Skeletons in the closet

A post-colonial perspective on museums of world culture and foreign cultural heritage

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Abstract

This study stems from an opinion that the current approaches to the repatriation of articles of cultural heritage to their places of origin are inadequate. Attempting to find alternative ways to discuss the matter, I am using idea analysis to investigate if the museums of world culture can be problematised and criticized from a post-colonial perspective – if they can be found to be maintaining a heritage of the colonial era. Finding that this is indeed possible, I use normative given that-analysis to discuss if these museums can still defend their existence and their keeping of the foreign cultural heritage they have got in their collections. Using three different normative logics to study this question; deontology, consequentialism and the logic of appropriateness, I find that different answers can be reached; that museums should send back everything they have got in their collection, that they should not send back anything, or that each repatriation request needs to be looked at individually.

Keywords: post-colonialism, museums, repatriation, native peoples, cultural heritage

Word count: 9982

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1   Introduction

1.1   Problem and purpose

Museums of world culture have built their collections out of objects from foreign cultures and peoples. But these museums, "as institutions of the dominant society, have remained aloof from, and largely irrelevant to, Native cultures. /.../ First Nations continue to be represented as both strange and vanishing." (Conaty & Janes 1997:32).

This paper deals with the role of museums of world culture in society and repatriation of foreign cultural property to their places of origin. According to my understanding, even though museums have become more open towards repatriation in the last few decades, the current approach to deciding what should or should not be repatriated is insufficient. In attempting to find new ways of reasoning within this area, I will problematise the role of the museum by discussing how it can be understood according to the theory of post-colonialism. Finding that it is possible to criticize museums from a post-colonial perspective, the issue of repatriation of those foreign cultural objects these museums have in their collections to their places of origin will be discussed – a normative question as no sufficient legislation exists (Unescorådet 2008:31) thereby providing new ways of discussing repatriation.

I thus strive to address two questions in my thesis:

- How can museums of world culture be criticized from a post-colonial perspective?
- Given that museums of world culture can be criticized from a post-colonial perspective, how can one discuss repatriation of foreign cultural property?

In answering my two questions, I will discuss the evolution of museums of world culture and the changes in attitude they have undergone; from those of pre-colonial and colonial times until today. I will categorize and criticize the values museums hold as essential to their existence. I will then use three normative logics to investigate if museums, despite being possible to criticize with post-colonial

theory, can defend keeping foreign cultural artefacts in their collections. My aim is not to argue for any of the normative logics but rather to construct an objective palette of different ways of thinking.

1.2   Background

When foreign cultural objects at museums of world culture were once transferred from one culture into another their objective value changed – they moved from one context to a new one. What was once created as an ritual object used for Haitian voodoo became an example of foreign art and religion, a story of another people, the moment it was placed in a Swedish museum. Repatriation debates often boil down to the different values the parties of the discussion consider the object to have; an object that for the scientist has a scientific value might for the art collector have an aesthetic, for the smuggler an economic and for a native American tribe a religious. (Unescorådet 2008:21, Östberg 2010:8f) Two quotes can be used to illustrate the main different standpoints in the debate. Östberg cites the king of Benin writing about an exhibit of Benin bronzes[1] at a Swedish museum of world culture:

> I want to stress the fact that these works were not made for museums and galleries. Most were made to commemorate events in the lives of our people. Others had religious significance. /.../ Anyone who visits the exhibition face pages torn from a peoples' history book. They are viewing objects that express our spirituality. /.../ No one but the people of Benin can grasp the intrinsic values of these objects, or understand their relevance and meaning, no matter how much they admire their aesthetic qualities, brilliance or grandeur. *(Östberg 2010:19f)*

Feest counterarguments on the same bronzes:

> While the values these objects originally expressed, for those who created them, were determined by religious beliefs and dynastic interests, it is impossible to ignore their technical brilliance, formal elegance and iconographic complexity. (Ibid:19, my translation).

Feest continues by stating that the museums are in fact doing Benin a favour, as the presence of their art at a Western museum is placing their culture on the map (Ibid:19).

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[1] The Benin empire in present-day Nigeria was famous for making brass plaques, many of which were taken by British forces in 1897. The Benin Empire is not to be confused with the modern-day country Benin (Östberg 2010).

