

Information Document and General Presentation of the Public Debate
"Memory and Universality: New challenges facing museums"
UNESCO, 5 February 2007

The UNESCO journal, *MUSEUM International*, organizes annual public debates on issues related to policies for the preservation of cultural heritage. These events concern the professional cultural heritage community, governments and the academic community.

The theme of the 2007 debate is “Memory and Universality: New challenges facing museums”. This initiative intends to examine how we can 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 cultures.

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. Museums, in their arguments against returning objects of cultural heritage, continue to prioritize: 1) the preservation and security of objects in their collections; 2) accessibility to large numbers for cultural and scientific purposes, and 3) the complete legal protection of objects. Countries dispossessed of their heritage in the colonial context (or due to illicit trafficking of cultural objects) are reclaiming the return of (exceptional) objects as a symbol of moral restitution (righting past wrongs), in order to reconstitute their collective memory, forge national identities, and provide representative collections of their cultural heritage.

Attitudes have, however, slowly changed, due in large part to initiatives taken by UNESCO. It is now widely recognized that 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. The 1970 UNESCO Convention has been ratified by major market states (the US, UK, France, Japan, and most recently Switzerland, 2003) and UNIDROIT (1995) continues to gain recognition. ICOM adopted its Code of Ethics in 1986 (16 years after the 1970 UNESCO Convention), and although several museums had already adopted ethical acquisition policies, other museums are gradually following suit. Increased public awareness, inventories and tools such as the ICOM Red Lists and electronic databases are facilitating the recuperation of illicitly displaced objects.

National legislations are also being adapted to address the issue of illicit trafficking and bilateral agreements between governments are increasingly being sought to protect cultural heritage. In some cases, national legislation has been enacted for the repatriation of human remains (US, 1990, UK, 2004) and sacred or funerary objects (US). Other countries have adopted policies in a similar vein (Canada, Australia). Museum policies in these settler nations are also taking into consideration indigenous beliefs and practices in the stewardship of their collections, as well as alternative interpretations and viewpoints. As indigenous peoples are increasingly trained in the field (as archaeologists, ethnologists, etc.), and as

curators and policy-makers within institutions responsible for heritage, knowledge of tangible and intangible heritage will increase and museological practices will continue to evolve.

A few recent, spectacular cases of restitution *have* taken place, notably between Denmark and its former Northern Atlantic colonies, with the return of medieval manuscripts to Iceland and 35,000 heritage objects to Greenland. It is important to note the mutual benefits of these initiatives with the establishment of dual collections and scientific collaborations in each case. (On the downside, showing that security remains an issue, in the 1970s, a Belgian museum returned a considerable number of objects to the National Museum of then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they were subject to looting following a coup d'état in the 1990s.)

A trend is definitely emerging in favour of joint projects between museums, involving long-term loans, shared travelling exhibitions, and exchanges. International, multilateral networks of museums are being established, and the digitalization of museum collections is also making objects available to wider audiences via the World Wide Web, though computer access remains limited in many parts of the world. In a large number of countries, the protection of and access to cultural heritage is often superseded by more pressing concerns such as poverty, hunger, education, disease and civil war. Heritage professionals, scholars and governments are, however, looking to UNESCO and its mobilizing and federating capacity to play a role in the development of these partnerships, ensuring that access to knowledge of cultural heritage does reach the greatest possible audience.

The public debate on 5 February 2007 intends to promote this action by initially allowing **all the voices** that enrich and develop the reflection on the subject, to be heard: voices from the academic community, universal museums, ICOM, and within the large museum community, the voice of museums dedicated to the heritage of indigenous communities, as well as the unique position of the “source countries”.

Academic community:

“What lies behind the renewed interest in cultural property restitution over the past decades is merely an attempt of compensating for the past, ultimately dealing with outstanding historical issues, i.e. European colonization, the Second World War, the discrimination of indigenous peoples. This renewed interest also reflects a change in the social status and economic role of cultural property over the past centuries, and possibly reveals the emergence of a new world of the future.

