



Agenda - Debating the Return of Historical Artifacts and the Prevention of Cultural Erosion

UNESCO



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. Letter from the Executive Board**
- 2. Introduction to Committee**
- 3. Introduction to Agenda**
- 4. Key Terms**
- 5. Return of Historical Artifacts**
 - 5.1 Colonialism and Historical Justice
 - 5.2 Ownership of Artifacts
 - 5.3 Digital Return
 - 5.4 Challenges in Returning Artifacts
 - 5.5 Black Market Trade
- 6. Cultural Erosion**
 - 6.1 Role of institutions
 - 6.2 Protecting Ownership Over Culture
- 7. Case Studies:**
 - 7.1 Benin Bronzes
 - 7.2 Cambodia Temple Sculptures
- 8. How to Research?**
- 9. Expectations from delegates**
- 10. QARMA's (Questions a Resolution must answer)**
- 11. Bibliography**

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Greetings Delegates!

We, the executive board of UNESCO, are overjoyed to welcome you to the 11th iteration of the Shishukunj Model United Nations conference. This conference will serve as a platform for you all to display your research skills and communicate confidently and effectively with your fellow delegates. We have planned an immensely exciting conference for all of you, and we know that you will enjoy it.

In return, we expect all of you to give your best while preparing for the three conference days. Despite our planning and efforts towards the committee, it is your level of preparation that will determine how much you enjoy and learn from the conference. The committee is set to have fiery debates, diplomatic discussions, nail-biting negotiations, and a lot of fun.

Each delegate must be well-versed in the entire guide for the conference days. However, we have provided this guide as a foundation for your research, and each delegate is expected to research well beyond that.

The agenda we have taken up is extremely relevant and a highly debated issue on a global scale. Each delegate must keep in mind the country they have been allotted while crafting speeches and interacting in the committee, due to the fact that different nations have very different perspectives and interests on the issue of returning historical artifacts. Our agenda has two major aspects: the return of historical artifacts is one, and the prevention of cultural erosion is the other. Delegates are requested to keep that division in mind and align their research and speeches to the same.

It is also important to mention that the executive board has a very strict policy against plagiarism and the use of AI. If any spoken or written material is suspected of AI use or plagiarism, the respective delegate will be subject to questioning by the bureau regarding the content, and strict action will be taken against him/her.

We are optimistic that each delegate will not only adhere to these points, but also exceed our expectations when we meet on conference day. We hope you all are ready to present your best ideas and enjoy the conference to the fullest. Good luck with the preparation ahead! For any doubts, feel free to reach out to the bureau anytime.

Sincerely,

Pinakini Karnik and Nibbana Wadhwani, **Co-Chairperson**

Aarya Sodhiya, **Vice Chairperson**

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) promotes cooperation in education, science, culture, and communication to promote peace worldwide. It was created in 1945 to focus on rebuilding schools, libraries, and museums that had been destroyed in Europe during World War II.¹

Some examples of the work that UNESCO does with its 194 Member States are- protecting natural habitats, dealing with artificial intelligence, providing better education, preserving history and culture, and ensuring access to trustworthy information.

UNESCO also plays an important role in protecting traditions and historical artifacts, and promoting collaborations at the international level regarding conserving heritage. It creates international rules, guidelines, and agreements that help countries work together on global issues. These standards help countries protect their heritage, make better policies, and work together to solve global problems.

In 1972, UNESCO created the World Heritage List of cultural sites and natural areas that would get government protection. Through these efforts, the organisation continues to encourage nations to protect and preserve cultural heritage.

UNESCO was born from a simple but firm belief: that long-term peace must be built on more than the political and economic ties between states alone.²

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/about-us>

² <https://www.unesco.org/en/vision>

INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENDA

The agenda “Debating the Return of Historical Artifacts and the Prevention of Cultural Erosion” is a topic that takes us hundreds of years back in the human story, while we also discuss the future of archaeology. We will debate whether various historical artifacts should be returned to their country of origin, what challenges face the process of return, and also discuss the digital return of artifacts. Ways to prevent cultural erosion will also be discussed in the committee as we evaluate the role of various institutions in doing so and come up with solutions to protect ownership rights over cultural practices.

The Return of Historical Artifacts

As you will learn further in the guide, there are many objects of cultural significance that historically belong to a particular place, but somewhere in the course of time, they were looted/stolen/wrongfully taken by another country. As of today, many of these objects, which we refer to as historical artifacts, sit in the museums of the countries that do not originate from. The places of origin, in many cases, were colonized by another country, like in the case of India and England. Other ways in which artifacts were stolen include wars, conquests, and cases of smuggling/black market trade.

Why is the return of historical artifacts such a debated topic?

Some people may feel that it is obvious that stolen artifacts should be returned to the country they belong to. However, there are many arguments against the return of historical artifacts.