1.3   Making this researchable

In discussing colonial residue in museums I will look at the role that museums of world culture have played and play in today's society. Based on this role I will investigate what values they claim to be crucial for them to be able to maintain their identity and how they therefore argue on the issue of repatriation of foreign cultural objects to their countries of origin. I will then apply idea analysis and post-colonial theory to this role and these values to identify traits that indicate colonial thinking in order to reach a conclusion about how they can be problematised from a post-colonial perspective. The post and present role and values of the museums will be the operationalising factors in answering this question. In answering my second question, I will apply three normative logics to the problem. I will use the presence of foreign cultural material at museums as the operationalising factor – they are as long as they are in the museums what carry the legacy of colonialism, but they are also, if repatriated to their countries of origin what will be the end of museums of world culture, as they would no longer have anything to exhibit.

1.4   Material

To answer the first of my questions I have reviewed books and articles on the subject of museum studies. I have used the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of what a museum is (or should be) to have as the basis for my problematisation. I have studied reports and other texts from Swedish museums of world culture as well as reports produced by foreign museums and (minority) peoples which have come about in repatriation debates and I have studied the formulation of goals of the Swedish National Museums of World Culture. To gain a deeper understanding of the problems concerning repatriation I have conducted two interviews with employees of the museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. My theoretical material has obviously mainly focused on colonialism, post-colonialism and normative theory and my methodological material has been on idea analysis.

For the second part of my thesis, I have applied Björn Badersten's chapter on normative value analysis and logics to the literature mentioned literature and the conclusions reached in the first question.

1.4.1 Comments on the material

I understand that interviews as the basis for conclusions can create a problem with the intersubjectivity of an essay. It might be difficult for a future student to reach the exact same conclusions as people might not always be available for interviews, or their opinions could change. To avoid this, I have recorded my orally conducted interviews

1.5 Limitations

I have chosen to limit my study to focusing on how the role aims of the Swedish National Museums of World Culture[2] can be problematised by post-colonial theory. The reason I chose to focus mainly on the four state-controlled National Museums of World Culture is because they can be seen as representing the Swedish nation's standpoint on the issue. I will however discuss the reasoning of a limited number of other museums as well[3].I wanted to perform a qualitative rather than a quantitative study and therefore found it plausible and motivated to focus mainly on only one country. I chose Sweden not only because the material thereby became more easily available, but because Sweden has an unusually large collection of foreign cultural objects for not being a former colonial power, which most of the countries which great numbers of foreign cultural artefacts are (Interview 1). Many major museums in the old colonial powers find it easier to consistently say no to repatriation requests with the motivation that if not, requests will soon come for more valuable objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles[4] or valuable Egyptian mummies (Interview 2). Sweden, on the other hand, has none of these very valuable treasures and therefore has less reason to reason like the others. Sweden thus faces, and abides to, more repatriation claims than many other nations (Interview 1). My hope is that the results from studying mainly the reasoning of Swedish museums can provide advice for how they can handle repatriation cases in the future and that it will be generalizable according to the logic of typical cases presented in Bergström and Boréus (2005:187).

I will also limit my study to objects not part of the so called 'world cultural heritage' as defined by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). This because the handling of this kind of artefacts is regulated by a number of laws, regulations and decrees while the cultural objects

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[2]The Museum of Ethnography, the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, and the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg.
[3]Mainly the British Museum in London, UK
[4]The Elgin Marbles, also known as the Parthenon Marbles, are a collection of classical Greek marble sculptures, many of which are on display at the British Museum in London (Interview 2).

which do not fall into this category, the objects my study focuses on, are not (UNESCO). In fact, laws and regulations on the issue of foreign cultural artefacts are by many thought to be inadequate (ICOM 2005:5), which is why the question of the normative problems repatriation-cases give rise to is cumulative as well as relevant.

1.6   Relevance

Conaty and Janes comment on the relevance of studies like these: "While few curators, and fewer administrators, are at ease amid these discussions, it is unlikely that the debate will subside anytime soon. It is important that ideas and experiences be freely exchanged and the parameters continue to develop" (Conaty & Janes 1997:31).

