GA4 Chair Report

Topic 2: Developing International Strategies for the Return of Stolen Artifacts to Their Countries of Origin

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Personal Statements

Chair – Rania Fernandes

I'm Rania Fernandes, a student at the International School of Laren in the Netherlands. I'm originally from Portugal/India, but I have spent the last 15 years in Dubai and am now in my second year in the Netherlands. Furthermore, I am 17 years old and in DP1. This is my first time chairing, and I am pleased to be doing it alongside my wonderful co-chair, Rosalie! This will be my sixth conference, but the first outside of the country. I am delighted to be chairing and meeting new people with different backgrounds and views, while also ensuring that everyone on our committee has a fantastic MUN.

Deputy Chair – Rosalie Geelhoed

My name is Rosalie Geelhoed and I am a student from the International School of Stuttgart. I'm honoured to be the deputy chair for GA4 at the MUNISS conference of 2025. I have lived in Germany for 12 years now, but I was born in the Netherlands. As I am a 9th grader, this will be my first time chairing, but my third conference. I started as an admin and I was a delegate last year. I have always enjoyed getting to know other students from all around the world and am excited to do so again this year. I wish everyone a great conference and I'm looking forward to meeting you in April.

Introduction

Firstly, a short introduction about how MUN functions. MUNISS stands for model united nation international school of Stuttgart that is hosted every year in Germany. It is a simulation conference consisting of students from many different schools coming together and debating important topics. Participants are assigned to represent specific countries and are divided into separate committees, each addressing specific topics.

GA4 (general assembly four) is a subgroup of the General Assembly which specialises in special political and decolonisation. The General Assembly discusses a range of topics all together.

The second topic we will be debating on is: developing international strategies for the return of stolen artifacts to their countries of origin. Stolen artifacts, also known as looted art, refers to artifacts that have been unlawfully taken from their rightful owners through differing means such as theft and coercion during times of conflict, colonization, or war.

Stolen artifacts can be a wide range of cultural objects that hold significant historical value, including artworks, archaeological items or religious relics. When stolen, a country loses the object and a part of the cultural community identity it may carry. Therefore, removing artifacts from their original context can be considered to have a negative impact on their ownership history and distort understanding of history (Buonaiuto).

Countries have attempted to return stolen artifacts to their place of origin but there are several issues which arise, hindering the process. For instance determining the 'rightful' owner can lead to difficulties returning the artifact (Owen).

Glossary

Artifact: an object made by a human being, that is typically of cultural or historical interest.

Repatriation: returning cultural artifacts to their country of origin (Owen).

Restitution: returning cultural material to an individual or community group (Owen).

Looting: the activity of stealing from shops during a violent event

Trafficking: the act of buying or selling goods illegally

Antique: an object that was created a very long time ago

Heritage: features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, that were created in the past and still have historical importance

Digitalization: to change something such as a document to a digital form (= a form that can be stored and read by computers)

Issue Explanation

There are humanitarian and economic problems and consequences caused by developing international strategies for the return of stolen artifacts to their countries of origin.

There are humanitarian impacts. Returning stolen artifacts can help heal historical wounds and restore the identity and pride amongst indigenous and colonized people. This is because many artifacts were acquired under circumstances that are now seen as unethical or illegal, such as looting or exploitation. Repatriating stolen items addresses legal and moral obligations to correct past injustices (Design Dash).

Furthermore, there are economic impacts. Repatriating cultural artifacts or remains to their countries of origin can help mend past wrongs and indicate goodwill, strengthening relationships between nations. Over time, this improved trust can lead to economic benefits, such as better trade deals and increased cultural collaboration. However, the process of repatriation of artifacts often includes significant financial costs regarding transportation, insurance, and legal fees. Additionally, if countries return their artifacts, they may be impacted by reputational impacts. Particularly if the items were acquired through debatable circumstances. By returning artifacts, museums or institutions might experience a decrease in visitors which could have financial impacts (Design Dash).

Keeping stolen artifacts disregards the historical injustices of colonialism and looting, reinforcing the idea that powerful nations can exploit weaker ones without consequences or accountability (Buonaiuto). Museums or institutions not returning stolen artifacts could be viewed as untrustworthy, as they are unable to acknowledge the problematic origins of their exhibition (Daniels).

This issue affects many people including indigenous communities and countries of origin as reparations are crucial for preserving their cultural identity and practices (International Council of Museums). It also impacts museums and countries as they may face economic and humanitarian issues.

However, there are many challenges regarding returning artifacts to their country of origin. For example, Establishing clear ownership can be difficult, especially for artifacts in museum collections for generations. Additionally, many museums argue they are better equipped to preserve artifacts (Design Dash).

Perspectives of Parties Involved

U.S.

The United States has stolen artifacts, many of which can be found in museums and private collections. These artifacts often originate from countries around the world, and were acquired through looting and trafficking. For example, over 1,000 artifacts in the Met's catalog have been linked to individuals involved in antiquities crimes (Woodman et al.). However, the U.S. has been actively involved in returning stolen artifacts to their place of origin. Museums like the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the American Museum of Natural History have returned artifacts after investigations and legal actions (Johnson and Neal). Although the US does seek the return of stolen artifacts, its main focus is on the repatriation of artifacts to their countries of origin.

