

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: The question of the preservation of cultural heritage and the repatriation of cultural artifacts

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Introduction

As we delve into the realm of cultural heritage, UNESCO stands as a beacon, safeguarding the legacy of diverse societies. Our focus today revolves around the poignant issue of preserving cultural heritage and the repatriation of cultural artifacts.

UNESCO refers to cultural heritage as the "legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed on future generations." In addition to ethereal elements like music, dance, language, and traditional knowledge, it can also comprise tangible things like structures, monuments, and artifacts.

A cultural item is repatriated when it is delivered to its country of origin or to the lineal descendants of its original owners. This may occur for a number of causes, including when objects were illegally seized or taken during colonization or war.

There are several justifications for repatriation. The first is that it is a moral and issue of fairness. The rights of the people who created the artifacts and the communities to which they belong are violated when they are taken without consent. Repatriation may be a solution to make this mistake right and give these communities their former sense of dignity.

A significant movement to repatriate cultural treasures has emerged in recent years, especially from North American and European museums to nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Numerous factors, including as the growth of indigenous rights movements and the growing understanding of the value of cultural heritage to people around the world, have fueled this trend.

Cultural treasures have recently been returned to their native countries by a number of museums, including the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution.

Definition of Key Terms

Colonialism

The policy or practice of acquiring and maintaining colonies, often involving the exploitation, domination, and plundering of the cultural heritage of the colonized regions.

Creative Cities Network

A UNESCO initiative designating cities that focus on specific creative fields, such as literature, music, or design, to promote cultural diversity and sustainable development.

Cultural Heritage

The legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes inherited from past generations, including structures, traditions, and artifacts, maintained in the present, and bestowed on future generations.

Digital Repatriation

The process of creating high-quality digital copies of cultural artifacts and making them accessible to their countries of origin, as an alternative form of repatriation.

Ethical Trade and Due Diligence

Advocacy for fair and ethical practices in the art market, including responsible acquisition and exhibition of cultural objects, to prevent illicit trafficking.

Hague Convention (1954)

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which aims to prevent theft and destruction of cultural artifacts during times of war.

Illicit Trafficking

The illegal trade, import, export, or transfer of cultural property, often involving stolen or looted artifacts.

Indigenous Rights

The rights of indigenous communities to their cultural heritage, including the return of ancestral remains and sacred objects.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

As recognized by UNESCO, traditions, music, rituals, and languages that are considered part of a community's cultural identity and are safeguarded for future generations.

Memory of the World

A UNESCO program aimed at preserving and promoting documentary heritage, including manuscripts, archives, and audiovisual materials of historical and cultural significance.

Repatriation

The act of returning cultural artifacts or items to their country of origin or the lineal descendants of their original owners, often prompted by ethical, moral, or legal considerations.

Restitution and Reparation

The act of returning cultural artifacts as a form of acknowledging and rectifying historical injustices, such as colonial exploitation and cultural theft.

Roerich Pact

An international treaty established in 1935 under the League of Nations to protect cultural property, especially during times of armed conflict.

World Heritage Sites

Designated places of cultural or natural significance by UNESCO, receiving international recognition and support for their preservation.

Key Issues

Colonialism and Plundering Of Colonial Artifacts

The colonial era represents a significant chapter in the history of cultural heritage preservation and repatriation debates. Colonial powers, driven by imperial ambitions, systematically plundered cultural artifacts from regions under their control. This widespread looting resulted in the displacement of invaluable cultural treasures from their places of origin.

The impact of colonialism on cultural heritage can be seen in the wholesale removal of artifacts, sculptures, manuscripts, and other cultural objects from their rightful contexts. These artifacts were often shipped to colonial metropolises, where they became part of museum collections or private holdings. The removal of these cultural treasures not only deprived the colonized nations of their heritage but also contributed to a distorted understanding of history and culture in the colonizing countries.

As we discuss the preservation of cultural heritage and the repatriation of cultural artifacts, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical injustices perpetuated during the colonial period. Many of the artifacts in question were taken without consent, often through force or coercion. The colonial legacy casts a long shadow over contemporary debates on repatriation, underscoring the moral imperative to address historical wrongs.