Restitution cases that compensate for the past are a result of a growing crisis of statist ideologies that have changed the attitude of the public and governments toward cultural heritage. Projects undertaken for the sake of the future have lost some of their urgency in favour of the exigencies of the present. This has helped to bring to daylight some decisions and actions which for years had been shrouded in secrecy, such as the illicit export of cultural property.

In each country, certain objects represent collective memory and are an element of collective identity. Works of art which once preoccupied the wealthy and the rulers, have become national causes. Cultural property is owned then, by two entities: the institution entrusted with that property, and secondly, all citizens of a given state or inhabitants of a region. In each country, however, the public knows intimately which works are considered to be special

vehicles of collective memory. Hence the notions of « national treasures » and « cultural property » have become staple expressions of today's discourses.

By the same token, if the nation's collective identity had been seen as permanent and settled once and for all, now it is understood as a collective project of self-creation, a project of fashioning new institutions and new forms of social life for the sake of future generations.”

Source: Krzysztof Pomian.

Universal Museums:

“There are two concepts of culture at work in the world today. The first stems from the premise that what is essential about human culture are the defining characteristics that make us all human, and holds that we are able –indeed, obliged- to form meaningful understandings of one another as individuals and as groups across these differences. The second is the idea of culture in all its forms and periods –material and intangible, prehistoric, historic, and contemporary – as the inalienable inheritance of a particular nation whose members are therefore its sole legitimate owners and interpreters. These two concepts have each produced their own type of museum. The first gave rise to museums typified by their presence in cosmopolitan centres whose influence, political, cultural, and intellectual, reached far beyond the borders of the nation states whose capitals they were; and whose collections documented what is to be human in all its variety and diversity for worldwide benefit. The second concept of culture gave rise to museums whose collections intended to record the story of the nation throughout history for the benefit of the state's citizens.

A key question with which the international community is now engaged is how these two different kinds of museums, the encyclopaedic and the national, can work with one another in a manner which is complementary rather than conflictual, for the benefit of all their publics, national and international.

The world is in many ways experiencing globalization as a source of tension between the poles of local and global. Museums, by contrast, can offer a practical example of how relationships can be complementary rather than competitive. Humanity too has a memory, in which we all have an inheritance. Starting from this perspective, we are all entitled to have a share in others' cultures and are required to allow others to have a stake in our own. Museums are valuable sites of public inquiry where we are permitted to ask questions, sometimes difficult ones, not just about “our” past, but also about other people's, on the premise that, as humans, we all have a legitimate interest in, and responsibility towards, our common history. Curators of whatever background need to sustain a fine balance between their particular responsibilities towards their own heritage and those of source communities, and their now fundamental role as mediators across the very cultural borders towards whose creation their professions have contributed so much.”

Source: Neil MacGregor, British Museum.

The International Council of Museums:

« The twin concepts of “memory” and “universality” lie at the heart of the history of museums and are crucial to much of the work of ICOM and its members. Nevertheless, together, these concepts have presented built-in tensions for museums for at least two hundred years. Such tensions may be addressed through legal means. However, through the

complications of historical changes to statehood and political boundaries over time, some tensions underlying multiple claims about objects of “heritage” will continue to require more than a purely legal or administrative consideration by museums.

Internationally, ICOM has long taken the view that such matters are best resolved through professional cooperation and self-regulation based on its Code of Ethics. Under the ICOM Code of Ethics, museums are expected to work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve. To meet the very different social, legal and political needs of the twenty-first century, ICOM believes that museums holding material which contributes information and identity to other states “should promote the sharing of knowledge, documentation and collections with museums and cultural organisations in the countries and communities of origin”[6.1]. A move from a legalistic to a knowledge-focused approach to collections and history should find far greater resonance among museums and help to foster “the possibility of developing partnerships with museums in countries or areas that have lost a significant part of their heritage.” [6.1]

This is where ICOM's embrace of mediation and constructive problem solving is an important direction to keep affirming in order to promote relationships that involve greater mutual responsibility and ethical, imaginative interaction across all present or previous divisions.