Questions like:

- Will the countries of origin, which demand the return of their artifacts, be able to **preserve them** the same way that countries that currently hold them do,
- Will the return of artifacts to countries of origin **reduce global access** to them,
- **Who** should get the artifacts back: Deciding between different nations that claim ownership, and deciding whether the national government, regional authorities, or the communities should get them back.
- **How** should artifacts be returned, digitally or physically? Can digital return replace physical return?

remain at the centre of this debate.

Preventing Cultural Erosion

Cultural erosion refers to the gradual loss of cultural identity, traditions, and practices in a society, which is its formal definition. In our daily lives, we see that despite having distinct

cultural backgrounds, our lifestyles are still very similar. We do not wear our national costumes on a daily basis, nor are we in touch with our heritage as part of our daily routines. This phenomenon is a common example of cultural erosion. Its major causes are globalization and the westernization of many parts of the world. If we do not tackle this issue effectively, we run the risk of erasing age-old cultural practices and creating a future that is disconnected from our roots. For people like traditional artisans, the erasure of culture and tradition is a threat to their livelihoods. We will assess **the role of various institutions**, including UNESCO, in protecting culture globally and explore actions they can take for this cause.

Another crucial aspect of cultural erosion is **protecting rights over cultural practices**. Cultural practices include art forms and folk literature, clothing and cuisine, and more. This subtopic basically means that the community from which a certain cultural practice originates should get the credit for it. For example, it often occurs that local handicraft techniques are stolen by big fashion companies without the consent of the artisans, and without giving due acknowledgement to their community. The delegates are expected to find solutions that ensure that the communities of origin are given due credit for their cultural practices, while also making sure that different cultures around the world are accessed and appreciated globally, and that they do not remain limited to a small region and eventually die out.

KEY TERMS

1. **Cultural erosion:** Cultural erosion refers to the gradual loss of cultural identity, traditions, and practices in a society. When a society stops practicing its traditions and loses connection with its culture over time, the phenomenon is called cultural erosion.
2. **Civil strife:** a situation where the citizens of a country are carrying out acts of violence. This could be a conflict between groups of citizens or an uprising against the government.
3. **Excavation:** the systematic removal of soil and rock to uncover buried material such as historical structures, artifacts,, or human remains, etc.
4. **Intellectual Property rights:** Intellectual property rights are the rights given to persons over the creations of their minds. They usually give the creator an exclusive right over the use of his/her creation for a certain period of time³.
5. **Patent:** a type of exclusive legal right given to the inventor of something, which allows him/her to prevent others from making, using, importing, or selling their invention. This provides legal protection to the invention, typically for 20 years.
6. **Repatriation:** The act of returning something to its country of origin
7. **Provenance:** Refers to the origin, source, or the historical record of ownership and custody of an item or data.
8. **Artifact:** An artifact is an object from the past helping us learn about the people, their culture, and the history of a particular place.
9. **Colonialism:** Colonialism is when a powerful country takes control of a weaker land or territory to use its wealth and resources.
10. **Restitution:** Restoration of something to its rightful owner
11. **Antiquity:** Coins, statues, or buildings (artifacts) of ancient times
12. **Good-faith:** Refers to the honest and fair execution of institutional duties. It requires museums to act with honesty, especially in holding artifacts in trust for the public, acquiring collections, and conducting research or restitution.

³ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/intel1_e.htm

COLONIALISM AND HISTORICAL JUSTICE

Introduction

Colonialism is the process by which one country takes both political and economic control of another region and rules over it. A lot of stealing and looting of historical artifacts took place during the colonial times, where they were removed illegally. Along with showing their power and control over the colonised areas, these acts erased their native cultures. Historical justice is referred to as the correcting of mistakes that were committed in the past. In accordance with this topic, it means accepting the fault of taking artifacts wrongfully and then returning them to the countries of their origin.

Why are artifacts important for preserving cultural identity?

Hidden inside the quiet corners of our country's museums, archives, and historical sites lie treasures from the past. Every item, from vintage equipment and clothing to documents and pictures, holds a story waiting to be discovered. Artifacts serve as tangible (real) links to the past. They show us how our ancestors lived, worked, and survived. By preserving artifacts, we can learn about historical periods, allowing us to know more about the past and build an informed future.



How were the artifacts taken?

Artifacts were taken during colonial rule, military looting (example- Benin Bronzes), forced treaties (example-Koh-i-noor), wars, illegal trades, and invasions. The people living in these regions had almost no control over the removal of the artifacts, which were so important for their history and their culture. Now, they are displayed and kept in museums.

Why do countries demand the return of historical artifacts?

This issue involves the questions of historical justice and ownership. This is because many artifacts were stolen and kept under war conditions and colonialism. Now, the countries are demanding the return of their artifacts as they feel that they are a part of their identity. Still, there are various arguments and opinions on the return of artifacts.

The question raised is- will the countries of origin that demand the return of artifacts be able to preserve the artifacts safely and make them globally accessible?