Embedded within arguments over the possession of the objects are concerns about identity, justice, power, and history (Ibid:31). I hold the relevance of this thesis from a political science perspective to be that it is an example of how one can discuss a subject as precarious as a possible defence of colonial heritage. I find it feasible to study this matter from the perspective of political science as not only the repatriation, but the factual objects can be read as political texts (Ibid:45). Östberg comments on the exhibition of Benin bronze casts at the Museums of Ethnography: "in Benin, the bronze casts and the carved tusks were a form of political art, in that they expressed the king's spiritual and political power. Today, the art is once again placed in a political context, when demands are raised that objects which were taken from Africa during the colonial period should be returned." (Östberg 2010:42). I find it relevant to partly conduct a normative study of this matter as ethics is a product of culture, and it is exactly its change in the course of history that causes conflicts and debates such as the one over the restitution of cultural property (Feest 1995:39).

> Hopefully, the debate about who the artefacts belong to will give rise to a fruitful dialogue where ingrained beliefs are challenged and where understanding for different ways of looking at a number of difficult issues is promoted and related to the interpretation, responsibilities, power, history, use and perception of ourselves and others (Unescorådet 2008:26).

My study is also relevant for other sciences. For museum science, it can give new dimensions to the problems surrounding repatriation of cultural heritage and new directions to how to work with these problems (Interview 1). For historians, it can provide new ways of thinking about the consequences of colonialism impact on society.

1.7 Definitions

- **Museums of world culture** are non-profit making institutions which are open to the public and that serve society and societal development. They acquire, conserve, and exhibit ethnographic material, that is to say objects with origins outside the nation's borders. (Interview 1, Museiutredningen 1994:51)
- **Cultural artefact**: A cultural artefact (used interchangeably with cultural object and cultural property) is a term used for objects created by humans that gives information about the culture of the creators and users of it and that can provide us with knowledge of the same. (Interview 1)
- **Repatriation** is, in this context, the action of returning a cultural artefact to its place of origin. (Conaty & Janes 1997:31)
- **Native peoples, natives or indigenous peoples** are ethnic groups, often in minority, who, especially before the arrival and intrusion of a foreign and often dominating culture, are native to a territory. They are a group of people whose members share a cultural identity that has been shaped by their geographical region. (Interview 1)

1.8 Epistemological considerations

To be able to discuss values – which is what the argumentations about repatriation comes down to – an epistemological standpoint must be taken. For it to be able to scientifically study and evaluate values one has to recognize their existence (Lundquist 1993:67). According to my understanding, values are real, but subjective; there are no absolute values. This being said, I understand them as being possible to study, but not to evaluate between one another, as one value can be of different importance to different people and one artefact can have different values for different people. In an epistemological-ontological matrix I therefore place myself and this study in the subjective-realistic field.

		Epistemology	
		Objective	Subjective
Ontology	Realistic		██████████
	Relativistic		

1.9   Disposition

Chapters two and three of this essay will introduce the methods and theoretical framework used. The purpose of chapter four is to give the reader an overview of how repatriation of foreign cultural material is discussed today, and why I think this reasoning is insufficient. My analysis, chapters five, six and seven, is divided into three main parts. In the first part I will write about the historic and present role of the museums in society, and try to identify which values museums claim as important for them to maintain their identity. In the second I will comment on, and problematise, their past and present role and values. In the third and concluding part, I will discuss what can be done with the foreign cultural property at the museums according to different normative logics. Chapter eight will provide a summary and conclusion.

2 Method

2.1 Idea analysis

As my opinion is that it is possible to find the role the museums play in society, and possible colonial traits, by identifying and commenting on the values the museums stand for I will use idea analysis to answer the first of my two questions. According to Beckman, idea analysis is the collective term for different combinations of purposes, question formulations and analytical techniques which can be used in the study of political messages (Beckman 2005:10). An idea can be described as a construction of thoughts that as opposed to impressions and attitudes contains a certain level of continuity - this construction of thoughts can be an idea about reality, e.g. that Sweden is a democratic country, or it can have a normative, evaluating basis: the idea that it is wrong to kill is an example of a such (Bergström & Boréus, 2005:149f). In my study I will treat values as normative ideas.

