



DUMUNC

XL 

Background Guide

Social, Cultural, and Humanitarian Committee
(SOCHUM)



SOCHUM

Table of Contents

Letter from the Dais..... 3

Expectations for Debate 4

Introduction..... 5

Historical Background..... 10

SOCHUM’s Role in 2025 11

Additional Committee Information.....12

References and Reading Material..... 13

Letter from the Dais

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to DUMUNC XL! We're elated to have you here! Whether you're a longtime Model United Nations enthusiast or a newcomer to this exciting extracurricular event, we hope this committee will be productive, compelling, and (most importantly) fun for all involved!

The problems you will tackle and the crises that will arise over the course of the weekend will require out-of-the-box thinking and creative problem solving on your behalf. We hope all the delegates can work together to create these innovative solutions. Most of all, we want you all to relax and enjoy this weekend while learning a lot about artifact repatriation!

As your chairs, we hope to make this committee fun and memorable for everyone. We will work hard to make sure that everyone's voices are heard in both moderated and unmoderated debate. If any problems arise over the course of the committee, or if you have questions about DUMUNC or Duke in general feel free to ask at any time during the course of the conference. Good luck to you all and we hope you have a lot of fun this weekend!

Sincerely,

Chairs, SOCHUM

ss1606@duke.edu

Expectations for Debate

The issue of the repatriation of cultural and historical artifacts is deeply rooted in the legacies of violence, racism, and exploitation that characterized the practice of colonialism. We reserve the right to remove delegates who violate the DUMUNC Code of Conduct's explicit prohibition of any kind of discriminatory conduct and sexual harrassment. If you or someone you know has concerns about delegate behavior that violates these rules, please leverage our anonymous reporting system or directly speak with your chair or a member of DUMUNC staff.

Introduction

The repatriation of cultural and historical artifacts remains a contentious issue in international relations, as nations formerly subjected to colonial rule seek the return of objects taken during periods of imperial expansion. Museums in former colonialist states, particularly in Europe, house vast collections of artifacts acquired through ethically fraught means, at least by modern standards. The British Museum, the Louvre, and the Pergamon Museum, just to name a few, have been at the center of ongoing debates regarding ownership, cultural heritage, and historical justice. While some institutions have begun returning select artifacts, broader systemic solutions remain elusive.

Delegates in this committee must be prepared to navigate the complex legal, historical, and diplomatic considerations surrounding several closely related issues surrounding the repatriation of cultural and historical artifacts. How should nationally- and privately-operated museums handle the issue of artifact repatriation? Do museums play a key role in preserving and spreading awareness of artifacts? In addition to (or perhaps in lieu of) repatriating artifacts, what are formerly colonized states owed by those former imperialist powers? How can the international community support awareness of culture and history through several platforms beyond museums in the digital age?

These questions and others will form the agenda of DUMUNC XL's SOCHUM committee. Formed in 1945, the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee, also known as the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), is a body of the United Nations responsible for coordinating global responses to pressing social issues ranging from womens', indigenous, and childrens' rights; the elimination of racism and other biases; as well as the right to self-determination, amongst others. Delegates will seek to expand upon this legacy through passionate, respectful, and ethical debate over the course of the weekend.

Historical Background

Overview:

Throughout the colonial era (16th–20th centuries), European powers, including the British, French, German, and Dutch empires, removed vast quantities of cultural and historical artifacts from colonized territories. Many of these objects were taken under conditions of coercion, deception, or outright plunder. Decolonization movements of the 20th century led to increased calls for repatriation, yet legal barriers and institutional reluctance have slowed progress.

Previous UN Action:

The United Nations has played a crucial role in addressing the repatriation of cultural artifacts, particularly through its specialized agencies and legal frameworks. Over the past century, the UN and its affiliated organizations, particularly UNESCO and SOCHUM, have established key international conventions, adopted resolutions, and facilitated negotiations between states seeking restitution.

The issue of cultural repatriation gained international attention after World War II, when Nazi Germany's looting of European art and cultural property led to efforts to restore stolen artifacts. The 1954 **Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict** was one of the first major UN-backed agreements addressing cultural heritage protection.¹ It established protocols for the safeguarding of cultural property during war and introduced legal obligations for the return of stolen artifacts.

In the post-colonial period, newly independent states began demanding the return of artifacts taken during European colonial rule. In response, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) took on a leading role in cultural restitution efforts. In 1970, UNESCO adopted the **Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**.² This convention sought to prevent the illegal trade of cultural artifacts and required signatory states to return items unlawfully removed from their countries of origin after the convention's adoption. However, it did not apply retroactively to artifacts taken during colonial rule, creating limitations for many repatriation claims.

Despite its limitations, the 1970 UNESCO Convention laid the groundwork for further international efforts. In 1978, UNESCO established the **Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case**

of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP).³ This committee provided a diplomatic mechanism for resolving repatriation disputes and promoting voluntary returns of artifacts, though its recommendations remained non-binding.