International Cooperation

- **US Returns Over 1,400 Priceless Antiquities to India**-In a monumental step towards reclaiming India's cultural heritage, the United States has announced the return of over 1,400 antiquities, worth millions of dollars, to India. These artifacts, spanning centuries of history, were either stolen or illicitly trafficked. Among the

returned treasures are a magnificent sandstone sculpture from Madhya Pradesh and the revered Tanesar mother goddess figure from Rajasthan.

- **The 1954 Hague Convention**-The 1954 Hague Convention aims to protect cultural property, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, archaeological sites, works of art, manuscripts, books, and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest, as well as scientific collections of any kind, regardless of their origin or ownership.⁴

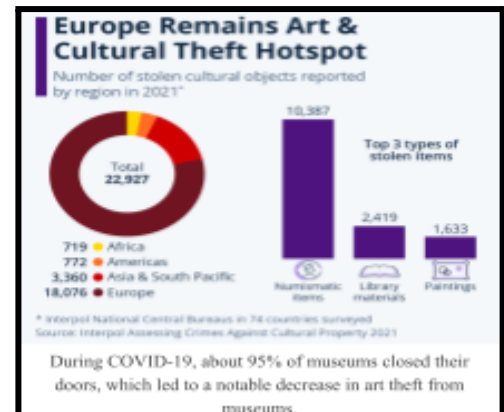
Bringing artifacts back to their countries of origin can be an important step in correcting the wrongs of colonialism, but it cannot erase its impact entirely. Delegates must think about the question: Can the return of historical artifacts correct the injustices of colonialism, or does true justice require additional efforts?

⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/1954-convention>

OWNERSHIP OF ARTIFACTS

Overview

What is common between the Rosetta Stone, Koh-i-noor, and Benin bronzes? These are the artifacts that are now located outside of their original countries, in the British Museum. Earlier, the countries that had stolen artifacts during colonial times openly refused to return them, but over time, their argument has shifted towards concerns over security, preservation, and accessibility of the artifacts, if returned. Yet the evidence tells a completely different story. About 50,000 to 100,000 artefacts are stolen each year globally, with Europe responsible for nearly 78% of all reported cases. In fact, the museums in Europe making claims about better security have proven far from “safe”, with approximately 2,000 artifacts going missing from the British Museum in 2023 alone, several of which were sold on eBay by a senior curator; and in October 2025, four thieves broke into the Louvre's Apollo Gallery (Louvre Museum, Paris) in broad daylight and made off with royal jewels valued about 88 million euros in just eight minutes.



The former colonies, meanwhile, continue to argue that these artifacts must be returned to them because they are vital to their cultural identity, heritage, and historical justice. They believe that most objects taken during the colonial period were legal only under the laws of the time that were made by colonial powers, for exploitation, and that the psychological harm of seeing their sacred objects displayed in foreign museums is experienced as an ongoing humiliation. These countries further question how these artifacts are more accessible to the public in London or New York than in Asia or Africa, which are the sources of the vast majority of the artifacts, and whose populations have the least financial means to travel to see them.

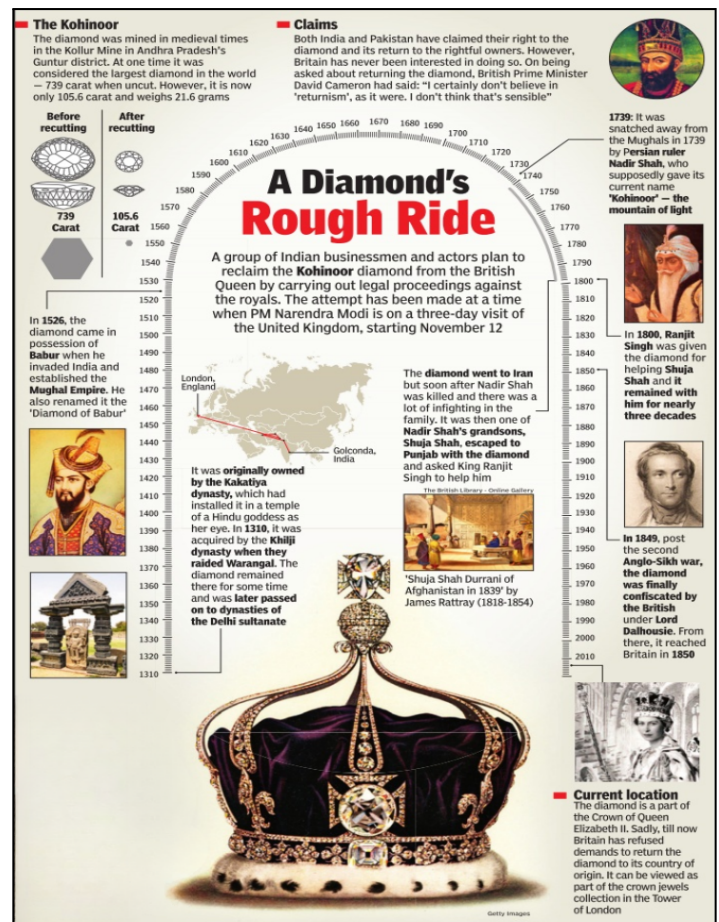
Determining Ownership

The famous Koh-i-Noor diamond was taken by Britain during its rule in 1849, a time when India wasn't divided. Today, countries like India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and even Iran claim ownership of Koh-i-Noor.

