

Considering increasing recent repatriation claims, how important is “original” material to museums, visitors, and communities?

Aims:

- Explore types of material within museums
- Explore why replicas may be employed
- Explore the necessity of original material for residents of each community
- Explore the effects of repatriation on the residents of each community

Questions:

- Who can make claims of repatriation?
- How do claims of repatriation affect communities?
- Why might museums refuse claims of repatriation?
- Can governing bodies influence repatriation?
- Why might original material be important to museums and visitors?
- To what extent do museums already contain replications of material?

Questions that may be raised from data collected:

- Is there a correlation between answers and economic class?
- Is there a correlation between answers and relation to the heritage sector?
- Is there a correlation between answers and whether the residents of the community are receiving claims of or claiming repatriation?
- Is there a correlation between answers and ethnicity?

The topic of repatriation is not new to the heritage and museums sector. However, changing of laws and acceptance of these claims in certain scenarios has become increasingly common across countries that hold material from other countries. A criticism to these actions revolves around having to “open the gateway”¹ for the evaluation of all material within museums and their status within the museum they reside, especially within the UK. Such an evaluation would lead to the question of replacing material within museums with replicas as the original material is returned to its country of origin. A discussion could then be had on the need for original material within museums, and how original material, or lack thereof, affects communities. This discussion would have to be prefaced by discussing what material is within museums, what material is likely to be replicated and why, and attaining the baseline of understanding of replicas within museums from the general public.

There can be considered to be two types of material within museums: organic and inorganic. Organic includes material made of biological components, such as human

¹ [Reference to follow]

remains or wooden items. Inorganic includes material made of nonbiological components, such as pottery and metalware. Human remains, specifically, have been at the forefront of discussion around material within museums, and the debate around whether they should be displayed is widely discussed. Both types of material present their own difficulties in presentation and interpretation within museums, as well as conservation. Material within museums require conservation, as per the ICOM definition of museums². This can include environmental monitoring, being control of light, humidity, temperature, air quality, and pest control³, but also the likes of the storage containers themselves and limiting the handling of material.

Replication of material may be employed in instances where the material is too unstable to display but is deemed valuable enough to display. Similarly, damaged parts of material may be replaced with replicas so that the entirety may be displayed. Common examples for both of these cases lies within the exhibition of skeletons⁴. Molds of certain material may also be taken for educational purposes, allowing visitors to handle items that they would not normally be able to. This is beneficial for all visitors to museums, but especially beneficial for accessibility within the museum. Tactile exhibitions improve the museum going experience for those with limited sight. Replicas of objects may also be employed for the purpose of recreating the original experience of the item. For example, a clay pot may be recreated to allowed visitors to experience filling and holding the item. Replication of material already exists within museums to an extent, and the questionnaire would aim to determine how aware the general public is with its current use, and how they would react to the furthering of its use.

Material experiencing repatriation claims is usually argued to have importance to the community it is requested to be returned to. The extent of this importance can be evaluated with the questionnaire, given to those within the communities material is returned to. However, it might be argued that the material carries some importance to the communities it is being housed in. The object biography of the material removed from one culture and brought to another contains both cultures and could therefore be considered to have importance to both. Again, the extent of this importance to the communities receiving repatriation claims can be evaluated with the questionnaire. There will also be communities less directly affected by repatriation claims and the originality of material within museums, whose thoughts can also be evaluated through the questionnaire. Such an evaluation would prove useful for acquiring a baseline opinion of the general public.

Ideally, the questionnaire should also be delivered to professionals within the heritage industry as well as the general public and those within communities affected by

² [ICOM definition to follow]

³ [Reference to follow]

⁴ [Reference to follow]

repatriation. Their thoughts and opinions would preferably provide an informed, unbiased perspective on the topics of repatriation and the employment of replicas within museums.

Data collection could be done using voluntary sampling, wherein the questionnaire is publicised, online for a better reach, and those wishing to partake opt-in to do so. Identifying data requested would include country of residence, ethnicity, economic class, and relation to the heritage sector. An ideal group for data collection would contain a wide scope of the general public across these groups. Ideally, the questionnaire would be answered by those living within countries asking for material to be returned, as well as countries where requested material resides. Country of residence and ethnicity are included as those living in a particular country may originate from elsewhere, and therefore not fit within the typical views of those who are resident and originate in the country they are in, or within the typical views of their ethnicity. Requesting both eliminates a potential skew in data. Economic class is requested to evaluate the opinions of those within countries receiving claims that are more likely to be able to access original material should it be returned to its country of origin, against those who are not, and those within countries requesting material who are more likely to be able to access original material should it be returned to its country of origin, against those who are not. For example, it might be expected that working class people within the country of origin are in favour for the return of original material as it is then easier to access, whereas higher classes may be more divided. Relation to the heritage sector is requested as it stands to reason that those within the heritage sector are biased towards specific answers to these questions and have more knowledge on the employment of replicas.

The group could be presented with a questionnaire to evaluate knowledge of employment of replicas within museums, the necessity of original material, and how repatriation affects their community. Most questions would aim to be simple, easily answerable and understandable questions for each topic: "Should museums have original material?" with the answerable options of "Yes," "No," "Maybe." Further questions can aim to expand upon this answer: "Why or why not should museums have original material?" There is likely to be bias within the results due to the nature of voluntary sampling. Those with already developed opinions on the topic are more likely to respond to the survey than those who are not. This could attempt to be counteracted with in-person convenience sampling. However, this presents its own bias of the area in which it is done. Additionally, getting to other countries is inconvenient.

The primary aim is to determine the importance of original material to museums, visitors, and communities through the usage of a questionnaire delivered online to those who choose to partake. The questionnaire presents some boundaries regarding data collection and bias that could be counteracted, though not without expense.

Ideally, data collected would represent a wide range of people, including museum professionals, visitors with knowledge of repatriation and replicas, visitors without, and potentially those who do not visit museums. As a result, the extent to which repatriation and the consequential furthering of employment of replicas within museums affects the communities involved and the opinions of the general public and museum professionals can be evaluated. This then could potentially influence the decisions regarding repatriation claims.