

Administrative Information

Study Title

Repatriation of Artefacts: Western Museums and their Victims of Circumstance: Protocol for Systematic Review with Meta-Synthesis

Registration

This protocol does not involve health outcomes and did not warrant the registration with PROSPERO: International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews. However, the protocol will be published in an appropriate journal for monitoring purposes.

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Author Contributions

MM, the corresponding author leads the development of this protocol, data generation, synthesis and dissemination of review findings.

Amendments

All protocol post-publication amendments will be kept in record and reported.

Financial Support

No funding has been received at the moment

Abstract

Background

The saga of repatriating cultural artefacts continues as western museums face increasing pressure from claimants. Western museums that have been involved in the display of historical artefacts, most of which were acquired during the colonial period, have come under huge criticism. A heated discussion of late has been the legitimacy of retaining artefacts in western museums. This study aimed at investigating the ongoing debate regarding the restitution of artefacts.

Objective

To investigate the arguments for and against the repatriation of artefacts in relation to diplomatic exchange, preservation, legitimacy and usefulness.

Methods

Records will be searched in electronic databases including the University of Manchester Library for Social Anthropology, Scopus and Project MUSE. Search terms will include "return of artefacts", "return of historical objects", "return of cultural objects", "western museums", "restitution of artefacts", "repatriation of artefacts", "restitution of historical objects", "repatriation of historical objects", "restitution of cultural objects", "repatriation of cultural objects", "material culture", "return of antiquities", "restitution of antiquities" and "repatriation of antiquities". Coding and analysis will be done in SWIFT-Review. The deductive and inductive approaches will be used in synthesising results. Both tabular and graphical methods will be used to present results.

Ethics and Results

This study did not need any ethical approval. Results on study characteristics, quality and risk of bias assessments as well as the synthesis of arguments for and against the restitution of artefacts will be presented. The review results will be reported according to appropriate guidelines and disseminated through publication in a relevant journal and presented to stakeholders where necessary.

Conclusions

This review will be based on current protocols for systematic review and qualitative evidence synthesis. The study will be the first review that seeks to pull together claims for and against the return of cultural artefacts. The conclusions that will be drawn and recommendations will provide the basis for further research into the debate and the way forward. This study will also help identify the existing gaps regarding the subject matter.

Keywords: Material culture; restitution; artefacts; antiquities; cultural objects; western museums; review

Introduction

Background

Estranged artefacts in western museums are on the watch of how their fate is being decided in the "international court of material culture", through the lens of contemporary discourse (1,2). These artefacts of high cultural and archaeological value are at the forefront of a "living systematic review", of whether they should be repatriated to their countries of origin (3,4). The rising antagonism between claimants and those retaining artefacts out of the context in which they were produced has been a longstanding issue, dating back to the United Nation's Declaration of 1960, on the Granting of Independence (5). This declaration followed a series of consecutive resolutions about the return of cultural property (6,7). Since then, only 18 cases of return of artefacts have been documented by UNESCO (8). Many western countries are reluctant to return preserved

artefacts, the reason being that western museums play a vital role in the globalization of cultural identity and knowledge sharing, especially for sites that would not have otherwise been open to the public (9). The role played by western museums in the preservation of cultural heritage cannot be underestimated (10). Professor Bénédicte Savoy has underscored such a role when it comes to preserving the cultural identity of artefacts (11). Notwithstanding the important role played by western museums, the overwhelming majority of claims for the return of artefacts is based on the fact that these artefacts were not legitimately acquired (12). While acknowledging that there should be no place in western museums for looted artefacts, expert opinion holds that there is a need for global collaboration and the establishment of a “new universal museum”(11). Such a consensus is particularly important in guarding against the trafficking of artefacts. The need to protect artefacts led to the development of preventive and monitoring mechanisms against their trafficking (13).

In the United Kingdom, for instance, the case is indifferent but the argument has taken a slightly different shape (14–16). While contestants ponder on the irrelevance of maintaining artefacts out of their original contexts, western diplomats and scholars ponder on the evidence of ownership and how to fit the present into the distant past (17). For instance, it is argued that the purpose for which artefacts were made is different from the reasons for which they are presently being contested. Just like the title of the book “Who’s Who in Ancient Egypt” (18), so does the question of “Who is who?” in the present-day claims becomes preoccupying. As Professor Bigger puts it, “Are today’s claimants really the heirs of yesterday’s victims? What, exactly, do contemporary Greeks have in common with ancient Athenians, such that the former can claim to be the rightful owners of the Elgin Marbles?”, no one can presently claim to be the rightful owner of contested artefacts(19,20). In the same way that the speaker in the poem “If I had a voice” highlights, artefacts such as the Elgin Marbles and the Rosetta Stone displayed in the British Museum (21,22), would have loved to speak for themselves if they had a voice (23).

