

Voices in Conversation as a Postscriptum to the UNESCO Public Debate

“Memory and Universality: New challenges facing museums” (Part I)

Isabelle Vinson (Editor-in-chief Museum International/UNESCO) organised the debate on February 5, 2007, with the full support of Françoise Rivière, new Assistant Director General of Culture at UNESCO, who moderated it. The idea was to bridge differences within the museum community to open dialogue. How can we reconcile the cultural memory of countries and communities that is contained in objects of cultural heritage, with the museum's mission for the universal dissemination of culture? Since the first symposium in Britain on the complex and contentious question of the return of cultural property, “Lost Heritage”, held in London at the Africa Centre in 1981, and involving representatives of “Universal Museums” (David Wilson, former director of the British Museum), UNESCO, ICOM (Geoffrey Lewis), the academic community, and heritage professionals, the terms of the discussion have not really changed, but attitudes have. Moral and ethical considerations must also be taken into account with the legal and political aspects of the return or restitution of cultural objects. Unlike in 1981, stakeholders are currently - 25 years later - more willing to express their opinions publicly, and museums have recognized that there are issues to be debated.

Lysa Hochroth (ICOM): Some people – especially in the French press, at UNESCO, and in some partner organisations – did not understand the concept of “digital repatriation”.

Bernice Murphy (ICOM): It is important to stress two things: first, that ICOM's position remains clear and unchanged in its support for repatriation as laid out in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums; second, that digital repatriation is a completely different concept, and is in no way put forward as an alternative to object repatriation.

Alain Godonou (Ecole du patrimoine africain):

The formulation “digital repatriation” might lead to some confusion. Do we really need to conceptualise what is already going on in many sectors, like in our “Sharing Documentation” programme?

Bernice Murphy (ICOM): Digital repatriation is a knowledge repatriation concept. It is motivated by the idea that possession of objects is not the sole focus of museums. Museums are pre-eminently knowledge institutions, and have a huge potential to collaborate in the compilation and circulation of vital knowledge (interpretation, documents, records) about cultural patrimony worldwide.

Alain Godonou: Then we are not forgetting about the importance of original objects and the restitution of material cultural heritage?

Bernice Murphy: In the UNESCO debate in Paris, I was very moved by your account of how much African cultural heritage has actually been removed from the continent of Africa, and that – most deeply challenging of all to a conscientious world community – some 80% of African children have little idea about their heritage. The large and wealthy museums of the world have huge resources for knowledge production and knowledge exchange. They could help to produce the interconnected material to provide great assistance in correcting the imbalances you speak of. The museums of the world could provide knowledge to be used in African schools, and digital collaborative effort is a very fast and fluid way to combine and move knowledge among colleagues – eventually for production of educational and community-related materials for use locally.

Alain Godonou: We have had this type of cooperation with museums in the North of Italy and in Lyon, with the *Musées des missionnaires africains*. 19th

and 20th century anthropology resources are immense when one considers the history of knowledge gathered about Africa. I do agree knowledge needs to be shared, but it is already happening, to a certain extent. (The DISA programme in South Africa, for example: <http://aboutdisa.ukzn.ac.za/buletin/BrieftoHESA.pdf>)

Bernice Murphy: We could speak of knowledge sharing. But that is rather vague and weak. It does not have the urgency of purpose or contemporaneous communications potential that is expressed in the concept of “digital repatriation”. The ‘repatriation’ idea is important also in the proactive movement to restore to people the knowledge that is rightfully their inheritance.

Alissandra Cummins: Digital repatriation is nothing new, but libraries and archives are obviously ahead of museums... if you consider IFLA's work and the advances in recompiling dispersed archives, manuscripts and bodies of work through digital means. (See Ivan Boserup's article on ‘digital repatriation’ for example: www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/papers/097e-Boserup.pdf)

Alain Godonou: Not new at all, especially given all the university collaborations.

Alissandra Cummins: But for museums, the momentum is getting started. We are now having some meetings in the UK about museums with Slave Trade Archives and restoring digital copies of these items to the source communities which enables more and more of the disinherited to retrieve their ancestral past. The focus is not on original documents with their attendant problems of conservation, it is the information enshrined within them which we really need to make widely available to those who have never seen them before.

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“Memory and Universality: New challenges facing museums”

Alain Godonou: The onus should be on the major museums and also on the governments in the countries concerned. I know many conservators would like to see collections in reserves which require maintenance and management made available to African museums, on a long-term loan basis, at least. Good governance will make cultural issues a priority: as research and training of professionals depends on direct access to collections.