2.1.1 Purpose of, and different types of idea analysis

Beckman claims that an idea analytic study can have three aims which can be combined or be used separately. These are describing, explaining and position-taking. One can study and interpret the significance of different values, explain the consequences of value conflicts or evaluate the durability of value arguments. (Ibid:14) I have chosen to carry out a describing idea analysis.

Even though there is no generally recognized classification of different types of idea analysis, a rough division into five types - and a distinction between these - can be made. A first form analyses the presence of ideas in general. A second seeks to analyse ideas from an actor or idea perspective. A third views political messages as a collection of arguments, where the intention is to examine and criticize the sustainability and validity of these arguments with the aim to develop arguments for or against a particular position. This is the method Tingsten calls idea criticism (Bergström & Boréus 2005:156. A fourth kind, the functional idea analysis, is the one defended by Vedung, among others. This type of idea analysis views political messages not as arguments, but as variables in a chain of events.

The purpose is thereby not to take a stand, but to clarify the relation between the message and the motive or other underlying factors; the researcher takes an interest in the origin of ideas, how they have spread, or in their consequences. Lastly, the purpose of the critical idea analysis is to critically examine an idea and to compare it to an outer reality. (Ibid:158) Two of these types are relevant for my study; the idea/actor centred idea analysis and the functional idea analysis. Furthermore, my study uses a combination of idea and actor centred analysis. The idea centred idea analyst focuses on the arguments while the actor centred focuses on the actors who have presented a certain point of view. (Beckman 2005:18) I intend to study not only the ideas that are presented but why they are presented and what reasons the actors have for their standpoints.

2.2 Normative analysis

Normative analysis is the scientific study of values. Values are according to Badersten what tell us if something is good or bad, what is desirable - a value is for the normative analyst what reality is for an empiricist. (Badersten 2006:21) That there are conflicts concerning different values in society is according to Badersten the "true essence of politics" (Ibid:28f) which is why my opinion is that a study of values is not only motivated, but relevant. Values can be of a general nature, such as peace or freedom, or specific, as e.g. political participation. Values can also be the base for answers given to normative questions (Ibid:8) such as "Who has the right to claim the aboriginal human remains at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm?" and "Can colonial legacy in museums in any way be defended?"

2.2.1 Purpose of, and different types of normative analysis

The purpose of the normative analysis is to provide scientific answers to normative questions (Badersten 2006:8). There are three main types of normative analysis. **Normative concept analysis** strives to "define and clarify the meaning of and relation between different values, normative principles or normative concepts." (Badersten 2006:42, my translation) The purpose of **"pure" normative analysis** is to, from a previously constructed value-base, "justify a certain action or condition" (Ibid:47, my translation). The aim of **normative given that-analysis,** or deductive analysis, is not to take a standpoint for or against something, but rather to in a neutral way deduct, problematise and compare different answers to normative questions based on certain given premises (Ibid:44ff). The purpose of normative given that-analysis, the one that I will apply

in the second part of this study, is to show that different values or normative logics can provide different answers to normative questions; it is thus more comparative than other types of normative analytical methods. Distinctive for normative given that-analysis is that it is often concrete and tied to specific questions. (Ibid) For my analysis, I will use three different normative logics to illustrate what answers they can give to the question if museums, despite the premise of being carriers of strands of colonialism, should be allowed to keep their collections of foreign cultural artefacts.

3 Theoretical framework

To answer my questions, I will be using two different theoretical models. Post-colonial theory will help answer the first, and three of the four normative logics presented in Badersten's book *Normativ Metod – att studera det önskvärda* (2006) the other.

3.1 Post-colonial theory

Post-colonialism, or post-colonial theory, is a post-modern intellectual discourse that was introduced mainly by Frantz Fanons book *The Wretched of the Earth* and Edward Saids book *Orientalism* of the 60s and 70s (Smith and Owens 2008:189). Post-colonialism claims that a cultural legacy of the European colonial era still exists today (Manzo, 2006:262) and that these residual effects have negative impact on former colonies (Ekström 2006:22). It looks at how an image of the West as enlightened and modern is created and strengthened by the ways in which the West describes the East – often as outdated, mystical and traditional (Said, 1978:15). According to post-colonial theory, the West is often associated with rationality and culture, while the East is associated with nature and irrationality (Smith and Owens 2008:188) – a dichotomy is created in which the West has more positive connotations, defining itself by saying what it is not (Mandaville 2009:115). The creation of this image of ourselves has affected how we view others. (Smith and Owens 2008:188). Furthermore, post-colonialism theorizes about cultural identity in former colonies; the difficulties they might face in trying to rid themselves of the image of them as victims or perpetually inferior people (Said, 1978:60).

