

# Colonial Collections and Restitution issues – The State of a Global Debate

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During five centuries of European colonial expansion, a massive flow of objects of cultural and historical importance to Europe took place. Many of these objects ended up in public and private museums in Europe and North America. Many museums no longer deny that part of this flow consisted of spoils of war, involuntarily lost and other tainted objects. At the same time, governments and museums in former colonies such as Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, Ghana, Namibia, Peru, Indonesia, Sri Lanka or China want to retrieve part of these objects and come up with specified return-claims.

Based on interdisciplinary research, this contribution answers the question why the debate about contestable objects from former colonial contexts has become so topical, both in former colonies and in European countries. It does so by describing different phases and discourses in the ‘return debate’ since 1945. The first and fairly hard one started after the independence of colonies in Asia and Africa. Claims were generally formulated, while returns were incidental. The second and softer one was dominated by development aid from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Some former colonisers (Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, Denmark) returned objects. The third one began around the turn of the century with changing global relations, new ethics in western museums, a role for the immigrants from former colonies in Europe and North America and better equipped former colonies with more specified claims.

The contribution dwells specifically on the third period and offers a helicopter view of changes in former colonies and European countries. It has special attention for a remarkable development in one country: the Netherlands. On January 29, 2021, the Dutch government announced a new policy on returning colonial collections. At the heart of it is a recognition that an injustice was done to the indigenous population of the colonial territories when cultural heritage objects were taken against their will. If former Dutch colonies ask for the return of certain objects, they will be given back *unconditionally*. An independent Assessment Committee will advise the minister for Culture.

This contribution critically looks at this much applauded policy. The policy chooses for state to state negotiations, but what are the consequences of this choice for minorities, royal families and other non-state actors in former colonies?

Does the policy have any Europe-wide elements, so that the negative effects of Europe's colonialism are tackled at a European level?

And, last but not least, how does it handle issues of provenance research? Thousands of involuntarily lost objects are waiting to be investigated, and this contribution offers two examples of provenance research into one object to illustrate this: a ceremonial canon of the King of Kandy in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, claimed by Sri Lanka in 1980 and again in 2019; and the kris (dagger) of Indonesia's national hero, Prince Diponegoro, which he lost in 1830 and which Indonesia had claimed since 1975.