Decolonization and Restitution: Moving Towards a More Holistic and Relational Approach

Report on the Panel on Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous People, ICOM Kyoto, September 2019

Michèle Rivet

At the twenty-fifth triennial ICOM International General Conference, which took place in Kyoto, Japan, on 1 to 7 September 2019, decolonization and restitution were discussed during a whole afternoon under the heading “Decolonization and Restitution: Moving Towards a More Holistic Perspective and Relational Approach.” Two consecutive sessions with simultaneous translation in English, French, Spanish, and Japanese were attended by almost one thousand people in each session. Speakers for both sessions were representatives of their respective ICOM National Committees.¹ ICOM’s Code of Ethics for Museums, adopted in 1986 at the fifteenth General Conference in Buenos Aires, is recognized worldwide and serves as a guideline in museum work, especially the sixth principle: “Museums work closely with both the communities from which their collections originate and those they serve.”

The first session focused on decolonization.² It touched on how museums in their areas are addressing decolonization, where they see progress, and what challenges and barriers they face. It should be noted that American, Australian, and Canadian panelists in that session were from countries where First Nations were already established when the settlers arrived. Also discussed was the repatriation of artifacts to First Nations. India, for its part, was for a long time a colonized country, and so many of its treasures left the country during this time. Fundamental to this discussion were issues of ownership, control, and power: Who are the rightful owners of objects collected as a result of colonialism and its legacies? Who controls the narratives that give meaning to these collections? and Who has the power to set museum agendas and prioritize whose voices count?

During the first session, it is worth mentioning some of the comments, questions, problems, and solutions as expressed by panelists. One of them said: “There are very particular issues (in Australia) which is, of course, a colonized country with a dispossessed, Indigenous population, the culture of which is richly represented in its museums, but is, generally, very poorly represented amongst its visitors, or the museum staff.”³ Panelists felt that it was the Eurocentric model of the museum itself that should be questioned, being inappropriate in an age of engagement and of social entrepreneurship. As William Underwood put it: “The notion of the museum as colonizer has gained currency recently . . . [as has] a sharp rebuke of what many see as our traditions of elitism, including the co-opting and exploitation of other cultures.”⁴

What is the meaning of decolonization and how is it defined? On the one hand, decolonization (Rivet 2020) restores the Indigenous worldview, culture, and traditional ways of life, replacing Western interpretations of history with Indigenous perspectives. Indigenization, on the other hand, recognizes the validity of Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and perspectives. It incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in museums,⁵ the Indigenous People being partners of equal value. Ultimately, decolonization comes down to how the museum is making the decisions. All agreed that steps should be taken very thoughtfully, lest decolonization become neocolonization if the voices of the colonized are not heard.

People also felt that the concept of decolonization needs to be combined with the challenge of defending museums as fundamental institutions at the service of society, which foster critical thinking, freedom of speech, and human rights. It includes both the valorization of, and guarantee of, access by native and tribal communities to their material culture. Decolonizing museums is much more than decolonizing collections and exhibitions. It is about getting rid of colonial power structures. As one panelist said, “museumological thoughts (are) still imbued with colonialist power structures . . . repeating and perpetuating structural and historical inequality.”⁶

In Canada, many changes occurred in the 1990s. Following the 1988 Lubicon Cree boycott of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition (Glenbow Museum) during the Calgary Olympic Games, a working group was created with an Assembly of First Nations members and the Canadian Museums Association (CMA). In 1992, the working group submitted a report titled *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples* (AFN and CMA 1994). It recommended increased participation of Aboriginal people in the interpretation of their culture and history, better access to museum collections for Aboriginal Peoples, and the repatriation of sacred objects and human remains contained in museum collections (Phillips 2011; Rivet 2020).

In 1990, the United States adopted NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which federally mandated the return of human remains, relics, and religious objects to native peoples. NAGPRA, mostly seen as a historic attempt “to right decades of moral and legal wrongs,” has its detractors, who “cite disputes between tribes over identity, ownership and proper reburial of remains, or the problem of museum-held artifacts tainted with pesticides, cyanide or arsenic.”⁷ In Canada, repatriation to First Nations is done through national guidelines in which the CMA is involved. Several museums have adopted repatriation policies. In 2019, the Royal British Columbia Museum published an *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook* with the Haida Gwaii Museum, a First Nations Museum, which is a reference for BC Indigenous communities and museums that was created by and for Indigenous people working in repatriation (Collison et al. 2019).⁸

For India, bringing back Indian artifacts and cultural heritage from overseas remains a “key element in India’s foreign policy.” The Indian panelist wrote: “The consequence of the imperialist era is still being felt today in terms of stolen and smuggled [artifacts] in different countries all over the world, i.e. the USA, Australia and many more.”⁹ Our Indian colleague added: It is painful for us that we could not have those objects, which we have introduced in the pages of books, in our own country because they had been taken away a long time back.”