Historical artefacts form a huge personal and social construct of identity for people who lived in the precolonial and colonial epochs (24–26). This cultural capital makes historical artefacts useful to both the public and scholars (25,27). It is argued that the cultural capital of artefacts can only be optimised in their countries of origin (22). An important question worth asking is “Where did the western countries go wrong by preserving such cultural capital and promoting knowledge transfer?” (28,29). “Could there not be a collaboration towards global material culture?” (30). Umblepy (2009) talks about “a global brain from a global university”. Deciding whether or not to return historical artefacts has been and remains very challenging because of many unanswered questions regarding contemporary claims (19). An enquiry into some of these unanswered questions prompted the undertaking of this research study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study following from the literature review is based on the belief that artefacts will better be of value in the context in which they were made, as part of the package of resolutions attributable to independence (5,7). Latest developments have seen this turn into a pivotal debate between claimants and western diplomats.

Objective

The objective of this study is to weigh the reasons for the return of artefacts against the reasons why they should not be returned to their countries of origin, and make recommendations. To this effect, our research question was developed in line with the Perspective, Setting, Phenomenon, Environment, Comparison, Timing and Finding (PerSPEcTiF) Statement (31).

Research question

From the perspective of claimants of artefacts removed from indigenous communities, how do the arguments for the retention of artefacts in western museums compare with arguments for their return, from when they were removed up until now, in relation to diplomatic exchange, preservation, legitimacy and usefulness?

Methods

Eligibility Criteria

We used the PerSPEcTiF guidelines to define the inclusion and exclusion criteria (31), in accordance with Cochrane's Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (32).

Table 1: PerSPEcTiF Statement

PerSPEcTiF	Inclusion	Exclusion
Perspective	From the perspective of claimants of artefacts removed	Articles not dealing with artefacts that were removed from their original context
Setting	From indigenous communities	
Phenomenon of Interest	How do the arguments for the retention of artefacts	Studies exploring neither reasons for nor against the return of artefacts
Environment	In western museums	Studies not dealing with artefacts in western museums
Comparison		

Timing	Compare with arguments for the restitution of those artefacts	Studies exploring neither reasons for nor against the return of artefacts
Findings	From when they were removed up until now	
	In relation to diplomatic exchange, preservation, legitimacy and usefulness	

Information Sourcing

Electronic Databases

The search for literature will be performed in electronic databases including the University of Manchester Library for Social Anthropology, Scopus and Project MUSE. The search for records will follow the guidelines for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Search strategy (PRISMA-S) (33). Each database search will continually be refreshed throughout the study duration.

Manual Search

Identification of useful articles will be done manually through the Griffin Institute (University of Oxford), University College London, Egypt Exploration Society, Museum History Journal, World Archaeology, International Council of Museums, American Journal of Archaeology (via Archaeological Institute of America), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The keywords of studies meeting the inclusion criteria will be used in Google general search engine to source additional articles.

Citation Search

We shall use the reference list of identified studies, including systematic reviews by searching for their titles, authors or digital object identifiers in Crossref.org.

Contacts, Alerts and Generic Suggestions

Where ever possible, we will use recommended records from experts and set up Email alerts in electronic databases searched. We will also make use of Mendeley suggestions, to locate useful records.

Search Strategy

Electronic Search Terms

Search terms will include "return of artefacts", "return of historical objects", "return of cultural objects", "western museums", "restitution of artefacts", "repatriation of artefacts", "restitution of historical objects", repatriation of historical objects", "restitution of cultural

objects”, “repatriation of cultural objects”, "material culture", "return of antiquities”, restitution of antiquities” and “repatriation of antiquities”.

Electronic Search Strategy

A search will be performed in the different electronic databases indicated above without language limitation. In the event of overwhelming search results, electronic filters of consulted databases will be applied to get the most relevant records. Table 2 is a detailed sample search strategy. The search strategy for each database is shown in [Appendix 1](#).