In cases like Koh-i-Noor, where the artifacts have been taken from a nation that has been divided or broken into other nations, the question of which country should get the artifact at present comes up.

The Benin Bronzes are thousands of historic artworks made primarily from brass, wood, ivory, leather, and bone that were taken by the British army from the Kingdom of Benin, in present-day Nigeria.

The case of the Benin Bronzes shows another problem in returning cultural objects: ownership conflicts are not just limited to countries, but also different authorities in a single country. In Nigeria, only the national government can officially receive the bronzes upon their return. However, the Oba of Benin (the traditional king), local museums, and the people of Benin City believe that they must also have an opportunity to make decisions regarding the bronzes, since the bronzes came from there and are an important part of their culture. Such disagreements, even when everyone believes that the artifacts must be returned, are heavily used by the Western museum to delay the return of the artifacts. So the question is not just whether artifacts should be returned, but to whom should they be returned: the national government, the regional authorities (museums), or the communities?



International Conventions

Although the return of artifacts remains debated, international agreements have been made to address it.

1. UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO Convention 1970)

It is the most important international framework. It was adopted on November 14 1970. 140 Countries agreed to it. The main goal of the UNESCO Convention of 1970 is to create a system for getting back museum items that were stolen.

Limitations-

- 1) It does not apply to artifacts that were taken before 1970. This includes the debated objects that were taken during the colonial period.

- 2) Mainly focuses on stolen museum objects and not on artifacts removed through illegal excavations.
- 3) It also requires claimers to compensate museums, creating financial barriers for developing nations.
- 4) Most importantly, it doesn't have strong enforcement mechanisms and may be overturned by national laws such as the British Museum Act of 1963, which prohibits the museum from returning items in its collection unless in some specific circumstances, like the return of Nazi-looted art.

2. UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (1995)

Adopted to strengthen and complement the UNESCO Convention, it establishes uniform rules for the return of cultural objects.

Limitations-

- 1) Only about 50 countries agreed to it, and major art-holding countries such as the UK and Japan have not yet agreed to it.
- 2) Its global impact is limited due to low participation.
- 3) Enforcement still depends largely on the cooperation of individual states.

Thus, these treaties are helpful, but leave many questions about how to ensure universal participation and how to provide effective enforcement.

What Is the FPIC Standard?

FPIC stands for free, prior, and informed consent. It is recognised under Articles 11 and 12 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) and gives the original residents of a country the right to say yes or no to any project that may affect their lands or resources.

If FPIC is applied to the objects taken during the colonial period, a simple question arises: did any community before removal freely, with full information, consent to giving up their artifacts? Did the people of the Kingdom of Benin, in present-day Nigeria, agree for the British to take thousands of bronze sculptures from the royal palace during the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897? Did Japan ask the people of Korea before taking the royal seals, historic manuscripts, and artwork that were important for their monarch and national identity? While some have been returned over the decades, many remain in Japanese museums and private collections today. Likewise, in almost every case, the answer is no, which makes almost every object taken during the colonial period ethically illegal, regardless of the laws at that time.

If FPIC is applied in the present scenario, then, after objects are returned, as discussed previously, the original community, and not only the national government, should decide how they are cared for.

Lastly, if FPIC clearly highlights the injustice of past actions, then how can it be applied to shape solutions such that the communities are given a chance in deciding the return and the future of their cultural heritage?

DIGITAL RETURN OF HISTORICAL ARTIFACTS

As discussed previously in the study guide, it is not always viable to return historical artifacts physically. This is due to the fact that many artifacts are not easy to transport across large distances, given their size, or at times, as in the case of the return of Benin artifacts, they need very specific climatic conditions to be stored safely. It also occurs that the legislation of some countries does not allow the removal of these artifacts from their museums, even if it is to return them to their country of origin.

What is digital return?

Considering these points, the emergence of technology has been proven beneficial to the cause of returning historical artifacts. Using digital methods like scans and virtual libraries to return historical artifacts to their country of origin is called digital return. Essentially, countries take detailed images or scans of the artifacts and make a collection of such images, which they provide to the country where these artifacts originally belonged.

The Issue with Digital Return

- Now that countries have the option of digitally returning artifacts, a major challenge for the committee is to decide if digital return is being misused by these countries to avoid actually returning stolen objects.
- If the answer to this question is yes, what measures can UNESCO take to avoid a situation where countries return objects digitally to avoid or delay the physical return of artifacts?
- Because digital return is a new and emerging technology, there is a lack of national and international rules and regulations to guide how digital return should be done, and in what cases digital return can be carried out instead of physical return.