Decolonizing museums’ collections, their practices, and their programming relies on greater employment of Aboriginal staff, the provision of traineeships for Aboriginal curators, and the reinterpretation of collections. A few examples of current decolonization projects underway include:

- The Association of Art Museum Directors, comprising members from the United States, Canada, and Mexico, has created an African Art Working Group.

- The Museum of Man in San Diego (now known as the Museum of Us)¹⁰ has established a new position: Director of Decolonizing Initiatives.
- Birmingham Museums launched a major exhibition in 2017: *The Past Is Now: Decolonising Birmingham and the British Empire*.
- The Art Gallery of Ontario is rendering wall labels in the language of the Anishinaabe, one of the oldest North American languages, and is removing the word “Indian” from labels and other descriptive materials.
- The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, has taken on the difficult and even more complex issue of settler colonialism.
- The Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, has engaged in critical reflection over its core content, including significant reframing of the issue of Indian Residential Schools within the context of genocide, both in terms of gallery messaging and in terms of public and school programs.
- The recently opened Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian promises to transform popular as well as scholarly interpretations of slavery by sharing the varied experiences of the African diaspora with a largely ignorant public.
- In 2020, the new Western Australian Museum in Perth will open. It benefits from over forty-five thousand engagements with people as part of its consultation and co-curation work: many of these people are Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.
- A coordinated project between the Museums Association, Arts Council and other key support organizations enables ICOM UK to “leverage the ICOM network to build relationships between UK museums and relevant communities around the world,” as mentioned by Laura Pye.¹¹

However, despite all this current work, colonization is still work in progress. “There is a very long way to go,” as Alec Coles from Australia concluded.¹²

Restitution

The second session looked at the current state of restitution, specifically exploring the approach of colonized countries to reclaiming artifacts and how former colonizing countries have responded, particularly in light of the Sarr-Savoy report commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron; it also considered the initiatives taken by Dutch museums not to wait for repatriation claims but instead to proactively open talks with former colonies; lastly, the panel discussed the German government’s \$2 million investment into restitution research. The panelists in this case were either from Europe or Africa.¹³

In the past, the question of ownership, via claims of restitution, has typically been resolved through one-off transactions. Should we not consider restitution in a larger, more holistic context? We need to understand how claims of restitution could provide the basis for relationship-building that could support other aspects of museum decolonization.

In 2014, the Africa Accessioned project was initiated by the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography (ICME),¹⁴ which is working in partnership with the Southern African Development Community Heritage Association (SADCHA). The Africa Accessioned project was launched to coincide with International Museum Day: “Museum Collections Make Connections.” The project aims to identify ethnographic collections in four different European countries that have links to four southern African countries.¹⁵ The project database further led to a development of new forms of dialogue, cultural exchange projects, and thus subsequent claims

for restitution. It enabled Namibia to obtain detailed information about—and this become aware of—its diasporic material culture.

In Namibia, the restitution process began in 1995, just five years after Namibia gained independence, with the return of a sacred stone from Finland and human remains from Germany. These sporadic returns, as one panelist described it, “are very significant as they involved sacred and sensitive material and Human Remains [sic] . . . They have also served as learning opportunities for all parties involved.”¹⁶ In Cameroon, the debate continues to be in full swing in different African communities and also among the decision-makers, legal experts, cultural heritage and museum experts, and professionals concerning the African artifacts in Europe and in the rest of the world.

In November 2018, the Sarr-Savoy report, *On the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Towards a New Relational Ethics*, was released, a 252-page bilateral agreement between France and certain African countries. The document is divided into three main parts: (1) “To Restitute”; (2) “Restitutions and Collections”; and (3) “Accompanying Returns.” However, the report has been widely criticized. For Cameroon, by endorsing the report “[t]he French President took an historical position vis-à-vis African collections and objects found in French museums and at collectors’ outlets either fraudulently and through the unorthodox practices that had taken place at the time.”¹⁷ As explained by Bertrand Guillet,¹⁸ the French Minister of Culture announced a series of measures encouraging museums to intensify their exchanges with their counterparts from Africa; strengthening training partnerships (the Heritage Institute and the Louvre School will implement a training program for African partners who wish to take part in it); and developing scientific work devoted to collections from the African continent and kept in French museums. The restitution of artifacts out of France requires a special law. In the meantime, as explained by a French colleague, “for the 26 pieces claimed by Benin . . . teams from the Ministry of Culture and the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac work closely together with Beninese professionals to find the possible forms of circulation of these works.”¹⁹

