

## History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage (online, 17–19 Nov 21)

online, Nov 17–19, 2021

Deadline: Mar 14, 2021

Lena Grundhuber, Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste

### The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts

2021 Virtual conference of the German Lost Art Foundation in cooperation with The Research Center for Material Culture of the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands

Since November 2018, when the "Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage" by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy appeared, the debate on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts in European museums and heritage institutions has focused strongly on the issue of restitution. Undoubtedly, the number of objects returned from European museums to their countries of origin in recent decades has been small – which is why demands for return may appear comparatively novel. However, issues of provenance and restitution were already hotly discussed in the 1970s and 1980s in Germany, Europe and internationally. Pivotal in this regard was the UN Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property that was signed in 1970 in order to put an end to the plunder of cultural heritage in newly independent nation states. Importantly, the non-retroactivity of the Convention was contested by these very states. The current debate, therefore, has a much longer history: Local objections to the removal and theft of individual belongings, collective property, or human remains have existed since the beginning of the colonial expansion. The same goes for successful and unsuccessful claims for the return of cultural heritage, or for compensation for its removal, as well as for attempts to resist, prevent and publicly condemn colonial looting. Claims for return, repatriation and restitution have long been articulated by individuals, communities and governments towards colonial actors and colonial institutions, drawing on local ontologies and moralities and thereby fundamentally challenging and critiquing European colonial practices and (mis-)conceptions.

However, these early histories have barely been systematically investigated and publicly debated – not least because they were not documented in sufficient detail in colonial archives or rather were transmitted orally. Their close reading reveals important aspects of local agency that seem forgotten in the current debate – at least in Europe. Nevertheless, they continue to inform current restitution claims and underline their urgency.

The conference strives to shed light on the 'long history' of resistance against colonial dispossession and expropriation through the articulation of claims for the return of cultural heritage. By historicising and grounding the current debate, the conference aims to explore new avenues for

research and future options for action.

## Submissions

We welcome contributions that focus on and discuss the following topics:

- local forms of contemporary protest against the removal of objects and evidence thereof in the 'colonial archive' and in local oral records;
- early criticism of European colonial practices of dispossession, expropriation and looting in colonised societies;
- (local) ontologies and moralities underpinning demands for return, restitution and repatriation;
- early (successful and unsuccessful) restitution claims, arguments and rhetoric utilised in these claims, reactions to them;
- (public) restitution debates in the run-up to decolonisation and independence, as well as during the negotiations about the 1970 UN Convention;
- pre-1970 attempts at lobbying for and codifying the right of access to, and return of, cultural heritage translocated in the colonial era;
- reflections on when and why pre-1970 restitution claims were answered, accommodated, rejected, re-activated or forgotten over the course of history and how this can inform the current debate.

The conference aims to present:

- cases from diverse geographical-cultural, disciplinary, and historical contexts focusing on artifacts, archives, specimens, but also human remains;
- comprehensive analyses of historical processes and discourses;
- conceptual and theoretical papers on the above issues.

The organising committee would like to invite submissions of abstracts for panel presentations as well as poster presentations:

- panel presentations are intended to last about 15–20 minutes followed by Q&A;
- posters need to be made available to conference participants two weeks before the conference starts and will be discussed between authors and interested parties in 5–10 minutes Q&A sessions; in particular, posters can also present experimental, artistic, activist and/or curatorial approaches to the topic.

Please submit an abstract of 500 words max. and a biographical note of 300 words max. including your institutional affiliation, academic experience and relevant publications to [conference@kulturgutverluste.de](mailto:conference@kulturgutverluste.de) by March 14, 2021. Please send all relevant parts of your submission in one document. The format of the conference will be entirely virtual.

For any questions, please contact [conference@kulturgutverluste.de](mailto:conference@kulturgutverluste.de)

The conference programme will comprise selected submissions as well as lectures by invitation. A selection of papers will be published in the conference proceedings.

For further information:  
[https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Content/02\\_Aktuelles/DE/Meldungen/2021/Januar/2021-01-28\\_Call\\_pdf\\_Konferenz.html](https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Content/02_Aktuelles/DE/Meldungen/2021/Januar/2021-01-28_Call_pdf_Konferenz.html)

--

## Herbsttagung 2021 des Deutschen Zentrums Kulturgutverluste

Die diesjährige Herbstkonferenz des Deutschen Zentrums Kulturgutverluste wird vom 17.-19.11.2021 als virtuelle Konferenz und in Kooperation mit The Research Center for Material Culture of the National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands stattfinden. Thema der Konferenz mit dem Titel "The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts" ist die oftmals vergessene Vorgeschichte zur heutigen Debatte um die Rückgabe von Kultur- und Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten.

Neben Vorträgen von geladenen Redner:innen wird es dieses Jahr auch möglich sein, sich mit einem eigenen Beitrag um die Teilnahme zu bewerben. Einsendeschluss für Abstracts ist der 14. März 2021.

Die Konferenz wird auf Englisch stattfinden. Bei Rückfragen wenden Sie sich bitte gerne an: [conference@kulturgutverluste.de](mailto:conference@kulturgutverluste.de).

### Reference:

CFP: History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage (online, 17-19 Nov 21). In: Arthist.net, Feb 2, 2021 (accessed Dec 9, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/33320>>.