

Repatriation: The Return of the Cultural Artefacts

Critical Commentary

Mark Horton's article 'Returning Looted Artefacts Will Finally Restore Heritage to the Brilliant Cultures That Made Them' is on The Conversation, a website which works to deliver expert knowledge from research and academic communities to the public. The article addresses a current issue in the global world today: repatriation. It has been an ongoing debate in the recent years whether the looted artefacts of the colonial era should be returned to their respective countries. In November 2017, the French president Emmanuel Macron gave a speech regarding the looted African treasures in French museums to be returned through permanent restitution. He stated, "I cannot accept that a large part of the cultural heritage of several African countries should be in France" (New York Times, 2018). Horton's article discusses such examples of African treasures and the arguments behind the issue of looted artefacts.

Mark Horton is a Professor of Archaeology in University of Bristol and does his research on Africa. He discusses how the colonial powers such as France and the UK came to acquire the treasures or artefacts through measures such as looting, theft and forced content. He makes his opinion about the issue clear at the beginning of the article stating that "record of colonial powers in African countries was frankly disgusting" (Horton, 2018). This sets the mood for the article, consequently preparing the reader for more opinions and examples. Horton addresses the 'Western' side of the debate which argues for the artefacts to be kept in the West as they would be safer and would be preserved for posterity. Here, it is written

in a way the writer agrees with him. However, he immediately voices out his disagreement with this side of the debate stating that “this is a specious argument rooted in racist attitudes that somehow indigenous people can’t be trusted to curate their own cultural heritage. It is also a product of the corrosive impact of colonialism” (Horton, 2018). Horton had delivered the strong opinions that set the mood of this article and the reader cannot help but agree with this strong statement.

Moreover, Horton continues to elaborate on the failure of the colonial powers to set up proper museums in the African countries which has obviously created an imbalance of the artefacts. Most of these artefacts are scattered across the museums in Western countries such as the British Museum and museums in France. For instance, Horton describes the Benin expedition of 1897 - an ancient kingdom which was famous for its unique bronze and brass plaques and statues - and how they looted all the artefacts with British Museum getting 40% of the haul, leaving Benin completely empty. Furthermore, problems such as climate control, poorly trained staff and little security are some of the current problems faced by the museums in African countries. Horton suggests that for collections to be returned to their respective countries, the West needs to take responsibility and come up with a proper plan to rebuild “Africa’s crumbling museum infrastructure” and that it must be supported by real money. Horton’s writing reflects his hopes that permanent restitution of the artefacts such as Macron’s approach would be successful and looting of artefacts would remain a thing of the past. His writing also demonstrates his hopes for the rich cultural heritage of African countries to be returned and restored.

Mark Horton has explained the ideas behind both sides of the argument and offers ideas that could potentially solve the problems. Horton has addressed how colonialism had left African museums empty and in poor condition. However, he failed to give specific examples of these African museums and elaborate the problems faced by these museums further. Perhaps this was the whole point as it highlights how unimportant the African museums are as they cannot even be named. Additionally, another thing missing from his article is how the looting of these artefacts affected the African people beyond the issues of museums. The article's title refers to the 'brilliant cultures that made them' which automatically makes the reader think that something about African cultures would be mentioned. The artefacts are not just material objects on display, they also represent a group of people's culture, history and identity. Simpson (2009: 122) illustrate the significance of the artefacts as they 'have contemporary value as resources for cultural renewal for indigenous peoples that have lost most of their heritage materials during the colonial era and are now seeking to recover from the effects of post-colonial trauma'. This highlights how repatriation is an issue that goes beyond just artefacts. It affects the culture and livelihoods of people who are still dealing with the effects of post-colonialism.

Overall, Mark Horton makes a generally good argument. He provided insight into the 'Western' side of the argument and highlighted how we need to move away from this thought process to move forward with the process of repatriation. However, some problems highlighted were rather overgeneralised as he failed to elaborate them further. Had he named specific museums with examples, it would have made a stronger argument which would have a better effect on the reader. Moreover, his failure to

mention the cultural significance of the looted artefacts despite the title demonstrates an old way of thinking about heritage issues, where artefacts are just seen as objects to be displayed in a museum.

Bibliography

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