During the 1980s and 1990s, multiple UN General Assembly and SOCHUM resolutions emphasized the importance of cultural restitution as part of broader post-colonial justice efforts. In 1995, the **UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects** strengthened international legal frameworks by establishing clearer restitution mechanisms. Unlike the 1970 UNESCO Convention, the UNIDROIT Convention recognized the rights of private individuals to reclaim stolen cultural property and provided legal avenues for resolving disputes.⁴

In the 21st century, the UN has intensified its efforts to facilitate the repatriation of cultural property. The rise of cultural heritage destruction in conflict zones, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, has renewed focus on artifact restitution. The 2015 destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra by ISIS and the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 prompted stronger UN measures against illicit trafficking.⁵

Several key developments in recent years include:

- **2018: UN General Assembly Resolution on Cultural Repatriation** – This resolution called for stronger cooperation between states to return cultural property taken under colonial or occupation contexts, emphasizing the need for ethical museum practices.⁶
- **UNESCO’s Expanded Role in Restitution Cases** – UNESCO has increasingly facilitated negotiations between former colonizer states and countries seeking artifact repatriation, as seen in the mediation efforts regarding the Benin Bronzes and the Maqdala Treasures.⁷
- **2021: SOCHUM Discussions on Colonial-Era Artifact Repatriation** – Recent SOCHUM sessions have examined ways to create legal frameworks for addressing colonial-era looting, though binding resolutions remain elusive.⁸
- **UNESCO’s 2022 Report on Cultural Restitution** – This report emphasized the growing momentum for restitution, highlighting recent successful repatriations and advocating for more transparent legal processes.⁹

Case Study: The Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes, a collection of thousands of intricately crafted plaques, sculptures, and ceremonial objects, originate from the Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria. These artifacts, made primarily of brass and bronze, adorned the royal palace of the Oba (king) of Benin and held significant cultural, historical, and religious value.¹

In February 1897, British forces launched a punitive expedition against the Kingdom of Benin in

response to an incident where a British delegation, ignoring warnings from Benin officials, was attacked while attempting to enter the kingdom.² In retaliation, the British military conducted a large-scale assault, sacking Benin City, setting it on fire, and killing thousands, including civilians. During this operation, British soldiers and officers looted an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Benin Bronzes and other royal treasures.³ The artifacts were taken as war spoils and later sold to museums and private collectors across Europe and North America. Many pieces ended up in institutions such as the British Museum, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Following the looting, the British government auctioned off a significant number of the artifacts to cover the costs of the punitive expedition. These sales dispersed the bronzes across Western museums and collections. The British Museum remains the single largest holder of Benin Bronzes, possessing around 900 pieces.⁴

For decades, Nigerian officials and cultural advocates have called for the return of the Benin Bronzes, but museums often resisted repatriation efforts, citing legal and logistical barriers. The British Museum, for instance, has historically invoked the British Museum Act of 1963, which prohibits the institution from permanently removing items from its collection.⁵ Other institutions have argued that they provide superior conservation and global accessibility, though this justification has been increasingly challenged as Nigeria has developed its own museum infrastructure.

Recent years have seen a major shift in attitudes toward repatriation, driven by growing global awareness of colonial injustices and increased pressure from advocacy groups and African governments. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged to return African artifacts held in French museums, signaling a broader reconsideration of colonial-era acquisitions.⁶

A breakthrough came in 2021, when Germany announced it would return over 1,100 Benin Bronzes from its museum collections, including those housed in Berlin's Humboldt Forum.⁷ The German government formally signed agreements with Nigerian officials in 2022, transferring ownership of the bronzes and setting a precedent for other institutions.⁸

Several other institutions followed suit:

- The University of Aberdeen and Jesus College, Cambridge returned bronzes to Nigeria in 2021.⁹
- In 2022, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. returned 29 bronzes.¹⁰
- In 2023, the Horniman Museum in London returned six bronzes, marking one of the first formal repatriations from a UK institution.¹¹

Despite these successes, major museums like the British Museum have yet to fully commit to returning their collections, citing legal obstacles. Instead, they have proposed alternative arrangements, such as long-term loans, which Nigerian officials view as insufficient.

SOCHUM's Role in 2025

Key Issues to Consider:

Legal and Ethical Considerations: Most repatriation claims involve artifacts acquired before the establishment of modern legal frameworks governing cultural property. Former colonizer states often argue that acquisitions were legal under the laws of the time, while claimants emphasize the coercive nature of colonial rule. The absence of binding international legal mechanisms complicates dispute resolution.

Preservation and Accessibility: Institutions such as the British Museum argue that they provide superior conservation and global accessibility to artifacts, ensuring their long-term survival. Critics counter that this paternalistic argument disregards the ability of source countries to manage their own cultural heritage. Recent advancements in museum infrastructure in countries such as Nigeria and Ethiopia challenge this justification.