Post-colonialist thinkers argue that many of the thoughts and practices that made colonialism and imperialism possible are still active today (van Dommelen 2006:104f). By exposing these ideas and recognizing that they have widespread negative consequences for global equality they can be deconstructed. The aim of post-colonial theory is then to find ways for the world to combat these effects, and move towards a new period of mutual respect. In order to do this, space must be cleared for multiple voices, especially for those in former colonies – subalterns (Smith and Owens 2008:188ff). Edward Said discusses the ways in which many western scholars disregard the opinions of the peoples they study – preferring to

rely on what they (maybe unknowingly and involuntarily) feel is their intellectual superiority. (Ibid)

3.2   Normative logics

Badersten presents four so-called normative logics, by which one can reason within value-based questions of which I will be using three. **Deontology**, or **Deontological ethics** can be illustrated by Immanuel Kant's famous categorical imperative, "act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Badersten 2006:109). Central for deontological ethics is that normative reasoning is based upon a set of previously formulated values or principles which cannot be violated; every action is isolated and valued against this background, independently of what consequences the action has (Ibid:110). **Consequentialism** is the exact opposite, focusing only on the consequences of an action or idea and basing the moral value of that action or idea on these consequences (Ibid:114). Thus, according to consequentialism, no actions are good or bad in themselves, their value should be judged by what they lead to – The ends justify the means. (Ibid) One strand of consequentialism, utilitarian hedonism, claims that good actions are those that contribute to the greatest amount of good in society; the goal is according to John Stuart Mill and other utilitarians to achieve "the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people" (Ibid:114). What deontology and consequentialism have in common is that they do not provide any substantial guidance to exactly which values are good and which are not – what they do is state that it is possible to provide rules for how to reason about these values (Ibid 115). **The logic of appropriateness** then, is different. The logic of appropriateness claims that we cannot formulate omnipotent principles of justification, as reality is too complex to do so. Instead, in judging the moral value of an action, we have to look at the circumstances surrounding it. What is the good or right thing to do is based upon what is currently appropriate, and is thereby isolated from every other action – actions depend on the context. (Ibid.:126)

4 Repatriation today

UNESCO began to focus on the issue of illicit transfer of cultural property from the third world and its restitution to the same in the 1960s (Feest 1995:34ff). Building upon the 1954 Hague convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the 1956 Recommendation on International Principles applicable to Archeological Excavations, two conventions were formulated, which established the concept of cultural property and regulated the keeping of it. However, the definition of the term cultural property came down to national legislation, and many countries never ratified the conventions, why they never had the great impact UNESCO had intended. (Ibid)

ICOM formulated a code of ethics for museums in 1986 which has had greater impact on the managing of repatriations than UNESCOs conventions. By signing, the museums agree to, among many other things, not to keep items without documented origin or where it is evident the form of acquisition was unethical, and to treat culturally 'sensitive' objects and human remains in an ethical way. (ICOM 2005:5)

Today, when a request for the repatriation of an object arrives at a museum today, three main aspects are taken in consideration, by ICOM recommendation.

What type of object is it? ICOM considers some types of objects to be more culturally or religiously sensitive than others and that extra consideration thereby should be given to these. Demands for artefacts such as human remains and objects with great religious or cultural value are thought to be more legitimate than demands for textiles, tools and works of art. (Unescorådet 2008:15) The immediate problem with this reasoning is that it is difficult to perform this categorization. Should a haitian Pake (a bottle that contains the soul of a deceased relative, used for ritual purposes), by Swedish standards, qualify as human remains because it does for many Haitians? And how can one motivate that a certain object has or does not have a great cultural or religious value for a people?

What is the temporal distance? The general rule is that objects which were brought out of a country a long time ago are less likely to be returned than objects taken in a less distant past (Ibid:16). However, what counts as "a long time ago" is unclear and undefined.