Relevant Statistics:
- HSI has repatriated over 20,000 objects since 2007 to over 40 countries and institutions ("Cultural Property")
- Since 2009, the U.S. has returned over 504 Chinese artifacts in 15 batches (Kaihao).

U.K.

The UK participates in international discussions and collaborations on repatriation. An organisation (Working Towards International Repatriation) has requested the government to create a national policy and provide funding to facilitate the repatriation of Indigenous human remains and cultural artifacts from UK collections. "The briefing also calls for national museums and galleries to be "given the powers needed to act independently, and be included in sections 15 and 16 of the 2022 Charities Act, enabling them to repatriate cultural items on moral grounds". The policy briefing also advocates for international repatriation among many European nations (including France, Germany and the Netherlands) to have produced national guidelines and policies (Adams). Some UK museums have new approaches to repatriation, acknowledging the rights of communities and countries to their cultural heritage (Adams). While the UK government does not have national policies, museums and institutions

are taking action. The British Museum Act of 1963 forbids the museum from returning artifacts, but there are discussions about changes or exceptions to this law (Tremayne-Pengelly).

Relevant Statistics:
- 62% of Britons would support returning historical artifacts to their country of origin permanently, including 29% who would "strongly" support museums to do so (Ibbetson).

China

China has signed a memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with countries like the United States to prevent the illegal importation of Chinese cultural property (Chen). China has clearly stated that it wants looted artifacts back, many of which were stolen by the French and British troops (in 1850-1950) during the "century of shame". "China is in a unique position: having once been a victim of European aggression it now basks in self-confidence, both financially (it has the world's second largest economy) and politically (it has a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council)." (Herman).

Relevant Statistics:
- From 1949 to 2019, China successfully facilitated the return of over 150,000 looted cultural relics (Xi and Liuliu).
- In 2024, the U.S. returned 38 Chinese cultural relics, including artifacts from the Ming and Qing dynasties (Kaihao).

Russia

Russia has not shown active support for developing international strategies for the return of stolen artifacts to their countries of origin. Russian forces have been accused of looting and removing cultural artifacts from occupied territories in Ukraine. There is now international criticism, for instance when the Dutch Supreme Court decided to return an artifact to Ukraine, despite Russian objections (Berg and Coalson). Russia has returned stolen artifacts in the past (to Germany for example) but it has not shown any cooperation in regards to a broader strategy to support international repatriation.

Relevant Statistics:
- In Mariupol, over 2,000 works of art were stolen from the city's museums after Russian forces occupied the city ("Art theft").

France

France has shown significant support for repatriation. In 2017, President Emmanuel Macron assured the return of African cultural heritage to African countries within five years (Adams). France has clearly stated the importance of returning artifacts to Africa, including scientific and museum partnerships focussing on the return of cultural property ("Return of cultural"). "France's legal framework, which considers public art as inalienable, poses a significant challenge to repatriation efforts, making it difficult to return artifacts permanently to their countries of origin, regardless of their geographical origin" (Harris).

Relevant Statistics:
- France has repatriated 28 African objects since 2017 (Harris).
- The Sarr-Savoy report found that around 46,000 African artifacts in French museums could qualify for repatriation, but only a small fraction have been returned so far ("France returns").

Syria

Syria actively engages in international forums and committees focused on cultural property protection. For example, Syrian delegates partake in meetings of the "Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation" ("National report"). Syria participated in the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. This legal framework highlights the protection of cultural heritage during conflicts. However, its effectiveness has been limited in Syria during the ongoing war ("Protecting cultural"). Local and international organizations have worked to recover stolen artifacts ("Experts return").

Relevant Statistics:
- Between 2012 and 2014, at least 300 cultural objects were repatriated to Syria ("Curbing the spoils").

Germany

Germany established the Act on the Protection of Cultural Property (Kulturgutschutzgesetz) in 2016, aligning its laws with EU and international standards, such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention. This legislation protects cultural objects and aid their return if they were illegally exported or imported ("Act on the Protection"). Germany has actively returned cultural artifacts to their countries of origin (Hickley). "Germany participates in international forums and collaborates with organizations like UNESCO and the Blue Shield to protect cultural heritage globally. This includes advocating for clear guidelines on the export, trade, and acquisition of cultural objects." ("Clear Guidelines").

Relevant Statistics:
- The German government established a program for restitution efforts, allocating €600,000 per year until 2027 ("Stolen colonial").

Ukraine

Ukraine is cooperating with law enforcement organizations worldwide (including Interpol) to reclaim stolen art that may appear abroad ("Explain Ukraine 15:45"). Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy is creating a register to document information about artworks found in occupied territories and to help track down cultural property (*Museums Association*). "Ukraine has ratified international agreements, conventions, and resolutions related to the protection and return of cultural objects, enabling negotiations for the return of Ukrainian heritage" (Starinsky)

Relevant Statistics:
- According to data published by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine in 1987, Ukraine lost approximately 130,000 art objects during World War II ("What is the repatriation").