Emergence of Repatriation as a Global Issue

The emergence of repatriation as a global issue can be traced back to the latter half of the 20th century. As former colonies gained independence, they began to assert their rights to reclaim cultural artifacts that had been taken during the colonial period.

One of the seminal moments in the history of repatriation was the return of the Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in the late 20th century. These magnificent sculptures had been looted by British forces in 1897 during a punitive expedition in Benin City. The subsequent discussions and negotiations surrounding their return marked a turning point in the global conversation about repatriation.

Additionally, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property highlighted the international community's growing recognition of the need to address illicit trafficking in cultural artifacts and promote the return of stolen cultural property to its rightful owners.

As we delve into discussions on the preservation of cultural heritage and the repatriation of cultural artifacts, it is essential to acknowledge the historical context in which these debates have evolved. The legacy of colonialism, early international efforts, and significant repatriation cases all contribute to the complex and multifaceted nature of this issue.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United Kingdom

The UK is under constant scrutiny for its enormous collections of cultural artifacts that it has amassed over the course of many historical events, including colonization. Items such as the Nigerian Benin Bronzes and the Greek Elgin Marbles are debated in relation to claims of repatriation. Having a large collection of disputed artifacts, the British Museum talks to countries of origin about repatriation. International initiatives such as UNESCO are partnered with and policies pertaining to cultural heritage are implemented by the UK government through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport. Still, there is ongoing criticism of the repatriation processes for their lack of transparency and slow progress. Diverse perspectives are included in these intricate conversations within the UK. Museums struggle to strike a balance between legal ownership, public access, and ethical considerations. Relatives' remains and cultural artifacts should be returned, according to indigenous groups and communities of descendants. In order to further inform these discussions, academic institutions and cultural experts also provide research and expertise.

Mexico

Mexico has made a concerted effort to get back a number of artifacts, such as enormous Olmec heads from the US and Aztec feather headdresses from Austria. They work together with institutions such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) to promote ethical collecting methods and the return of culturally important artifacts to their original owners.

Egypt

Egypt has highlighted the importance of its legacy on a global scale and works with the World Customs Organization and UNESCO to fight illicit trafficking. They track stolen artifacts and assist in their return by collaborating with institutions such as the Egyptian Museum and the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Their dedication to the management of cultural heritage in an ethical manner is strengthened by their partnerships with global initiatives such as the Global Alliance for Museum Ethics.

Greece

Greece has continuously emphasized the Parthenon Marbles' cultural and historical significance as a component of the Athenian Acropolis and has called for their repatriation from the British Museum. Through studies, public awareness campaigns, and legal channels, the Acropolis Museum and the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures actively promote repatriation.

Australia

Australia and the International Alliance for Stolen Art (IAFA) have collaborated to tackle the pervasive problem of Indigenous cultural artifacts being taken unlawfully out of their communities. In order to track down stolen items, fight for their return, and advance Indigenous-led cultural heritage management techniques, organizations like the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the National Indigenous Art Galleries collaborate with local communities.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
1954	Hague Convention revised, expanding its scope and strengthening enforcement mechanisms.	Increased legal framework for protecting cultural property in armed conflict.
1956	UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.	Broader international treaty with more comprehensive protections for cultural heritage.
1970	UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.	Combats illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts, aiming to curb further losses.
1972	UNESCO World Heritage Convention establishes framework for identifying and protecting culturally significant sites.	Recognizes the global importance of preserving cultural heritage beyond individual nations.
1982	UN Convention on the Law of the Sea recognizes the cultural heritage of the seabed as common heritage of mankind.	Extends protections for underwater cultural artifacts.
1995	UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects seeks to facilitate their return to countries of origin.	Provides legal mechanism for repatriation of stolen or illegally obtained artifacts.
2001	UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity promotes respect for cultural diversity and	Emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage as a foundation for understanding and dialogue.