What were the circumstances surrounding the acquisition? Objects which have been stolen, or objects the acquisition circumstances of which cannot be determined are more likely to be returned than objects which have been bought or received as donations. (Ibid:16ff) However, this reasoning takes little or no regard to the issue of an uneven power balance between sender and receiver. A purchase might have been legally valid, but morally indefensible, if the seller at the time had no other choice than to sell – he or she might have been threatened by violence or starvation. (Ibid) "Whoever was in power could decide which laws applied, and other economic and political conditions that allowed the removal of the object." (Ibid:20) Among other examples, the Nazi confiscations of art from Jewish homes before and during World War II were not formally illegal, as the confiscations were in accordance with laws introduced by the Nazi government (Ibid:21).

By the criticism that can be given the ethical guidelines of ICOM, I find the above mentioned aspects to be helpful, but inadequate, and my goal is that this study will provide an alternative way of thinking about museums of world culture and the repatriation of foreign cultural artefacts.

5 Museums of world culture

The role of the museums has changed, in Sweden as well as in the rest of the world. What used to primarily be an exhibition room has evolved into an arena for discussion and reflection. These are the words of former minister of culture Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth in a UNESCO conference report from 2008 (Unescorådet 2008:6).

5.1 The past role

In the early 1900s, ethnographic collections were important to describe the outside world and for studies of human evolutionary history, "it was the era of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism" (Unescorådet 2008:46, my translation). artefacts were collected as strange memorabilia by explorers or as trophies taken by conquerors from defeated people (Wingfield 2011:133); demonstrating the strangeness of other cultures, thereby helping to justify Western dominance (Conaty & Janes 1997:32).

As exploration expanded, non-Western cultures were overwhelmed and overpowered by Western states. Western travellers and researchers, who had previously collected items from living societies, now embarked upon an effort to salvage whatever they could from the remnants of what they thought were vanishing cultures. Thus, the museums underwent a shift from exhibiting the *strangeness* of foreign objects to a comparative, evolutionary perspective in which the West was the 'leader of the pack'. (Conaty & Janes 1997:32) Racial theories were developed, claiming links between physical differences and cultural traits (Östberg 2010:39) and the idea of the biological and cultural superiority of the white race, which emerging academic disciplines as anthropology, geography and medicine seemed to scientifically prove, served as the defence of colonial policy. (Östberg 2010:40). The contact with other countries, which by the colonial conquests became more substantial, led to a deepened idea of 'us' and 'the others', and the newly built Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, as well as many other Western museums, exhibited these 'others' - the reverse did not occur (and nor does it to any great extent today) (Östberg 2010:40). The foreign cultural objects in Sweden were used as channels for strengthening the Swedish identity, as the Swedish people could separate themselves from 'the others', strengthening their

image of themselves. For a wealthy explorer, cultural treasures could be used to transform economic resources to social standing. Donating cultural property to a museum gave personal prestige (Östberg 2010:30, 39) and it is by the hands of these explorers that many objects have come to end up at museums of world culture. (Ibid:28)

During these first two stages of collecting and exhibiting (first describing the strangeness of other cultures and later their inferiority), objects were "removed from their utilitarian, social and spiritual context to become part of an analytical system in which they were valued solely for their artistic and technological attributes" (Conaty & Janes 1997:32). The objects became artefacts. Their values were redefined as they underwent this change of context, to becoming artistic, ethnographic, or exotic objects (Ames 1992:53). The general norm for museums was to not discuss or attempt to problematise the origins and histories of these artefacts, nor to discuss the question of their ownership. This because most people thought it to be natural that artefacts from all over the world were on display in Swedish museum cases (Unescorådet 2008:13, Bäckström, 2011:73). Their history of use, ownership and meaning, usually important in traditional societies, was often left unrecorded (Conaty & Janes 1997:32).