Table 2: Electronic search in Scopus (June 1, 2021)

ID	Search Terms	Results
#1	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND artefacts))	1,138
#2	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND historical AND objects))	258
#3	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND cultural AND objects))	465
#4	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND antiquities))	292
#5 = #1 OR #2 OR #3 OR #4	((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND artefacts)) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND historical AND objects))) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND cultural AND objects))) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND antiquities)))	1,970
#6	TITLE-ABS-KEY (western AND museums)	3,041
#7 = #5 AND #6	((((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND artefacts)) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND historical AND objects))) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND cultural AND objects))) OR ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND antiquities)))) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (western AND museums))	22

Study Records

Data Management

Records from the literature search will be loaded into both Mendeley Desktop and SWIFT-Review workbench. De-duplication of search records and screening will be done using SWIFT-Review workbench (34). Mendeley reference manager will be used to manage citations and for the generation of bibliography. Data coding and analysis will be performed in SWIFT-Review.

Screening Process

The first phase of screening will involve the removal of duplicates. Secondly, titles and abstracts of all records recovered from electronic databases after de-duplication will be screened in accordance with the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria in Table 1. The full article will have to be read should it not be possible to screen titles and abstracts alone. Screening of records will be automated through text mining in SWIFT-Review desktop. Records that cannot be otherwise screened due to the unavailability of full text will be excluded.

Data Extraction

Data will be extracted by the lead author (MM). Data extraction will be performed with the help of the SWIFT-Review Tag Browser based on manually applied tags to the literature corpus. A backup data extraction template will be used if necessary.

Data Items

Data to be extracted will include author, study date, study design, study objective, museum setting, contested artefact, country of origin, date of production, date of removal, circumstances under which it was removed and arguments for and against return.

Outcomes and Prioritization

The phenomenon of interest includes arguments for and arguments against the repatriation of artefacts displayed in western museums. The findings of interest include preservation, legitimacy, usefulness and diplomatic exchange. Studies retained for the review will be organized according to arguments and findings. Studies with low risk to moderate risk of bias presenting arguments in relation to the preservation, legitimacy, usefulness and diplomatic implications will be prioritized in the drawing of conclusions.

Risk of Bias in Individual Studies

Given that this review will be dealing with qualitative studies and argumentative evidence (35,36), we will make use of tools that assess the strength of methodology and study limitations of the included studies, in line with Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group (QIMG) (37). Retained studies will be assessed for risk of bias using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies (38). The assessment of methodological quality using the CASP tool is presented in [Appendix 2](#).

Data Synthesis

Synthesis Procedure

The different retained studies will be presented in a summary table, including, study id, year, study objective, museum setting, name of the artefact, country of origin, production date, removal date and circumstances under which it was removed/displaced. Studies will be coded into study id for the extraction of the two major themes (reasons for and against the restitution of artefacts). Codes will then be developed for the full list of themes arising from these two broad views, by capturing sentences and fragments of texts (39). We will make use of open codes to capture themes arising from texts. Codes will then be categorized into axial codes. Selective coding will be used to make sense of the framed thematic categories, towards making a case for or against the return of artefacts based on directionality (40). Meta qualitative analysis will follow the six phases of qualitative content analysis (41).

Coding Framework

We will make use of a blend of deductive and inductive approach, firstly to focus the review synthesis on the subject matter (debate) and secondly to remain open to themes emanating from the predefined framework (42). The coding framework will be based on the theoretical framework. The coding frame following from the deductive method will therefore constitute two codes including (1) arguments for and (2) arguments against, the return of artefacts in western museums(41).

Synthesis Reporting

Apart from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (43), this review will also comply with the Standards for Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research (ENTREQ) (44), as well as the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (45).

Meta-bias

Challenges regarding the systematic review of qualitative data will be overcome by making use of the key considerations proposed by Soilemezi and Linceviciute (46). The heterogeneity across studies will be assessed by generating a table of similarities and differences of developed themes across different studies. Differences across studies will be seen as an opportunity to assess findings in different contexts. Reporting this variability will help provide the basis for context-specific considerations. Given the relative importance of dissemination bias, we will use the 6 different routes of dissemination bias initially identified by Booth et al (47) to assess the possible impact of dissemination bias on our findings. We hope to reduce this upfront through the inclusion of grey literature.