Precedents and Diplomatic Implications: Returning high-profile artifacts could set precedents prompting further claims, potentially emptying Western museums of significant portions of their collections. Moreover, repatriation is entangled with broader diplomatic relations. Some states, like France under President Emmanuel Macron, have taken proactive stances, promising the return of African artifacts.³ Others remain resistant, fearing a domino effect.

Potential Avenues for SOCHUM Involvement:

As a key forum for addressing issues of cultural justice, SOCHUM can play a significant role in promoting international discussions on repatriation. The committee could contribute by:

1. **Encouraging Member States to Adopt Clearer Policies on Restitution** – SOCHUM could pass resolutions urging nations to establish legal frameworks that facilitate the return of looted cultural property, aligning with international ethical standards.
2. **Facilitating Multilateral Negotiations** – SOCHUM could act as a mediator between countries seeking the return of artifacts and institutions hesitant to part with their collections, promoting dialogue and compromise.
3. **Strengthening International Collaboration with UNESCO and Other Bodies** – By working in conjunction with UNESCO and ICOM, SOCHUM could support the creation of guidelines for artifact-sharing agreements, digital repatriation, and best practices for cultural cooperation.

4. **Addressing the Broader Human Rights Aspects of Cultural Heritage** – Cultural identity is deeply tied to heritage, and the wrongful possession of artifacts from former colonies could be considered a continuation of historical injustices. SOCHUM can advocate for the recognition of cultural heritage as an essential part of human rights.

By leveraging its influence within the UN framework, SOCHUM has the potential to push for systemic change in how repatriation disputes are handled, setting a precedent for ethical museum practices and international cultural diplomacy.

Additional Committee Information

Position Papers

- In order to be eligible for awards, a **one-page** single-spaced position paper is due the night before DUMUNC (11:59 PM EST on April 4th), outlining your delegation's position on **1** of the topics outlined. You may choose the topic and style. We would prefer them as PDFs.
- Position papers should be emailed to **ss1606@duke.edu** with the email title "[SOCHUM] Delegation Name," i.e., "[SOCHUM] USA"

Preferences of the Dais

- Do **not** prewrite any resolutions, amendments, or other materials before the first committee session.
- Conduct all **committee work within committee time and spaces** to ensure equitable access to policymaking for all parties involved.
- Be respectful to your fellow delegates and the activity of Model United Nations as a whole. Stay attentive, respectfully engage with your peers, and ensure that you are fighting for your interests well.

Notes on Procedure

- We understand that as a General Assembly, some delegates may be new to Model United Nations and may need procedural assistance or reminders. Do not hesitate to tell us (e.g. passing a note) if you need a moment to catch up on procedure!
- Accordingly, to the more experienced delegates of the committee: be ready and willing to assist your less experienced peers with procedure! The chairs will look favorably upon being a team player and non-exploitative! :)

References and Reading Material

Previous UN Action

1. "Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," UNESCO, 1954, <https://www.unesco.org>.
2. "1970 UNESCO Convention," UNESCO, November 14, 1970, <https://www.unesco.org>.
3. "UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property," UNESCO, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org>.
4. "UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects," UNIDROIT, June 24, 1995, <https://www.unidroit.org>.
5. Irina Bokova, "Cultural Heritage Under Attack: The Role of the United Nations in Protecting the Past," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 23, no. 2 (2016): 139–155.
6. "UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/130," United Nations, December 17, 2018, <https://www.un.org>.
7. "UNESCO and the Repatriation of the Benin Bronzes," UNESCO, 2022, <https://www.unesco.org>.
8. "SOCHUM Debates Cultural Repatriation: A Path to Justice?" *UN Chronicle*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.un.org/chronicle>.
9. "UNESCO Report on Cultural Restitution," UNESCO, 2022, <https://www.unesco.org>.

Benin Bronzes Case Study

1. Barbara Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals—Court Arts from Nigeria* (Vienna: Snoeck Publishers, 2007), 42.
2. Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 97.
3. Philip J.C. Dark, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 22.
4. "Benin Bronzes," The British Museum, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.britishmuseum.org>.
5. British Museum Act, 1963, c. 24 (UK).
6. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: French Ministry of Culture, 2018), 14.
7. "Germany Signs Agreement to Return Benin Bronzes to Nigeria," *BBC News*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa>.
8. David Fricker, "Repatriation and Justice: The Return of Nigeria's Benin Bronzes," *Journal*

of *Museum Ethics* 9, no. 2 (2023): 55–67.

9. “Cambridge University Returns Looted Benin Bronze to Nigeria,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture>.
10. “Smithsonian Returns Benin Bronzes to Nigeria,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com>.
11. “Horniman Museum Returns Looted Benin Bronzes to Nigeria,” *Reuters*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa>.
12. Hicks, *The British Museums*, 215.