



Iowa High Model United Nations
Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee
Return of Cultural Property to Countries of Origin
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Background:

As museums and art institutions acquire cultural property, meaning archeological artifacts, religious artifacts, and historical works of art, there is dispute over the legitimacy of ownership of such items. These items are attained both through legal trade and sale and through illegal trafficking of looted or stolen goods. Countries of origin desire their cultural property to be returned for many purposes such as: promoting tourism, creating a national and cultural identity, representing their nation with cultural heritage, or plain dignity of regaining their items. Museums wish to retain these properties for reasons including: they legally acquired the items, if you return one, you must return them all, and they believe that the world's treasures should be displayed on a "world's treasures" scale, kept safe in great museums. There are several ways which cultural property can be returned including: amicable return of ownership, perpetual loan, force of law, or personal action. Major past returns include the Codex Regius to Iceland, the Aidonia Treasure, and the Lydian Hoard.

What Has Been Done/Past UN Action:

The issue of returning cultural property to places of origin is one that is becoming more of a legal battle in leveraging privately owned collections and museums to return items of significant importance to their nations of origin. The main group that is concerned with the return of cultural property is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The activities of UNESCO include fighting illegal trafficking, promoting conservation, return of cultural property, and studying the movement of such items. UNESCO has held multiple conferences over this issue. In the 1950 UNESCO Convention in the Hague, looting from WWII was discussed in how to return items back to their place of origin or museums from which they were stolen. In 1970, UNESCO held a convention which created means to recover stolen property and to list cultural property to help protect it from theft. However, this convention didn't hold ground as defining cultural property nor did it open the communication to recover cultural property. Many resolutions have been drafted by haven't been universally ratified, so they carry little power.

Possible Solutions:

This committee needs to consider how UNESCO and the global community can ensure the end of global cultural artifact trafficking and illicit trading. Also consider the fallacies of past agreements and how they could be improved. It is advised that you pay attention to how these agreements would impact the cultural community, how to implement policies, and how to respect legitimacy of private owners and cultural property at the same time.

Questions to Consider:

1. What legitimacy does a private owner have versus a nation claiming cultural property and requesting return?
2. What can UNESCO do to stop illicit trafficking of cultural property?
3. How can UNESCO penalize ratifying members while respecting their legitimacy?
4. What modes of communication and acquisition can be implemented for nations to request and trade materials?
5. Are there any specifically problematic states that the committee can work with directly to release property back to original owners?

Consulted/Recommended Sources

Greenfield, Jeanette. *The Return of Cultural Treasures*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.

Renfrew, A.C. 2000. *Loot, Legitimacy and Ownership*. London, Duckworth.

"The Return of Cultural Property." *Archeology and Contemporary Society*. Web. 23 Jan. 2012.

<http://pcwww.liv.ac.uk/~Sinclair/ALGY399_Site/return.html>.