5.2   The present role

5.2.1 A change

About 50 years ago, this view on the role of the museum and on the status of Native peoples started to change (Frese 1960:129). It became clear that many of the peoples and cultures whose objects were on display had neither disappeared nor been defeated. Instead, these peoples started demanding a greater role in museum work, and some museums, in turn, began to see this involvement as essential. (Conaty & Janes 1997:32) "Under pressure from Third World governments, the idea of a world culture belonging to all of mankind gradually gave way to the notion of the primary importance of a national cultural heritage needed to express national identity and to participate as equals in the global dialogue of cultures." (Feest 1995:34, Conaty & Janes 1997:32) Society began to comprehend that objects the origins of which could not be determined, no matter how artistically exquisite, had little or no scientific or pedagogic value – values which were vital if the museums were to uphold and defend their role as educators of the people (ICOM 2005:9, Hegardt 2011:125), see below. Also, the opinion that all countries had the same right to keep "their" cultural heritage within the borders

of their country – or at least had the right to discuss the matter started to evolve (Unescorådet 2008:13).

Consequently: today, the focus of museums lies with the issue of questioning that which we previously took for granted, to look upon history in a new way and to question ourselves *whose* history we are telling, *for* who and in *which way* we are telling it (Unescorådet 2008:5, Persson-Fischier 2010:16, Olander & Sjögren 2006:65). One example of this new view could be found in the name and exhibition text of a now closed display of 2000 year-old Paracas textiles[5] at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg: "A Stolen World". The aim of this exhibition was not only to show these textiles to the public but to tell the story of how these objects under not always honest ways came to end up in Sweden (Världskulturmuseet).

5.2.2 The Swedish National Museums of World Culture

According to ICOM, a museum "is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and its development, which is open to the public. It acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment material evident of people and their environment" (SUO 1994:51). UNESCO claims museums to be cultural contact zones – areas in which people from all over the world can meet in mutual respect (Unescorådet 2008:26). "The Swedish National Museums of World Culture form a government authority that consists of four museums with shared responsibility for a large part of the international cultural heritage in Sweden. These four museums of world culture provide perspectives on the world and societal change" (SMVK, my translation).

The Swedish National Museums of World Culture, from hereon SMVK[6], focus on the world; what it is, how we relate to it and how it relates to itself. Their ambition is to give people new perspectives on the world and thereby to inspire them to renew and deepen their knowledge on these areas (Etnografiska Museet). SMVK state their aim to be, in accordance with ICOMs definitions (ICOM 2005:3), to "systematically work with the thinking and values within other cultures and societies, and to contribute to the worlds cultural heritage being used as an active power in promoting sustainable global development" (www.etnografiska.se, my translation).

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[5]The Paracas Culture was an important Andean society in present-day Peru. Because of the dry conditions where they lived, many of their textiles were found to be remarkably preserved when excavated in the 1900's (Världskulturmuseet)

[6]Short for the Swedish name, Statens Museer för Världskultur

5.3 Values of the museum as arguments for keeping foreign cultural objects

From this overview of the role of museums in society, a number of values that the museums claim to hold as the basis for their existence can be derived. Based on the frequency of these values in the texts I have read, I have made a selection of a number of these. These are conservation, safety, education and accessibility. These values are necessary for the museums upholding of their identity.

5.3.1 Conservation

ICOMs regulations state that "It is an important responsibility for everyone in the museum profession to create and maintain protective surroundings for the objects" (ICOM 2005:7) and that "the museum should carefully monitor the conditions of the collections to decide when conservations and reconditions need to be done." (Ibid). Museums have by their research and professionalism come to understand how better to store and exhibit objects, thereby prolonging their existence (Conaty & Janes 1997:32). Feest, and many with him, claim that many indigenous cultures do not share the Western respect for skeletal remains (Feest 1995:33), that there is an absence of the tradition to collect and preserve in most non-Western cultures (Feest 1995:39) and that this is one of the reasons as to why objects such as human remains should be kept in museums.

5.3.2 Safety

Feest comments on the lack of safety at museums in non-Western countries. "Many sad stories have indeed been told about restituted artefacts which almost immediately reappeared on the market, or about the failure of tribal museums whose collections have mysteriously disappeared." (Feest 1995:39) In Mali, nearly 85 percent of artefacts at museums have gone missing over the past few years, and the national museum in Kabul lost a similar percentage, 80%, in a looting in 1993. Part of a collection of coins that were found at an archaeological site in Afghanistan in the 90's could be found at a Swiss auction only a few years later (Unescorådet 2008:10f). Thus, a common argument against the return of objects, mainly to poor people and countries, is that the object is safer on its present site in the museum (Conaty & Janes 1997:31).