Conclusion

Even though the digital era has brought the facility of returning ancient artifacts digitally, allowing efficiency and global access, there are still various shortcomings in the systems that exist currently.

The technology of digital return must be utilised by the international community and not misused by certain countries. We must work to ensure this through solutions like necessary changes in pre-existing UNESCO conventions and the introduction of new legal documents, etc.

CHALLENGES IN RETURNING ARTIFACTS

Logistical Challenges

Return of some artifacts may require climate-controlled packaging and monitored environmental conditions throughout the transfer. For items like big sculptures and wooden carvings or groups of pottery or clay artifacts, even small shakes can cause permanent damage. Thus, the transportation of artifacts requires not only planning to select a safe relocation site but also a safe route and a vehicle to prevent damage, based on the artifacts' specific needs. Moreover, many countries have laws that require extensive paperwork to prove ownership. This paperwork, which may not be present for all historical artefacts or may have been falsified, becomes a heavy burden on the nation receiving the artifacts, which may already be facing financial constraints.

Preservation Concerns

In a survey of South African heritage professionals, the greatest concern about the return of artefacts was the lack of resources to properly store and protect the returned artefacts, with 78% of respondents indicating that this was "a very real concern". Storage and climate control facilities required by several artifacts in museums of most receiving nations are often insufficient. For example, the National Museum in New Delhi, one of the largest museums in India, has limited storage space and, most importantly, lacks proper climate-control facilities, even though it is in the most polluted city in India. If collections in such museums were increased as a result of returns, they may not be protected but slowly get damaged. Another concern is that the returned artefacts may be damaged through negligence or deliberate destruction. In 2018, the National Museum of Brazil lost over 90 per cent of its 20 million-item collection because of neglecting safety systems in the museum. The 6th-century Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan were demolished by the Taliban in 2001. While such extreme cases are not universal, they are enough for Western countries to delay the return of artefacts.



National Brazil Museum on Fire



The Bamiyan Buddha, Afghanistan
Before and after the destruction by Taliban

Economic Factors

As read above, the process of repatriation is overly expensive, and as a result, most of the countries may ignore the repatriation of culturally important objects entirely. However, it is important to consider that the British Museum, which is free to enter, still earns approximately £14 to £15 million annually from people visiting its ticketed exhibitions and gift shop sales. Similarly, the Louvre Museum of Paris attracted about 8.9 million visitors in 2023, generating millions of euros, while creating about 18,000 jobs. This raises a simple question: if the artifacts, no matter the cost, are successfully returned to the country of origin through international support, can they not increase tourism and ultimately relieve the overall financial burden on the country in the future?

BLACK MARKET TRADE OF HISTORICAL ARTIFACTS



19th-century alabaster Buddha sculpture thought to have come from Mandalay in Myanmar (Burma). In 2011, an attempt was made to import the sculpture to Norway illegally. The sculpture remained in the custody of the customs authorities until September 2015, when a legal decision was obtained. The sculpture was exhibited in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, until it was returned to Myanmar in June 2017.

Ancient artifacts are not just objects that hold precious memories from our past; they also hold immense economic value in the present. Globally, there is a high demand for these artifacts among wealthy collectors and some private museums. The global art market was valued at \$552.03 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach \$944.59 billion by 2033. A major portion of this trade is, however, illegal. More than 50,000 art objects have been smuggled out of India till 1989, according to an estimate by UNESCO. But officials agree that an exact count remains impossible⁵.

What is the black market trade of historical artifacts?

When historical artifacts are stolen, smuggled (moved from one country to another in a secretive manner), and sold illegally, it is called the **illicit trade of historical artifacts**. This is commonly known as black market trade as well.

Why is it a major issue?

There is an extremely high demand for artifacts among buyers in the black market. Additionally, there is a lack of strict laws, both national and international, which can prevent the black market trade of artifacts. This means that it is quite easy and profitable to do black market trade of ancient artifacts. Therefore, the scale of black market trade is especially large in the case of historical artifacts. The money generated from the illegal sale of these artifacts is huge because these artifacts hold extremely high value among buyers. A large portion of this money is used to fund terrorists and organised crime groups. Often, the artifacts are illegally excavated (dug up from archaeological sites) and then smuggled to other nations for

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<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/india-heritage-theft-remains-challenge#:~:text=Yet%2C%20just%20years%20after%20the.an%20exact%20count%20remains%20impossible>

sale. This causes the source country to lose objects that make up its culture and heritage. The collective history and historical knowledge of that country also remains at loss as these objects are stolen and sold off.