Greece

"In December 2024, Greece spearheaded the adoption of a UN General Assembly Resolution on "Return or Restitution of Cultural Property to the Countries of Origin." This resolution was adopted by consensus with 146 co-sponsorships, the highest number to date." Greece has called for member

states to indicate documented proof of origin and provide certificates for cultural goods traded internationally, including those traded online ("UN: Greece").

Relevant Statistics:
- In 2023, Greece recovered 351 objects from the collection of British antiquities dealer Robin Symes (BBC)
- The Manhattan District Attorney's office returned 30 antiquities to Greece. In total, it was valued at $3.7 million (*Manhattanda*).

India

In 2024, the U.S.-India Cultural Property Agreement was established, authorising a framework for cooperation between the two nations to ensure restrictions on the illegal import and export of cultural artifacts. India has promoted long-term investigations into international trafficking networks. A 15-year investigation led to the repatriation of 307 looted treasures to India (*Center for Art Law*). India is improving its ability to track and recover stolen artifacts (*BBC*). "India has been actively participating in global forums to address the issue of stolen artifacts" (Chabba).

Relevant Statistics:
- Between 2012 and 2022, India successfully repatriated 600 artifacts (*BBC*)

Sudan

The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) in Sudan is developing strategies for protecting and preserving cultural heritage and artifacts (ICCROM). Sudan has been documenting and digitizing its cultural heritage (Klein). Sudan has implemented emergency measures in several archaeological museums, including packing and securing endangered collections and preparing safe havens (UNESCO).

Relevant Statistics:
- In 2025, thousands of artifacts were stolen from the National Museum during the ongoing civil war. Some were offered for sale on eBay for only $200 (Sudan Tribune).

History of the Topic

Stealing and looting artifacts started thousands of years ago. Examples include tomb robbers who looted pharaohs' graves in Egypt (332 BCE) and The Roman Sack of Corinth in 146 BCE (History Skills). There are also more recent events like the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, resulting in the loss of numerous valuable antiquities in 2003 (Ramirez-Trelles).

One of the largest art theft operations was during WWII. The Nazis looted cultural property from Germany and every occupied territory during World War II. The Nazis were particularly interested in Jewish-owned art. A Nazi organisation called the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) stole 21,903 art objects from German-occupied countries. The Nazis even created an organisation which focussed on which private collections were of the highest value. They used this art for funding purposes, personal collections and Hitler's planned Führermuseum in Austria (Google Arts and Culture).

Returning stolen artifacts to their country of origin can be dated back to the early 1900s, after the Napoleonic Wars. Following the Battle of Waterloo, a Duke from England named Arthur Wellesley determined that art that had been plundered by Napoleon should be returned to Italy and other European countries. However, it is important to note that only 55% of all stolen artifacts were returned and some stayed in French museums. ("Repatriation cultural"). While this event marks the beginning of modern repatriation efforts, the issue has gained significant momentum in recent years.

Repatriation of artifacts has improved over time, specifically in recent years. This is due to multiple factors. Firstly, there's growing recognition of the cultural significance of the repatriation of artifacts to their countries of origin. This awareness is from the public, museums, institutions, and governments (Burack). Secondly, governments are providing legal frameworks that allow and encourage the return of artifacts to their country of origin (*Butler University*). Additionally, countries have been

cooperating on an international scale (Burack). There has also been an increase in political pressure for countries to address colonial legacies.

Potential Solutions for the issue:

There are many solutions that would help the repatriation of artifacts. For instance, by establishing partnerships between museums in different countries to allow for and facilitate the return of stolen or illegally acquired artifacts or forming advisory bodies that are specialised in returning stolen artifacts (*ABRAKA HUMANITIES*). In today's society, utilising social media for public awareness might also be considered (Nair).

Past Solutions for the issue:

The United Nations agreed upon many resolutions regarding the repatriation of art:

1. Resolution A/RES/79/133 (2024) (The British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles):
    - Introduced by Greece
    - Co-sponsored by 146 UN Member States
    - "Aimed at achieving interstate cooperation in protecting cultural property against illicit trafficking in times of peace and war"
    - Called for member states to have documented proof of the origin of the artifact and provide certificates for cultural goods traded internationally, including *online*

2. Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017) (NMUN-NY):
    - Mainly on "Maintenance of international peace and security"
    - Recognized the importance of developing effective legislation on import and export of cultural property
    - aims to deprive terrorists of funding sources through cultural property trafficking
    - "Furthermore, the looting of cultural objects has gradually been identified by the Security Council as a potential source of terrorism financing; it has thus also considered the trafficking in antiquities within the framework of its peace and security agenda" (Hausler).

3. Resolution 76/16 (2021) (NMUN-NY):
   - Titled "Return or restitution of cultural property to the countries of origin"
   - Emphasized the use of existing UN legal frameworks to address restitution

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