



Colonial Ideologies are Embedded in Unreturned Cultural Artifacts

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Cultural heritage contributes to both individual and community collective memory, a sense of community and belonging, cultural identity and social cohesion—all factors interconnected with mental health and wellbeing. The connection between cultural heritage and identity formation is important. When

the British Museum and other institutions refuse to return stolen

artifacts or engage in reparations, it symbolizes continued domination and control. Destroying culture and heritage, no matter whether it occurs by war or looting, has been defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a form of “cultural cleansing.”

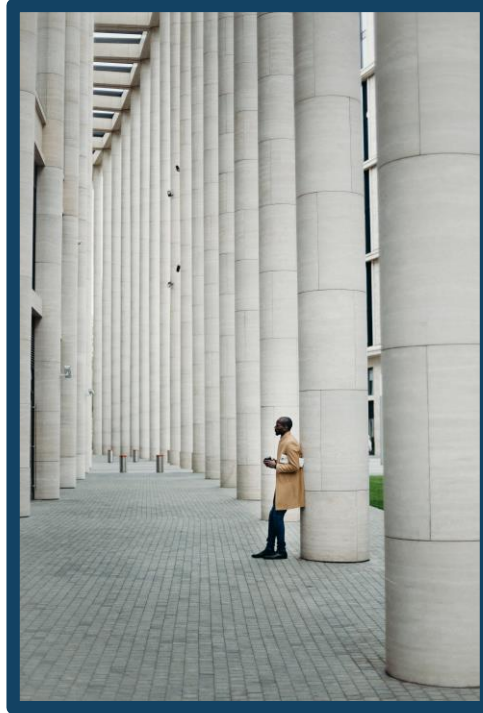


Figure 1 Photograph by cottonbro studio: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-leaning-on-post-3205988/>. Pexels CCO.

“When museums ignore such practices as the looting of artifacts, it often forces them to create displays with false narratives, thereby contributing to power and domination ideologies that erase cultures... restitution should be at the immediate forefront of museums and all other institutions...as a gesture toward worldwide social, racial and restorative justice, and the dismantling of the lasting legacy of imperialism.”

Highlights

Cultural heritage is often found in the museums of colonizers.

Returning historical artifacts to their rightful, original home is an important step to restoring that cultural heritage.

A shift in thinking removes the colonizer's viewpoint and replaces it with reclamation of indigenous history and pride.

We can and should hold entities accountable for failing to address these issues today. Engagement with museums can help illustrate community and cultural resiliency, while raising awareness of the ways in which museums and galleries typically focus on the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonizers. Institutions such as the British Museum, who have been historically praised for their expansive collections, need to account for possessing and displaying stolen artifacts. Protestors, advocates, and activists around the world are demanding Western governments and other institutions reckon with their imperial history—to acknowledge the linkage between the slave trade, colonialism, and racism.

Methods

I conducted a review of existing archival data on the British Museum's acquisition of the Benin Bronzes, stolen artifacts from Nigeria. I used search terms like "the Benin Bronzes", "stolen artifacts", "museum imperialism", "the British Museum", "cultural heritage", "UNESCO", and "identity". I used open access peer-reviewed articles, online magazine articles, other web sources, and book excerpts. In addition, I contacted the Field Museum of Chicago which resulted in an email response and subsequent telephone call to discuss the topic with a marketing representative. The representative answered questions and forwarded additional material.

Results

- Manifestations of racism nor imperialism cannot be effectively dealt with without relinquishing power. Many museums have engaged with the issues by attempting to return stolen artifacts in their possession; however, the British Museum has yet to do so. A return of the Benin Bronzes from Nigeria is a step forward.
- Returning all stolen artifacts to the country of origination would go a long way in helping to advance social, racial, and restorative justice, and the dismantling of the legacy of imperialism.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

I see this work as an attempt to raise awareness of behavior and action that supports colonialism, imperialism, and racism, and to hold institutions accountable for pushing these ideologies forward. I believe that this work aligns well with the field of Community Psychology. The discipline's overarching foundation is to go beyond focusing on individual wellbeing, to give attention to the ecological levels that impact individuals. We understand that the wellbeing of an individual is always intricately linked to the wellbeing of community, society, and systems. This article argues for change at the system-level. This change would empower the people of Nigeria, reduce long-standing social inequities, namely domination and control, and promote equitable societies—all tenets of Community Psychology.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Specific methodologies such as participatory action, ethnography, and photovoice encourage the researcher to engage with the population. In this case, such methods could center the voices of Benin descendants who can share the impact of cultural erasure.

Social Action: This work gives an example of what UNESCO does and opens doors for those interested to partner with this entity for social action with respect to preserving cultural heritage. Preserving cultural heritage can include keeping artifacts and the traditions and culture of groups of people and communities that inform generations to come.

Similar Settings: My goal is to introduce the importance of why preserving cultural heritage is important and to show the ways that advancing racism, colonialism and imperialism continue to show up in our modern world.

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