The Need for Reform

As discussed above, there are various factors that make the issue extremely prominent and widespread. Some of these are: Some of these are:

1. **Weak regulation:** On both international and national levels, there is a lack of specific regulation and adequate means to enforce the law. This means that it is easier for criminal organisations to carry out the theft and illegal sale of cultural property without having to face strict repercussions under the law.
2. **Conflicts and Political Instability:** When a country is at war with other countries or is facing civil strife within the country, there are various factors that make the situation a suitable one for the theft and the illicit trade of artifacts. As local security collapses during situations of turmoil, it becomes even simpler for criminals to illegally excavate, steal, and trade artifacts. Sometimes, when people are driven into poverty due to turmoil, it makes them sell objects of cultural heritage on the black market.
3. **Documentation:** For the sale and smuggling of historical artifacts, the documents required are often faked. Many buyers are unaware of the illicit origins of these goods, highlighting the need for greater public awareness and better documentation practices.⁶
4. Many antiquities (ancient artifacts) are not registered under the law. This makes them easier to steal, and once stolen, the source country lacks official inventory records to prove ownership.
5. **Lack of Awareness:** Other than that, locals, mostly people from rural areas, aren't aware of the cultural, historic, and monetary significance (the cost of the objects), which allows traffickers to buy them at a low price and sell them in the black market for a much higher price, generating massive profit.

⁶ <https://unicri.org/cultural-heritage-smuggling-and-nexus-terrorism-july-2024>

ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

Cultural heritage is a timeless treasure that connects us to our roots and offers a window into shared history. It helps us preserve cultural diversity and includes both physical and non-physical aspects of culture, including historic buildings, monuments, traditions, languages, art, music, and folklore. Institutions are organisations that work for a specific cause. Through education, media, literature, and various cultural programs, they ensure that both present and future generations have a good knowledge of their cultural heritage. Examples of such institutions are schools, museums, international organisations like UNESCO, and various media platforms.

Schools

Education and culture are closely connected and influence each other in many ways. Culture includes the traditions, values, and lifestyle of a society. Education and culture are connected. One of the main roles of education is passing cultural values and traditions to the younger generation. Education teaches students about their history, moral values, and national heroes. Subjects like social studies, literature, and history help them understand their cultural background and respect their heritage. This process helps keep culture alive and prevents it from being forgotten.

Media and Literature

The media plays an important role in preventing cultural erosion. It connects people with their cultures through films, documentaries, news reports, and television platforms. Social media and various digital platforms have made information available to all. Plus, the media also allows different communities to share their culture and traditions with a large audience.

Literature serves as a powerful vessel for preserving cultural traditions and heritage. Through books, oral traditions are kept alive, folktales are retold, and languages are protected. Books that talk about traditions and experiences show a sense of identity and belongingness for individuals of a particular community. Historical literature provides knowledge about the victories, struggles, and major events that created a community's past.⁷

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<https://cpdsingapore.com/books-and-cultural-preservation-the-role-of-literature-in-preserving-traditions/?srsltid=AfmBOopr1v-r-x8qmC28e34b4aUPyEtTmqSCTlcT8GkXzxT0g6RacTbu>

International Organisations

UNESCO and other international organisations have a good hand in the protection of culture.

- UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972)- It concerns the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which recognizes that certain places on Earth are of “outstanding universal value” and should form part of the common heritage of humankind.⁸
- International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)- It is an international non-governmental organisation that works for the conservation of monuments and sites around the world⁹.
- World Monuments Fund (WMF)- The organisation works with local communities around the world to safeguard irreplaceable cultural heritage¹⁰.

Challenges

- Globalisation - New ideas and trends are being spread, by which the current generation tends to forget or undermine their cultures.
- Money- Many museums and heritage sites fall short of funding, which acts as an obstacle towards culture preservation.
- Illegal trade of artifacts- Stealing of artifacts, cultural objects, and then selling them to buyers illegally.
- Damages due to natural disasters and fights- Wars and natural disasters damage historical sites and cultural artifacts.

Institutions are essential for the spread of cultures and ideas. But problems like globalisation, shortage of money, trading artifacts illegally, damages due to natural disasters, and fights can act as a barrier to the preservation of culture. Now it is the responsibility of the delegates to address these problems, find solutions to them, and suggest changes in activities concerned with promoting culture in these systems.

⁸ <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-heritage>

⁹ <https://www.icomos.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.wmf.org/>

PROTECTING RIGHTS OVER CULTURAL PRACTICES



The image above shows the footwear that looks exactly like the Kolhapuri Chappal, worn by a Prada model on the runway.

When we discuss cultural erosion, the issue isn't just that communities and countries are losing touch with their culture; it is also that their cultures are being stolen, and that they are losing their rights. Let us understand this with an example of handicrafts. Recently, the fashion brand Prada featured a pair of footwear that looked almost exactly like the *Kolhapuri Chappal*, without even mentioning that it originates from India. What it basically did was, it took a regional craft and took the credit for it in front of the world. It also sold the footwear for a very high price, much higher than what the original makers charge locally. It did not share the profit gained from its sale as well. Later, it launched a 'Made In India' collaboration and shared credit. However, mostly, after cultures are stolen this way, neither credit nor profit is shared.

