the globe. It now includes institutions from 55 countries and records 1,720 known instances of ‘open’ compliant organisations. However, significant gaps in representation remain across parts of Africa and Asia (McCarthy and Wallace 2024).

Since adopting an open access approach, Auckland Museum has established more than 20 diverse digital partnerships, including Wikimedia platforms (Richardson and Taylor 2025). Over the past eight years, the Museum’s

1 Anjuli was awarded a travel Scholarship from the Wikimedia Foundation to attend.

open access images on Wikimedia Commons have been viewed over 300 million times².

Approximately one third of the openly licenced collection images have been uploaded to Wikimedia Commons. Some of these images illustrating a range of diverse high-traffic Wikipedia articles across multiple language versions, including entries for the [Treaty of Versailles](#), [Order of the British Empire](#) and [Bird](#). By supplying high-quality collection images, new access points for discoverability are created for local, national and global histories. This collective approach increases access to informational and historical resources, connecting more people with the Museum's taonga.

Steering the complexities of open access is a shared experience amongst GLAM institutions around the globe. Auckland Museum's policy of '*open by default closed by exception*', is supported by robust cultural permissions guidelines, that safeguard the Museum's taonga Māori and Pacific collections (O'Donovan and Richardson 2017). These frameworks inform the dissemination of knowledge and data, ensuring that open access practices align with the Museum's ethical choices.

In pockets of West Africa, projects supporting digitisation, open access and knowledge distribution are growing (Oloruntimilehin et al. 2025). Harriet Bayel (Fig. 1) and Asuru Lutherking Petercan (Fig. 2) are considering how they can better address and refine their respective approaches at a regional scale.

As digital access becomes central to sustaining audience engagement and supporting post-colonial equity, global attitudes toward open culture are evolving,



Figure 1. “Harriet Henry Bayel” 1 (22/Oct/2024). Amuzujoe. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harriet_Henry_Bayel_1.jpg.



Figure 2. “Lutherking Asuru at the Wikimania 2025 Global Glam Meetup” (5/Aug/2025). Dolon Prova. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikimania_2025_Global_GLAM_Meetup#/media/File:Lutherking_Asuru_at_the_Wikimania_2025_Global_Glam_Meetup.jpg.

although many remain wary. Bayel found that some groups were hesitant due to limited familiarity with open cultural heritage. She identified that,

“some communities worry about how their heritage will be represented online or misused, so building trust and raising awareness is an essential part of the process”. (H. Bayel, personal communication, 6 September 2025)

Bayel is part of the Africa Advocacy Circle of the [TAROCH \(Towards a Recommendation on Open Cultural Heritage\) initiative](#), a Creative Commons-led project that is aiming to secure a UNESCO recommendation that promotes open access solutions for cultural heritage in the public domain. With a particular focus on empowering women and youth, her work supports open access, documentation, and preservation of cultural knowledge.

Petercan encountered similar challenges while undertaking [Find and Tell Elsewhere](#) with The Canadian Centre for Architecture. This project highlighted the work of Nigeria's first generation of post-independence architects who contributed to reshaping the country's urban identity.

As part of this project, a collection of Michael Olutusen Onafowokan's drawings (Fig. 3), held in private custodianship, were digitised and shared to Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share

² <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections/partnerships/wikipedia-statistics> (Auckland Museum 2015).