The core dynamic of forming international exhibitions (through international loans) requires a fundamental commitment to cooperative effort, and 'sharing' cultural resources, knowledge and experiences across geo-political divisions and rights of legal ownership. The ethical articulation of the recognition of "source cultures" and "continuing communities" as well as the "constituent communities" or "ownership cultures" framing museums' existence are important new directions, now built into ICOM's Code of Ethics, and important to keep reinforcing. The encyclopaedic museums have to be called upon to become the sponsors of new kinds of interactive work and shared knowledge and experience. There are many imaginative positions to be explored - e.g. shared management and co-cultural stewardship which have been explored in many countries in relationship to indigenous collections.”

Source: ICOM, Bernice Murphy.

Museums of indigenous communities – the example of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C.:

“The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has emerged as the vital and living Native place of memory in America’s monumental core and political center. This vitality and life have everything to do with the Museum's fundamental interpretive and representational process, which sees Indian peoples themselves as the primary source of authority on Native cultures. In addition, this recalibration allows the NMAI to transcend historical definitions of what museums do, and is helping us create something much larger in the process: a true civic and social space of far greater public import and reach than "museums" as we have known them historically.

One of my points concerns the methodologies of representation and interpretation relating to Native collections and the peoples and communities associated with them. I, of course, do not claim a monopoly on our approach, which puts Native voices in charge of our narratives. A number of museums representing and interpreting Native peoples and cultures of the Americas are moving in this same direction. But none has done it at the NMAI’s level of magnitude. Significantly, the NMAI does not refer only to the past history of Native

Americans. It is, instead, an international institution of living cultures, representing peoples whose homelands stretch from Tierra del Fuego in South America to the Arctic Circle in North America. Putting Native voices in charge of our narratives requires the direct involvement of people who, in fact, live this heritage. This scholarship of inclusion has important implications. Exhibitions, the very mainstay of museum presentation, may look quite different. Even more important is the overall shift in power and authority that this inclusion brings.”

Source: Richard West, National Museum of the American Indian.

Source countries - Africa, a unique case:

« Regardless of how the debate concerning the return of cultural objects is presented, and the various viewpoints, the situation of sub-Saharan African countries is fundamentally different from those of other regions or cultures of the world that could legitimately make claims for return. The massive scale of the loss, in quantity and quality, is the main feature of the situation in most sub-Saharan African countries. Each of the great European, American or Japanese museums of African art or ethnography often possesses more objects of African origin than all museums of the source countries combined, and this in a huge proportion.

The history of the colonization of Africa is not unrelated to the aforementioned situation; it is at the origin of another aspect of the African specificity: the enduring resentment in African « source countries ». Are the "dishonest equations" evoked by Aimé Césaire in his "Discourse on Colonialism" truly behind us?

A third fundamental dimension of the African situation is the weakness of the continent's museums; this is, moreover, one of the two main arguments most often evoked for settling – for the time being – the issue; the other argument, relatively recent in the debate, being the universality of cultural heritage.

This diagnosis of weakness being nearly unanimous, actions of solidarity should be based on seeking solutions to remedy the situation. A sizeable handicap must, however, be acknowledged: African decision-makers and politicians grant little attention and therefore little resources to these issues. In fact, they do not take them fully into account or judge them properly, perhaps because they lack the qualified specialists who could advise them. If it is recognized that professional training is the key to strengthening heritage institutions in Africa, we must seriously work toward this end. Capacities must be strengthened or built in Africa in order to obtain the critical mass which is necessary to sustain solid internal dynamics.

Museum professionals as well as enlightened politicians in African countries would unhesitatingly embrace the concept of the universality of cultural heritage, if they were sure that an ulterior motive did not exist. The situation is moreover not as unchanging as one may think; within the framework of professional partnerships, which are occasionally instigated by politicians from the « North », positions are evolving.

Eventually, the denial of justice must be recognized, and together, modalities must be developed in order to restore to African peoples on a larger scale, the « miraculous weapons » of this heritage which they need in order to become fully aware of themselves and develop their future. »

Source: Alain Godonou, Ecole de Patrimoine Africain, Bénin.