

The role of museums

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When we talk about addressing the colonial past and decolonization, museums should play an active role and make their numerous voices heard. In order to play a relevant role in this context, a museum must address all issues that affect society. It must offer a space to exchange and debate ideas, for a community to present its diverse talents, and celebrate its history and culture. It has to involve today's youth.

Colonial-era museum collections can give young people from both the Global North and Global South insights into the realities of colonialism. Through these collections, museums can create awareness and educate the public. However, discussions about colonial objects' copyrights, and their possible restitution are vital. How are copyrights, intellectual property rights and the return of stolen objects related to one another? Does it make a legal difference if an object is of ritual significance, or belonged to a specific family or royalty? What if the object's history is linked to particularly cruel, inhumane treatment?

Examples of repatriated items are numerous. The Hendrick Witboi Bible was recently returned to Namibia. A Finish museum handed back the Kwanyama power stones. Given their history, how could objects like these ever be linked to a place or culture other than the Witbooi>Nama people, and the Ovambo/Kwanyama people respectively? Who is morally and legally entitled to the copyright or intellectual property of these objects? These questions point to why legislation governing art and cultural property has become a source of heated debate between people who work in museums, and in the global media. A starting point for this discussion is to analyze colonial collections: What kinds of objects migrated to the Global North? What state they are in? How do they, or could they, benefit the current owners and countries of origin? Where are they now? If they are on display, what knowledge, information or stereotypes do they convey? Which of these objects are stored in boxes, storerooms, warehouses as is the case of many European museums?

Cultural property should be returned to source nations and indigenous peoples. This issue reflects larger debates about historic redress, injustices and social inequality; legacies of colonialism, exploitation and violence; and the respect for cultural differences. When talking about repatriation, we are also talking about closure, reconciliation, equal participation and involving communities of provenance in their own representation. If they can play a role in displaying and protecting these objects, and promote and develop their heritage, then the Nama and Ovaherero peoples will have some form of closure. If European museums keep Nama and Herero objects, these wounds remain open. The Ovaherero and Nama peoples are asking for their own museums. They want to interpret their culture themselves. They are the rightful owners of their ancestors' objects.

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