Confidence in Cumulative Evidence

This protocol has been developed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis protocol checklist (48). The review will be in line

with Cochrane's Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (32). The search strategy will follow the PRISMA Search guidelines (33). The quality of database search will be improved by making use of "AND" and "OR" strings. The quality of qualitative evidence will be assessed using the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation - Confidence in the Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative research (GRADE-CERQual) approach (49,50). The GRADE-CERQual approach makes use of four components (methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy and relevance) to assess the quality of evidence from qualitative synthesis as can be seen in [Appendix 3](#). The Certainty of evidence will be presented in a GRADE CERQual profile table and a Summary of Qualitative Findings (SoQF) table.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared

Appendix 1

University of Manchester (expanded beyond the library)

#1= "Artefacts" OR "Contested" OR "Historical objects" OR "Antiquities" (Anyfield)

#2 = "Museum*" (Anyfiled)

#3 = "Restitut*" OR "Return*" OR "Repatriat*" OR "Reasons for" OR "Reasons against" OR "Arguments for" OR Arguments against" [(Anyfiled); (Open access)

#4 = #1 AND #2 AND #3

Scopus Database

#1= (TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND artefacts) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND artefacts))

#2 = (TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND antiquities) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND antiquities))

#3 = (TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND cultural AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND cultural AND objects))

#4 = (TITLE-ABS-KEY (return AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (restitution AND of AND historical AND objects) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (repatriation AND of AND historical AND objects))

#5 = #1 OR #2 OR #3 OR #4

#6 = TITLE-ABS-KEY (western AND museums)

#7 = #5 AND #6

Project MUSE

#1 = Any of the terms [return] [of] [artefacts] in content, and any of the terms [repatriation] [of] [artefacts] [""] in content, and any of the terms [restitution] [of] [artefacts] in content

#2 = any of the terms [return] [of] [historical] [objects] in title, and any of the terms [restitution] [of] [historical] [objects] in title, and any of the terms [repatriation] [of] [historical] [objects] in content

#3 = any of the terms [return] [of] [cultural] [objects] in title, and any of the terms [restitution] [of] [cultural] [objects] in title, and any of the terms [repatriation] [of] [cultural] [objects] in content

#4 = any of the terms [return] [of] [antiquities] in title, and any of the terms [restitution] [of] [antiquities] in title, and any of the terms [repatriation] [of] [antiquities] in content

#5 = #1 OR #2 OR #3 OR #4

#6 = any of the terms [western] [museums] in content

#7 = #5 AND #6

Appendix 2

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme for Qualitative Studies (38)

No	Section/Question	Options	Reviewer's Judgement
Section A: Are the results valid?			
1	Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the aim/objective of the study is clearly stated
2	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	Studies to be included in this review will be qualitative
3	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	This review emphasizes the research problem rather than the method. Arguments can either be unilateral or bilateral

4	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the strategy for choosing subjects and focus groups is clearly outlined. Applicable for interviews and focus groups.
5	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the authors described how data was collected, indicated sources of quotes and justified arguments. If arguments are closely linked to the research question.
6	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the author(s) discussed issues of bias and their involvement in the study (question formulation, relation with artefacts and museum in question). Also relevant if the study involves the recruitment of subjects
Section B: What are the results?			
7	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If informed consent was provided (for studies involving subjects). If ethical approval was obtained. If a protocol was used in reporting results
8	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the analysis process were described sufficiently and convincing. How codes were derived, and if authors indicated their influence.
9	Is there a clear statement of findings?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If the arguments for and against were sufficient enough to support the study findings. If conclusions were linked to research question or aim
Section C: Will the results help locally?			
10	How valuable is the research?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Can't tell <input type="checkbox"/> No	If authors indicated how the findings can be used elsewhere or how useful the findings are. If they point out new areas of research

Appendix 3

Individual Finding Quality Assessment (CERQual) (49)

No	Component	Concerns	Author(s)'s Judgement Guide
1	Methodological limitations	<input type="checkbox"/> No/very minor <input type="checkbox"/> Minor <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Serious	The degree of satisfaction in the methodology of included studies following from CASP assessment
2	Coherence	<input type="checkbox"/> No/very minor <input type="checkbox"/> Minor <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Serious	Does the review finding fit perfectly well with the data provided by studies supporting it? Do findings from some studies contradict the review findings?
3	Adequacy of data	<input type="checkbox"/> No/very minor <input type="checkbox"/> Minor <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Serious	Does the review present enough data to support the finding? How well enough do the included studies answer the research question? Are there enough studies supporting the finding?
4	Relevance	<input type="checkbox"/> No/very minor <input type="checkbox"/> Minor <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Serious	The extent to which the finding can be generalised. Are the settings of studies contributing to the review finding in accordance with the setting previewed in the review question?
Overall Confidence ^(a, b, c, d)		<input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Very low	How well are the findings representative of the current debate and in harmony with the review question?

^aHigh: Highly likely that the finding reasonably represents the current debate

^bModerate: Likely that the finding reasonably represents the current debate

^cLow: Possible that the finding reasonably represents the current debate

^dVery low: It is unclear whether the finding is a reasonable representation of the current debate

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