Balancing global accessibility with regional credit

As countries of the world get increasingly connected with each other due to the facility of the internet and social media platforms, we see that cultures belonging to a particular region are not limited to just that region. Now, local cultures are gaining popularity on a global level. This is a good thing because now people all over the world can appreciate regional cultures, and their commercial value also increases due to their popularity. However, it is also a fact that now these cultures are being stolen by big companies globally, because they can be accessed by everyone.

We must work to ensure that local cultures are accessible globally, but the credit for owning the cultural practices stays with the actual community/country of origin.

This is important and urgent because while the craft of local communities is stolen and sold in the global market at high prices, without giving credit and sharing profit, they continue struggling to make little money out of their art. When local artists are unable to make much money out of their cultural practices, they are discouraged from practicing their cultural art forms and do other work to make money for survival. This causes cultural erosion and risks the livelihoods of many communities around the world.

Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCEs)



Image of a Warli Painting, a folk art form originating from Maharashtra

Traditional cultural expressions (TCEs), also called "expressions of folklore", may include music, dance, art, designs, names, signs and symbols, performances, ceremonies, architectural forms, handicrafts, and narratives, or many other artistic or cultural expressions¹¹. **These are the tangible (material) and intangible (non-material, e.g., oral) forms through which a community expresses its cultural identity. These are passed down from generation to generation.**

For instance, the *Maori Haka*, a ceremonial dance from New Zealand, epics like the *Mahabharata*, the hand-painted *Warli* folk art from Maharashtra, etc., are all counted as TCEs.

TCEs are integral to the identity of the source communities and represent generations' worth of knowledge and skills transferred within the communities. TCEs are precisely what the

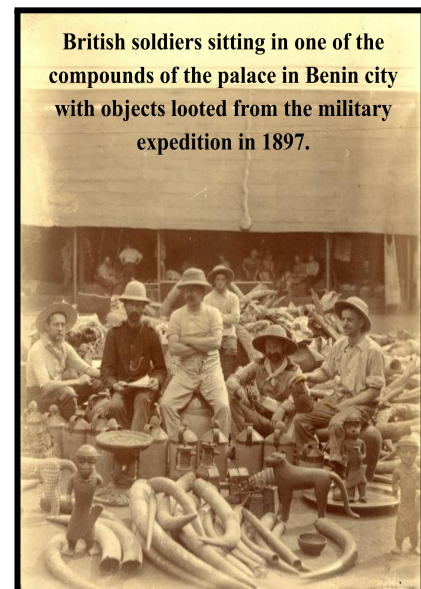
¹¹ <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/traditional-knowledge/traditional-cultural-expressions/index>

committee seeks to protect and promote, to ensure the prevention of cultural erosion and further the best interests of thousands of communities across the globe, which hold a rich cultural heritage and identity.

CASE STUDIES

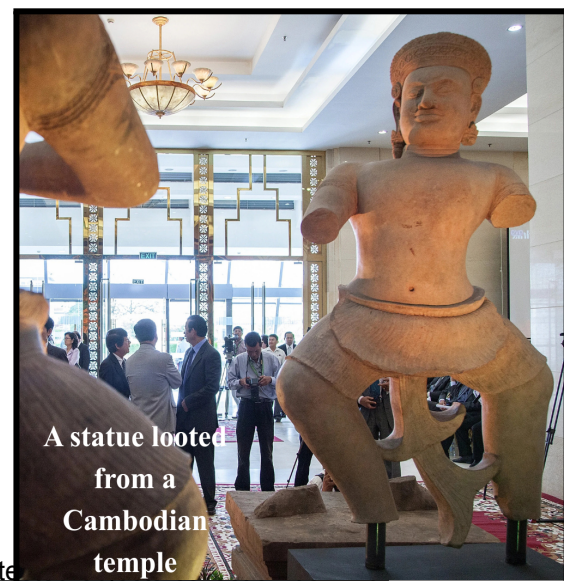
1. Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes consist of beautifully decorated metal plates, commemorative heads, animal and human figures, royal items, and jewellery. They are an important historical record of the Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria), providing insights into the kingdom's dynastic history. The Benin Bronzes have a complicated history. In 1897, the British forces invaded the Kingdom of Benin. The British looted thousands of objects from the royal palace, including the Benin Bronzes, and many of these objects were eventually sold to museums and private collectors around the world. The Benin Bronzes now reside in museums across Europe, North America, and beyond. The British Museum has the largest collection with over 900 objects. Nigeria requested the return of the Benin Bronzes exactly after its independence in 1960. These requests were consistently refused. British officials argued that they legally owned the objects through purchase, even though those purchases derived from looting. Museums argued that objects were safer in their care and accessible to global audiences. This case shows the challenges involved in returning artifacts to their countries of origin. It remains an important example of international cooperation and cultural heritage preservation.¹²



