

Repatriation and Reparation: Objects and the Colonial Museum

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In 1934, the Duke of Gloucester paid a State visit to Ceylon, bringing with him the throne and regalia of Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the last king of Kandy. The return of the throne, which had been taken to Britain when Kandy was conquered in 1815, was a major attraction – instead of the planned three days, it was kept in Kandy for a full month to allow crowds to view it. Almost 50,000 people visited the National Museum over three days when the throne was brought to Colombo, necessitating the closing of roads to vehicles.

During the preparations for the handover, the ceremonial Kandyan chiefs decided they should be the ones to receive the throne, since it was from them that it had been removed a century before. This was backed by the chief prelates of the Malwatte and Asgiriya chapters, who also insisted on their former place of honour being restored to them. The throne was referred to as “national property”.

The arguments produced by the Mahanayaka *theros* draw very much on the perceived national significance of these objects. They also emphasised the fact that the throne should be returned to the chiefs from whom it was taken; whereas the British themselves had the idea of handing it to ‘the people’, represented by the (British) Governor of Ceylon.

The throne today occupies pride of place in the Kandy Gallery of the Colombo National Museum, where thousands of school children are told that it symbolises a national cultural heritage.

This elevation of an object to a place of national significance should be more complicated; the throne was, after all, a diplomatic gift from the Dutch Governor Thomas van Rhee to King Vimaladharmasuriya II^[i], and contains many non-traditional motifs. The fact that the British considered it important enough to carry away, however, made its subsequent return of symbolic significance^[ii].

Unfortunately, this symbolism is all too often restricted to a sense of nationalist pride in opposition to colonial decisions.

The museum, the map, and the census were important tools of colonialism. These three institutions, taken together, allowed colonial administrators to imagine the colony as a limited entity with clear categories, boundaries, and components.

The idea of collecting objects, housing them, and exhibiting them together was not a new concept, but prior to the 19th century this practice was largely confined to objects of religious importance – and most importantly, the objects, although respected and protected, were part of human ritual. The 19th century practice of museumising the colony brought a new element; in that museum objects were meant to be exhibited only, removed from human contact.

With the advent of nationalism, the museum was co-opted into the project of creating a national imaginary. Museum objects were recast as symbols of glorious (and independent) pasts, forcing a selective and falsely coherent imagined past on visitors and viewers.

In 2022, after years of research, the government of the Netherlands announced that it would be returning several objects^[iii] in museum collections to their lands of origin. Among these are six objects looted from Sri Lanka^[iv] during the Dutch colonial occupation. Their proposed return added fuel to the argument that already existed about the repatriation of museum objects.

A glance at the newspapers shows two major arguments about the return of such objects: that the colonial powers who occupied this country can make reparations by sending some objects back; and against the return, that our museum sector is not developed and funded enough to ensure the safety of the objects.

Since the objects have already been signed over, the second argument is a little beside the point – whether or not they will be safe here, the objects are coming back. I will therefore consider only the first argument: that the repatriation of objects is a form of reparation for colonial harm.

Sri Lanka was colonised by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in that sequence, gaining independence in 1948. In part due to the structures of colonialism and the demands of nationalism which arose counter to these, post-independence history has not been peaceful.

The internal war which raged along political, linguistic, and ethnic divides, the armed uprisings of the 1970s and 1980s, and the many religious and ethnic

riots and pogroms from the 1950s up to most recently in 2019, found parallels in conflicts in other newly-independent States.

The communal divisions cemented in the museum's portrayal of the past have grown deeper and deeper. The singular focus on colonialism, however, has allowed many people to conveniently ignore any and all other contributors to Sri Lanka's current problems and divisions.

The anti-colonial sentiment that has stirred again, since the announcement of the objects' return, is premised on the fact that a wrong has been done to us and the wrongdoers need to make amends for it. European museums have stolen other countries' artefacts, the received wisdom goes. Those museums are symbols of everything bad about colonialism.

But this year, while looking for objects for a proposed exhibition on the Malaiyaha Tamil community^[v], I found that the Colombo National Museum had nothing apart from a few copies of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) newsletter. This speaks of a hierarchy in museum representation where certain groups are given more space and exposure than others. What does that tell us about the colonial power structures within the museum itself?

If the museum represents an imagined national past, by excluding some communities it is sending a very clear message to them: you do not have a place in this nation. We inherited the museum from our former colonisers; but that does not mean that we are under obligation to run it along the same lines they did. The national imagination can expand and grow to encompass everyone who is here today, regardless of when, and from where, they arrived.

Contemporary discussion of the repatriation of museum objects to Sri Lanka today make reference to objects taken to Europe: Lewke Disave's cannon (pictured above), the statue of Goddess Tara^[vi], the throne, and more. One will hear about the University of Edinburgh's return of Veddha skulls in 2019^[vii], after a protracted debate about the ethics of having human remains on display.

Yet the Colombo National Museum, having remained sheltered from such debates, still displays Veddha skulls obtained in the 1920s. Objects which can be used to tell a different story are displayed in the context of a constructed ethno-nationalist heritage.

The discussion about colonialism in the museum needs to be turned inwards, to our own museums, before it is turned to foreign museums.

The dominant conversation around the repatriation of objects takes agency away from the former colonised. Shifting the blame to the colonising countries allows us to criticise European colonialist attitudes comfortably, without having to think about our own practices of injustice and oppression. At the same time, it turns the spotlight of the conversation back on the same practices and actors that we are supposedly opposed to, giving them undeserved power over us.

The physical return of the six objects, then, should not mark an end to their discussion in the reparations debate. Instead, the artefacts should spark more discussion, more research, and more complicated understanding of colonialism, within and without the museum.

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Notes

[i] Raheem, Ismeth. (2020). "The Dutch came bearing the Kandyan Royal throne!" *The Sunday Times* (28 June). Available at <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/200628/plus/the-dutch-came-bearing-the-kandyan-royal-throne-407500.html>

[ii] Wickramasinghe, Nira. (1997). "The Return of Keppetipola's Cranium: Authenticity in a New Nation". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(30): PE85-PE92.

[iii] *Rijksmuseum*. (2023). "RIJKSMUSEUM TO RETURN COLONIAL OBJECTS FROM ITS COLLECTION FOR THE FIRST TIME: Six Colonial Objects will return to Sri Lanka" (5 July). Available at <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/press/press-releases/rijksmuseum-to-return-colonial-objects-from-its-collection-for-the-first-time>

[iv] *Department of National Museums*. (2023). "Six Kandyan artefacts to return home from the Netherlands after more than two centuries". Available at https://museum.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=143%3Apress-release&catid=35%3Alatest-news&Itemid=57&lang=en

[v] Srinivasan, Meera. (2023). "Malaiyaha Tamils | Two hundred years of struggle". *The Hindu* (28 May). Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/malaiyaha-tamils-two-hundred-years-of-struggle/article66901833.ece>

[vi] View at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1830-0612-4

[vii] *BBC*. (2019). "University of Edinburgh returns nine skulls to Sri Lankan tribe" (22 November). Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-50516316>