In the 1990s, the Netherlands started to address issues to do with the costs of maintaining artifacts in their museums and “started to think about returning colonial objects to the countries of origin.”²⁰ The National Museum of World Cultures established a protocol about principles and processes for the return of cultural objects that combines legal elements with principles of equality between parties. Also, the Dutch Ministry of Culture recently started a Shared Cultural Heritage Programme that is aimed at regions from the former Dutch network of trading posts: Australia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname, and the United States. ICOM Netherlands initiated and sponsored the website www.icomfamily.com to facilitate the direct connection between ICOM members from all those countries involved with the decolonization of museum collections.

Germany has a long track record when it comes to the loss of cultural property. In 2011, ICOM Germany, together with the Coordinating Office for Cultural Property Losses in Magdeburg, created a checklist called Ethical Guidelines for Cultural Property Ownership. Also, ICOM Germany is represented on this body and acts as a mediator for many other national committees. As Beate Reifenscheid mentioned,²¹ “ICOM and ICOM Germany like to use these experiences of worldwide co-operation for the meaningful examination and development of guidelines on dealing with collection material from colonial contexts.”

And After?

These sessions at the ICOM International General Conference were used as the basis for understanding how ICOM as an international network can support relationship-building among communities of interest and facilitate knowledge exchange. ICOM is now planning to organize a conference on decolonization. However, due to the pandemic, in April and May 2020 ICOM reviewed its forthcoming projects and calendar. An ICOM official explained: “Once clarified, ICOM will circulate the details on this future event. In the framework of this project, an informal conference steering group has been set up (however it is not an ICOM committee with a mandate).”²²

Some ICOM international committees are specially involved in decolonization and restitution—namely, ICME, the International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL), the International Committee for Exhibition Exchange (ICEE), and the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM). The ICOFOM triennial project 2019–2022 is entitled “Museums, Community Actions and Decolonisation.” Symposia are planned on this topic in December 2020, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, entitled “The Museum Experience: Museums, Community Action and Decolonization” and in March 2021, in Montreal, Canada, entitled “The Decolonization of Museology: Museums, Mixing and Myths of Origin.”

NOTES

1. This report focuses on their interventions on the panel, using quotations from their summaries, which were available to speakers, and on the discussions that followed.
2. For Australia: Alec Coles, CEO, Western Australian Museum; for Brazil: Marília Bonas, Head of the Memorial of the Resistance of São Paulo; for Canada: Michèle Rivet, C.M., Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees, Canadian Museum for Human Rights; for India: Reena Dewan, Vice-President, Kolkata Centre for Creativity; for the United Kingdom: Laura Pye, Director, National Museums Liverpool; and for the United States: William Underwood Eiland, Director, Georgia Museum of Art.
3. Coles, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
4. Underwood, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
5. One of the better-known global examples being between Māori and the peoples at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, as mentioned during the Kyoto panel.
6. Bondas, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel.
7. Underwood, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
8. Canadian Museum of History’s repatriation policy, see <https://www.historymuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/REPATRIATION-POLICY.pdf>.
9. Dewan, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
10. See <https://museumofus.org/>.
11. Pye, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
12. Coles, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
13. For Cameroon: Christian Nana Tchuisseu, Director, Blackitude Museum; for France: Bertrand Guillet, Director, Château des ducs de Bretagne—Musée d’histoire de Nantes—Le Mémorial de l’abolition de l’esclavage; for Germany: Beate Reifenscheid, Director, Ludwig Museum; for Namibia: Nehoa Hilma, Kapuka Project Development Manager, Museums Association of Namibia; and for the Netherlands: Luc Eekhout, Director, Heeswijk Castle.
14. ICME is devoted to ethnographic museums and collections from local, national, and international cultures. It is concerned with the challenges facing ethnographic museums and collections in a changing world.

15. Four African countries provided the initial focus for the project: Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The project initially mapped relevant collections held in Finland, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
16. Kapuka, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
17. Tchuisseu, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
18. Guillet, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
19. Ibid.
20. Eekhout, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
21. Reifenscheid, unpublished summary of Kyoto panel, 2019.
22. Emails exchanged 7 May 2020 with Marie Claverie, ICOM Coordinator—Museums and Society.

■ REFERENCES

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- Rivet, Michèle. 2020. "Decolonisation to Indigenisation: The Road to Equality," *ICOM Canada*, 12 January. <https://www.icomcanada.org/2020/01/12/decolonisation-and-restitution>.