2. Cambodian Temple Sculptures

Deep in the forests of Cambodia, in the Siem Reap Province, the five lotus-flower-shaped towers of majestic Angkor Wat soar towards the sky. This is the world's largest religious monument. By around 1500 A.D., the Khmer capital was abandoned, most likely after heavy floods and lengthy droughts. By the early 1990s, the site was under major threat, with many of the temples at high risk of collapse and several sites looted. Conservation work at Angkor had not been possible since the outbreak of the civil war. After Angkor Wat was included in UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1992, it helped in Cambodia's recovery after years of conflict. The fact that this large-scale project was successfully carried out



¹²<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/content/bronze>

in a country emerging from more than 20 years of conflicts proves the effectiveness of the World Heritage Convention.

HOW TO RESEARCH

1. **Country/Portfolio-specific research:** Research about your country's actions related to the agenda: all the policies it has implemented, initiatives it has taken, what the government thinks about the agenda, and the history of your country regarding the agenda. Also, be sure of your country's enemies and allies.
2. **Agenda-specific research:** This is the research you do on all aspects of the agenda, which will help you in the actual preparation of what you will speak on in the committee. The agenda research will start with the study guide, but delegates must do a comprehensive analysis of other aspects as well.
3. **Committee-specific:** A delegate needs to be thorough with the committee background as well. This will help you build solutions based on what actions the committee has previously taken and has the power to take in the future. An introduction to the committee has been provided in the guide for you to start.

Some trusted websites you can use are:

1. UNESCO's official website <https://www.unesco.org/en>
2. Harvard International Law Journal <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/ilj/>
3. WIPO's official website <https://www.wipo.int/portal/en/index.html>
4. Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/>
5. UNICRI reports <https://unicri.org/index.php/>
6. Cambridge official website <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org>

Some websites you should not use are:

1. Wikipedia
2. Reddit/Quora
3. Personal blogs
4. WikiLeaks

Delegates must make sure that no AI is used by them while researching and writing their speeches. If any AI is found in a delegate's content, he/she will face severe repercussions. AI platforms, including ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, etc., are not allowed. Plagiarism, which means directly copying content from the internet, is also strictly prohibited.

EXPECTATION FROM DELEGATES

Culture and heritage help tell us the story of who we are and where we come from. However, many artifacts, many treasures are still kept away from their countries of origin, from the people they belong to. Simultaneously, many cultural traditions and customs are slowly disappearing. As a result of modernisation, the risk of losing our cultures and history grows. This has made the return of artifacts and protection of cultural heritage an important issue globally. By addressing these issues, we can ensure that the coming generations stay connected to their roots and identity.

This study guide has given the delegates a clear idea of the agenda, “Debating the Return of Historical Artifacts and the Prevention of Cultural Erosion”, including the return of historical artifacts, protection of culture, ownership disputes, the role of institutions in safeguarding the cultural heritage, as well as black market trade. We expect that after going through the various topics and case studies, you now have a better understanding of the problems faced by countries wanting to preserve their heritage.

As delegates of UNESCO, make sure to maintain your country’s actual position and statements throughout the committee sessions, and also lobby, considering your foreign policy as well as with those delegates whose stance aligns with yours. The use of AI and plagiarism in your speeches or any other work during the committee is strictly not allowed, and if any delegate is found to be doing so will have to face severe consequences.

When you enter this committee, think with an open mind, allowing you to take in others’ points of view and work together to come up with creative, original, and practical solutions. Your research-based responses and smart decision-making can offer viable solutions to one of the most critical issues in the world.

Thank You,
Nibbana Wadhwani, Pinakini Karnik, **Co-Chaipersons**
Aarya Sodhiya, **Vice-Chairperson**

QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION MUST ANSWER

1. How can the creation of laws for the issue of black market trade ensure that it actually reduces black market trade, given that the black market operates in a highly secretive manner, and may violate laws that are made?
2. What specific measures must be taken to increase awareness among locals about the importance of their cultural artifacts?
3. How can it be ensured that communities get deserved credit and profit for their TCEs?
4. Can digital repatriation substitute physical return? If yes, under what conditions?
5. Can the wrongdoings of colonialism be corrected only through returning the artifacts, or are better measures required to achieve historical justice? Should artifacts be returned even if preservation risks exist?
6. How can media and literature be used to prevent cultural erosion? How can this be done in a way that cultures are represented fairly, without any biased opinions?
7. How can schools, educational institutions, and international organisations help in promoting cultural heritage?
8. How can pre-existing international conventions be made stronger, considering national ownership laws for historical artifacts override these conventions?
9. Should economic and logistical support be provided to the struggling countries where the artifacts are being returned?
10. How can rightful ownership be determined, ensuring the protection and accessibility of cultural heritage?

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