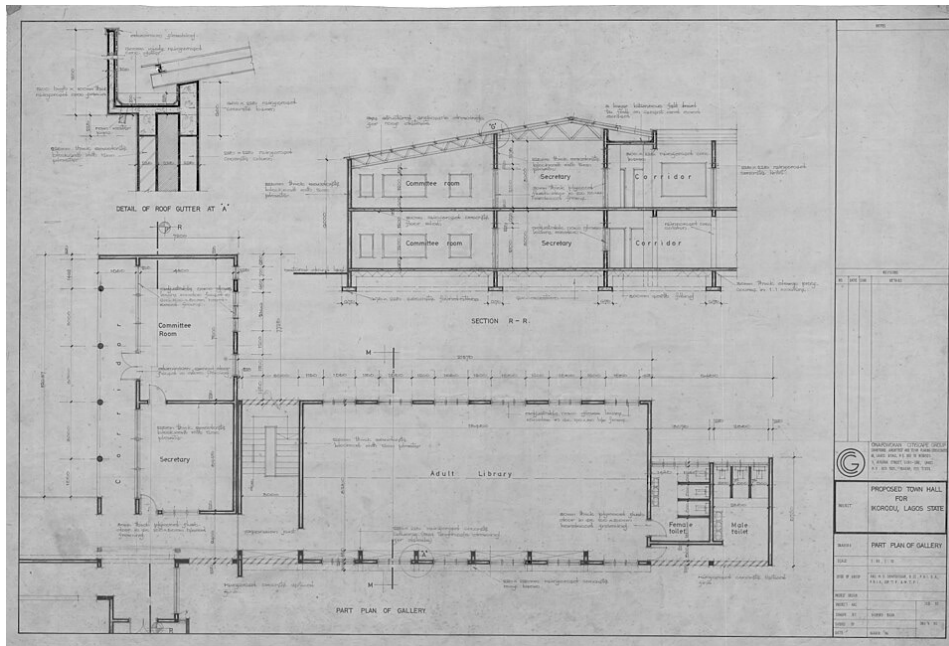


Figure 3. “Ikorodu Lagos State Town Hall Nigeria 1972 Designed by Michael Olutusen Onafowokan Part Plan Of Gallery 024” (circa 1961–1983). Michael Olutusen Onafowokan. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ikorodu_Lagos_State_Town_Hall_Nigeria_1972_Designed_by_Michael_Olutusen_Onafowokan_Part_Plan_Of_Gallery_024.jpg.

Alike 4.0 licence (CC BY-SA 4.0). Through projects such as this, open-access platforms facilitate partnerships that, as Petercan notes connect, “*local custodianship to global audiences, ensuring Nigerian and West African cultural heritage is not only preserved but also recognised as part of the global story*” (personal communication, 1 September 2025).

He also acknowledged that this work is not without ethical concerns with, “*questions of ownership, custodianship, and consent*” arising in practice. (A.L. Petercan, personal communication, 1 September 2025)

Like Aotearoa New Zealand, Ghana and Nigeria share histories shaped by colonialism. Contemporary open

access practice operates within these inherited colonial museological frameworks. In this context, open access can serve as a dialogue through which institutional authority is reconsidered and rebalanced.

Auckland Museum cares for taonga from across West Africa, including Ghana and Nigeria, within the Human History department’s, ‘World’ or ‘Foreign Ethnology’ collection. While the collection reflects the institution’s colonial foundations, it also takes on new meanings, embodying the need to represent the diverse and changing cultural landscape of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

This collection includes art and artefacts from regions beyond Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific. While



Figure 4. “mask/helmet” 1998.13.52, 55529. Collection of Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. CC BY 4.0. <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections/record/552075?k=nigeria&ooc=True>.

many of these objects were acquired through earlier collecting practices, they now hold relevance for migrant and diasporic communities in Auckland.

For example, a [Nigerian helmet/mask](#) (Fig. 4) from the collection has been photographed and released under a CC-BY SA 4.0 licence through [Collections Online](#). This open licensing enables records and associated image data to be shared on platforms including Wikimedia Commons.

In doing so, this object becomes more widely accessible, available for source communities and researchers to interpret, contextualise and connect with. In this way, institutional authority is redistributed, withdrawing the Museum as sole interpreter of knowledge. Instead, interpretation becomes a shared and evolving process.

A focus on authorship

West Africa encompasses 16 countries, with Nigeria and Ghana the first and second most populous in Africa. Conversations with Petercan and Bayel provide insight into the breadth of each of their countries' own unique cultural heritages and how the ways their work broadens global understandings of the range of African cultures, histories and identities.

Petercan describes the cultural diversity of Nigeria,

“Nigeria alone has over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own languages, traditions, art forms, and architectural expressions. Creating a heritage landscape that is not defined by a single story, but by a mosaic of histories and identities that together form a powerful cultural ecosystem. This diversity is visible in architecture, material culture, and oral traditions. From traditional Yoruba courtyard houses and Igbo compound layouts to Hausa mud-brick architecture and riverine stilt houses in the Niger Delta. Architecture here has always responded creatively to environment, climate and community life. Beyond buildings, Nigeria’s cultural heritage includes rich traditions of festivals, sculpture, textiles, music, and storytelling, which continue to influence contemporary cultural production. What is also unique is the layering of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence histories” (personal communication, 1 September 2025).

Bayel similarly describes Ghanaian cultural heritage as rich and diverse:

“It includes monuments like the Asante traditional buildings and coastal forts, iconic symbols such as the kente cloth and Adinkra designs, traditional music, festivals, chieftaincy institutions, and over 80 Indigenous languages. Across West Africa, Ghana shares traditions, trades and migration stories with neighbours, making the region’s cultural heritage vibrant, interconnected, and deeply rooted in history” (personal communication, 6 September 2025).

