



Background paper

Committee: Unesco

Topic A: Should Stolen Cultural Artifacts Be Returned to Their Countries of Origin?

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Historically, the phenomena of colonization, armed conflict, plundering, and unlawful trade have collectively facilitated the expropriation of innumerable cultural artifacts from their countries of origin. These artifacts possess profound historical and cultural significance. Examples include sculptures, paintings, manuscripts, and objects of devotion. They stand for the culture and identity of whole countries. One of UNESCO's most contentious cultural concerns is whether or not these items should be repatriated.

The Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum and the Benin Bronzes held in European collections are only two examples of the stolen masterpieces that nations like Greece, Egypt, and Nigeria have repeatedly demanded be returned. Restitution proponents argue that retaining artifacts like the Parthenon Marbles and Benin Bronzes overseas perpetuates colonial injustices and robs countries of their cultural pride. They argue that giving them back allows people to re-establish a connection with their roots and restores historical equilibrium.

Conversely, many museums and art organizations argue that they protect these items from potential harm or neglect. They assert that their exhibitions provide worldwide access and instruction, and that their facilities guarantee greater preservation. Furthermore, since many items were obtained centuries ago when there were no established international regulations, legal ownership might be challenging.

Through agreements like the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, UNESCO has been instrumental in fostering collaboration. However, there are still issues because restitution is not necessarily required by international law, which makes diplomatic negotiation the most popular course of action.

Cultural identity and historical justice are major concerns when it comes to the restitution of stolen cultural artifacts. During times of colonization and conflict, many artifacts were removed, causing entire nations to lose some of their cultural memory. In addition to depriving nations of the opportunity to preserve and disseminate their own history, this erasure fostered animosity toward former colonial powers. In addition to boosting national pride, returning these objects would aid in reestablishing the cultural continuity that ties people to their ancestry.

Accessibility and preservation are two more crucial factors. Some nations contend that they lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to appropriately preserve delicate historical artifacts. The museums that currently house these relics frequently assert that they offer improved preservation conditions and make them accessible to and educational for a greater number of people worldwide. But this also poses moral dilemmas over ownership and who is entitled to represent a country's culture. Finding a balance between protecting cultural artifacts and honoring their legitimate provenance is crucial.

Furthermore, this discussion heavily relies on international law and cooperation, such as the frameworks established by UNESCO and other international bodies. Long-lasting conflicts between museums, governments, and cultural institutions result from the lack of legally enforceable international regulations requiring the return of cultural property. More egalitarian and effective solutions might be encouraged by bolstering international collaboration and developing more transparent UNESCO led frameworks. This would guarantee a fair, open, and considerate process for returning cultural property to all stakeholders.

Guiding Questions

How can UNESCO strengthen international cooperation for the restitution of cultural artifacts?
Should the return of stolen cultural property be considered a moral duty or a legal requirement?
What measures can ensure that returned artifacts are properly preserved in their home countries?

Key Timeline

1954 – The Hague Convention establishes protection for cultural property during armed conflicts.

1970 – UNESCO adopts the Convention to prevent the illicit import and export of cultural property.

1983 – The United States joins the 1970 Convention, encouraging broader global participation.

2002 – The Axum Obelisk is returned from Italy to Ethiopia, marking a successful restitution.

2018 – France pledges to return African artworks taken during colonization.

2021 – Germany agrees to return hundreds of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria.

2023 – The debate over the Parthenon Marbles intensifies between Greece and the United Kingdom.

Bibliography (MLA Format)

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