	encourages international cooperation.	
2005	UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage addresses threats to submerged cultural remains.	Offers specific protections for underwater cultural heritage sites and artifacts.
2010	International Conference on Museums and Cultural Diversity held in Mexico City, focusing on decolonization and repatriation.	Increased visibility and momentum for discussions on repatriation and dekolonization efforts.
2017	Germany and Namibia reach agreement for the return of artifacts taken during colonial era.	Significant milestone in repatriation efforts, setting a precedent for collaborative solutions.
2018	Greece demands return of Parthenon Marbles from British Museum, reigniting debate on contested ownership.	Highlights ongoing complexity and sensitivity surrounding repatriation claims.
2020	UNESCO launches #ReclaimOurHeritage campaign to raise awareness about cultural heritage protection and repatriation.	Global initiative to mobilize public support and resources for safeguarding cultural heritage.
2022	First Global Forum on Restitution of Cultural Objects held in Benin, focusing on ethical frameworks and challenges.	Continued dialogue and collaboration among diverse stakeholders to find equitable solutions.
2023	Indigenous communities in Canada continue advocating for the repatriation of sacred objects and ancestral remains.	Ongoing struggle for recognition and return of cultural heritage with deep spiritual significance.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Notable Successful Attempts Of Repatriation

In 2010, the United States returned a collection of ancient Mayan artifacts to Guatemala. The artifacts had been looted and trafficked out of Guatemala in the 19th and 20th centuries. The return of the artifacts was a significant event for Guatemala, and it helped to strengthen relations between the two countries.

In 2007, the United Kingdom returned the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. The marbles had been looted from the Parthenon in Athens in the early 19th century. The return of the marbles was a significant event for Greece, and it helped to improve relations between the two countries.

In 2005, the Australian government returned a collection of Aboriginal cultural objects to the descendants of their original owners. The objects had been collected in the 19th and 20th centuries, and they were of great cultural and spiritual significance to the Aboriginal people.

The Roerich Pact and The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict

The League of Nations' efforts culminated in the Roerich Pact of 1935, which aimed to protect cultural property during times of armed conflict. While this pact did not

have widespread adoption, it set a precedent for later conventions and agreements on cultural heritage preservation.

Following the devastation of World War II, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was established. This convention sought to prevent the theft and destruction of cultural artifacts during armed conflicts. It emphasized the importance of respecting the cultural property of nations, even during times of war.

These early international efforts laid the foundation for contemporary discussions on cultural heritage preservation and the repatriation of cultural artifacts. They underscored the need for legal frameworks and international cooperation to protect and preserve cultural heritage in the face of global challenges.

Possible Solutions

Establishing Transparent Repatriation Guidelines

Creating unambiguous and open standards for repatriation claims can provide a much-needed road map. An international organization could reduce conflicts and encourage more equitable solutions by offering impartial knowledge and consistent decisions. But reaching an agreement on standards amongst disparate countries and organizations can be a drawn-out and contentious process. It takes careful dance to strike a balance between the need for clarity and the flexibility to fit particular contexts. While precise guidelines can shield cultural assets from needless destruction and deter petty claims, they also run the risk of unintentionally excluding worthy claims based on technicalities.

Financial and Technical Assistance for Developing Countries

Giving developing nations financial and technical support enables them to take an active role in the repatriation process. The provision of funding for transportation, conservation, and training enables them to effectively manage claims and surmount pragmatic obstacles. But distributing scarce resources fairly among various claims necessitates serious thought. Dependency on outside help also gives rise to worries about undue power or influence over decision-making. Even though increased knowledge and resources eventually help these nations' overall efforts to preserve their cultural heritage, financial assistance may not be sufficient to handle the complex legal or moral dilemmas pertaining to disputed artifacts.

Encouraging Collaboration and Communication

Encouraging transparent communication and cooperation among nations and organizations cultivates empathy and understanding, opening the door to compromise. Collaborative projects foster best practices and knowledge sharing by enhancing trust and capacity. Reaching an understanding among divergent priorities and viewpoints, however, and maneuvering through delicate historical narratives can be difficult. Like any meaningful exchange, open dialogue requires patience and time. While group initiatives can foster creative methods for protecting common heritage, it's not always easy to resolve individual claims, especially when they're entwined with complicated historical conflicts.

Raising Public Awareness

Gaining more public awareness and support requires educating people about the importance of cultural heritage preservation and repatriation as well as its difficulties. Public awareness can mobilize resources and exert pressure for responsible heritage management by illuminating the complexities involved. But there is still work to be done in ensuring that nuanced and accurate information crosses cultural and educational barriers to reach a wide range of audiences. While raising public awareness can help legitimize claims and inspire museums and other institutions to have moral conversations, oversimplifying complex issues runs the risk of producing unhelpful biases and incorrect beliefs.

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