Modern Nigerian, Ghanaian and broader West African cultural heritage, *“cannot be separated from the legacies of colonialism, independence struggles, and the rise of modern African identities”*, as Petercan notes (personal communication, 1 September 2025). Therefore, supporting initiatives that highlight local knowledge holders is essential. Ensuring they are in positions of authorship to work to identify and address gaps in knowledge and representation.

This is where Wikimedia platforms function as what Petercan describes as, powerful tools that, *“give global visibility to local heritage”* (personal communication, 1 September 2025). He argues that these platforms, *“encourage collaboration once materials are online, they can be reused in education, research, and cultural projects in ways that amplify their value”*, (A.L. Petercan, personal communication, 1 September 2025) and that Wikimedia provides an,

“open, decolonial model allowing communities to retain custodianship of their heritage while still participating in international knowledge sharing. For Nigerian and African GLAMs, this means our stories are told by us but heard everywhere”. (A.L. Petercan, personal communication, 1 September 2025)

Bayel similarly emphasises that Wikimedia platforms, *“enable community-driven contributions, making content freely available to anyone, anywhere”* (personal communication, 6 September 2025).

Such initiatives contribute to a wider initiative of authorship, an inherently equitable post-colonial and community centred approach. Through projects like Find and Tell Elsewhere and Bayel’s advocacy for stronger open cultural heritage frameworks, we see tangible sectoral impact grounded in collaboration, representation, and shared authority.

Looking forward

While perfection in this space is neither realistic nor attainable, ongoing reflection and improvement are imperative. In her advocacy work, Bayel hopes that the Africa Advocacy Circle will,

“generate interest and commitment from governments through supportive policies or bills and help build momentum among UNESCO Member States to advance the development and eventual adoption of a recommendation on open cultural heritage”. (H. Bayel, personal communication, 6 September 2025)

Petercan calls for *“ongoing dialogue and training with custodians, so they fully understand the value of open licensing and feel confident about the process”* (personal communication, 1 September 2025). He also advocates

for institutional support across West Africa to ensure digitisation initiatives can be sustained locally, alongside the development of clearer licensing frameworks tailored specifically to African cultural heritage contexts.

While the Wikimedia and cultural heritage landscape in West Africa is vastly different to Aotearoa New Zealand, the core principles remain aligned. Collective motivations and concerns that arise around equity, access, navigating our fast-paced digital landscape and dismantling colonial frameworks, urge GLAM institutions to find balance when sharing and protecting of cultural heritage.

Open access to cultural heritage can support preservation, interpretation, and connection when it is grounded in cultural safety and consent. Although this will not suit every context, when approached carefully, it can enable communities to shape how their heritage is represented and shared. Echoing Bayel’s aspirations to “*safeguard African heritage*” (personal communication, 6 September 2025) the GLAM sector can collaborate with open access to, “*empower communities to tell their own stories, in their own words*” (H. Bayel, personal communication, 6 September 2025).

The author thanks Harriet Bayel and Asuru Lutherking Petercan for generously sharing their insights and perspectives, which informed this article.

About the contributors

Harriet Bayel

Harriet Bayel (Fig. 1) is a community leader from Accra, Ghana. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Resource Development from the University of Ghana and is currently studying a Master’s degree in Leadership in Open Education at the University of Nova Gorica. Bayel was introduced to the Wikimedia movement after completing her undergraduate studies and has since been an active volunteer contributor.

Through her roles as an Affiliation Committee member of the Wikimedia Foundation, former Regional Grants Committee member for Sub-Saharan Africa, Executive Director and Community Lead at Global Open Initiative Foundation and as part of the Towards a Recommendation on Open Cultural Heritage coalition, now Open Heritage Coalition, she advocates for open knowledge, education and youth empowerment in Ghana.

Asuru Lutherking Petercan

Asuru Lutherking Petercan (Fig. 2) is an architectural historian and cultural heritage advocate from Lagos, Nigeria and is originally from Rivers State. He holds a Bachelor of Technology in Architecture from Rivers

State University, where he is currently pursuing doctoral postgraduate studies.

Petercan has been involved in the GLAM space and Wikimedia movement since 2022. In 2023, he took on a project that focuses on digitisation, open access and preservation of Nigerian cultural and architectural heritage.

Anjuli Selvadurai

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