

Returning History: The Ethics of Artifact Repatriation

To whom should important cultural artifacts belong? Artifact repatriation is the return of cultural property to their place and cultures of origin. Numerous museums and academic institutions around the world currently display disputed cultural artifacts that were originally obtained through acts of looting in periods of colonialism and coercion. These artifacts are usually significant and relevant in cultural, historical, or religious sectors of their places of origin, which poses challenges surrounding cultural identity and heritage. Arguments for and against repatriation center around property rights, colonialism, access to history, and conservation of artifacts.

Advocates for repatriation argue that many cultural artifacts were removed under colonial rule and coercion, and that returning these artifacts acknowledges historical wrongs and represents a form of reparation. They assert that refusing to repatriate artifacts would perpetuate colonial structures in the status quo, contributing to a never-ending cycle of domination. Advocates also contend that cultural objects are important parts of heritage and cultural identity, therefore the return of these objects would expand self-determination and autonomy in a postcolonial world. The denial of cultural identity is further complicated by the reality that that encyclopedic museums housing looted artifacts, such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are located in the Global North, places that are extremely costly to visit for most people and inaccessible to communities of origin, thus preventing these communities from interacting with their own history and heritage.

Those who oppose repatriation argue that the repatriation of artifacts would lessen global cultural education and risk damage to fragile objects. They contend that artifacts are a part of a shared human heritage, and that encyclopedic museums such cultivate broad cultural understandings by displaying artifacts from around the world, with the location of encyclopedic museums in large cosmopolitan cities allowing for greater international interaction with numerous cultures and fostering multicultural pedagogy. Critics also find that source countries do not have the necessary equipment or personnel to safely preserve artifacts; thus it is imperative for the safety of the objects to remain where they are now. The question of contemporary borders and ownership claims also arises, as most of the ancient societies from which the artifacts were taken do not retain their original borders, causing legal disputes over which country should receive the artifact(s).

Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent does repatriation act as a form of reparation? Can it ever serve as a sufficient redressing of colonial violence?
2. Is global access and cultural education more important than source community access and heritage?
3. How should disputes revolving around legal ownership of artifacts be resolved when the artifact is culturally significant in multiple countries?

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