Bernice Murphy: In some cases of great loss under colonialism, indigenous and other populations lost so much in the way of objects and associated knowledge that it is very difficult for continuing communities to know where all the relevant material of their cultural past has been dispersed in the world. Digital repatriation puts the onus of effort back upon museums rather than deprived communities. Digital repatriation (for example the photographic exchange of anthropological records) has sometimes provided the beginnings of vital cultural reconstitution for communities who have experienced major cultural rupture and violent deprivation historically.

Alain Godonou: I got the impression, as did some others, that ICOM was backtracking on object restitution or that this “digital repatriation” was becoming the main battle horse. It was as if the fact that vast African collections are so dispersed among hundreds, maybe thousands, of ethnographical, historical, art, and natural science museums in Europe and the United States, and now in Asia too, that reuniting collections was hopeless.

Bernice Murphy: A world-wide collaborative effort by museums to produce something like a digital repatriation portal could provide an important means of accessing vital material to source communities. Meanwhile object repatriation claims are a separate issue, to be pursued through formal and often legal channels. However ICOM's greatest strength is its museums networks.

Rick West (ICOM Executive Council, National Museum of the American Indian): Once international cultural heritage protection conventions are enshrined in national law, museums can make significant progress with restitution, as we have seen with NAGPRA in the United States (The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act - 25 U.S.C. 3001 (NAGPRA) and the Austrian Federal Law of 4 December 1998 for the return of art works acquired during the Nazi era.

Bernice Murphy: The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums (ICOM, 2006) calls upon the ethical

conscience of museums, irrespective of whether object claims are going forward or not. The Code urges colleagues to establish relationships and conversations with source communities, not simply to stay behind the lines of the law or formal state negotiations.



Bronze Age lur from Brudevaelte, North Zealand, Denmark.
Photo: Kit Weiss/National Museum of Denmark.

Rick West: The procedure is simply not clear enough: for an object to be returned under the UNESCO Convention or UNIDROIT, a country's representative must make the claim on behalf of the country concerned. Many times we are dealing with cross-border issues. There are multiple claimants, sometimes extinct original communities...and let's be honest, central governments that do not represent any of these...

Alissandra Cummins: What ICOM is asking the “Universal Museums” to do is simple. What can be done now – on a long-term basis – to ensure that communities and their museums can get what they need to recuperate that which they have lost?

Alain Godonou: It is true that the partnerships need to be “long-term” to make up for the many years of impeding access to our heritage, and there is no reason why they shouldn't include long-term loans and restitution as well.

Lysa Hochroth: “Universal Heritage Museum Partnerships” can include any long-term arrangements agreed to by the parties. When we see what the Louvre is capable of doing in Abu Dhabi, we ask, why not do something similar with developing countries?

Alissandra Cummins: The “Universal Heritage Museum Partnerships” would set up conduits through which information about collections would flow and the needs of museums in the developing world addressed on a new scale. But the major museums have to play their leadership role...

Alain Godonou: “Universal Museums” might even begin to take measures to remediate, to open access to the heritage, especially for and among museum people in different countries of origin. My feeling since the debate is that their position has evolved and that maybe there are new opportunities...

Rick West: That is exactly the point we were trying to make. How is it that researchers, museum people and communities can have access to heritage resources. In the US, this work has become very technical and complex, but there are database systems software that can do this, such as those we have created with American Indian communities.

Bernice Murphy: In Australia, there have been great strides made to involving Western Australian communities and Aborigines communities in knowledge-sharing. Obviously, it could be said that knowledge exchanges are not preventing overdevelopment from endangering the lives and livelihoods of Aborigines, but there is greater stock in the past that can become common ground...

Alain Godonou: Intellectual rights have a market value for museums: there are derivative products, t-shirts, calendars, books with the representations of indigenous art...there is no scheme for profit-sharing or for authorizations for the use of some of the material culture in museums, being re-utilised for its commercial value.

Rick West: That is precisely what gets worked into a written agreement between the living communities concerned, sometimes embodied (incorporated) into a museum or cultural centre entity, and the museums that hold collections concerning them.

Bernice Murphy: We need to tease out further the ethical implications of intellectual property issues as an important current topic...

Alissandra Cummins: Let's talk about that with Neil MacGregor, Mikhail Piotrovsky and Henri Loyrette in the next issue of ICOM News...

To Be Continued