5.3.3 Education

"A good museum is, by its very nature, a knowledge-based organization" (Conaty & Janes 1997:36). Museums should strive to share this knowledge with others, to cooperate with other museums and institutions with similar interests and to interact with society and community (ICOM 2008:9). Defining, categorizing and presenting the artefacts and the results of the research in a clear way is a substantial part of the educating role of the museum. (ICOM 2008:9) and it is important that the museums make sure to develop this role by attracting (and thus educating) as many visitors as possible.

5.3.4 Accessibility

Ideally, and according to SMVK, the cultural heritage belongs to everyone and should be treated according to this principle (Kaplan, 1994:3). By ICOM regulation, museums are obliged to do what they can to enable as many people as possible to visit the exhibitions (ICOM 2005:3) and to document all their objects in a database which should be accessible by all (ICOM 2005:7). Many museums claim that, being accessible by so many people, they are the best place to keep cultural heritage, as it is at the museum that most people will be able to view the objects (Kaplan, 1994:342, Lind 1986:127).

6   Post colonial theory and museums of world culture

6.1   The role of museum of world culture from a post-colonial perspective

The ways in which this stream of objects, going from weak to strong, from poor to rich, from east to west and from south to north (Unescorådet 2008:6) have come to end up here are different – theft, war, expeditions, purchases and donations; often made possible by the uneven power structure between the country the museum is in and the object's country of origin. (Ibid:9). The objects, photographs and texts collected by travellers and researchers over the years have contributed to increased knowledge and understanding in many areas. However, what was important to collect was to a large extent based upon the travellers' own interests and values. (Soderland 2009:55, Interview 1, Interview 2) Consequently, the histories of cultural artefacts were often created by others than those that first made and used them - collectors, ethnographers, historians, art-lovers and tourists took on objects and gave them new context. Therefore, the collections tell us just as much – and some times more – about the norms and values of the collectors as about the norms and values of the society they meant to describe. (Interview 2)

> Repatriation brings into focus the question of knowledge and power. As museum professionals we have learned that we hold the knowledge about our collections and that their physical preservation in our vaults is a desirable objective which serves all of humanity. We are now being challenged by First Nations who point out that our knowledge is flawed, if not erroneous, and who decry the sterile environment in which their living connections with all of creation are kept. (Conaty & Janes 1997:36).

There is an assumption that native understanding of material culture is less relevant than scientific understanding. This is repeatedly manifested when museums exhibit natives and native cultures. As the natives are what is on display, and put there by Western hands, museums in the West remain the temple of true knowledge, with the power and preconditions to exhibit the others. (Conaty &

Janes 1997:23) The balance of power is clear: by calling foreign objects valuable or artistic, by evaluating them for being something else than they were originally intended to, you give yourself the right to be the superior arbiters (Östberg 2010:41., Appadurai 1986:3).

6.2   The values of museums of world culture from a post-colonial perspective

6.2.1   Conservation

That third-world museums should be less able to maintain the protective surroundings for the objects that ICOM finds important might well be true – keeping a museum is a costly matter, money that many third-world states might not be able to afford to spend.

However, the value of the importance of conservation can be contrasted by the fact that a Swedish desire to preserve certain items is not, as Östberg points out, necessarily shared by the recipient. "While the urge to collect, preserve and display objects can be seen as inherent in man, peoples of different cultures take different approaches to different cultural objects" (Östberg 2010:22, my translation). In many African countries, people see museums and the desire to collect and preserve as an imported, western phenomenon (Unescorådet 2008:22). When the repatriation of a Haisla[7] totem pole at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm was discussed, the main argument against a repatriation was that the Haisla tradition was to let old totem poles decay in the forest close to their town; a tradition shared by many First Nations where the purpose is for the totem pole to reunite with earth (Interview 1). The focus on the physical aspect of objects reflects a scientific understanding of the world and what is important in it (Conaty & Janes 1997:32), putting western knowledge before native, and could be seen to be building on old colonial thinking.

6.2.2   Safety

King Opuku of Benin turns himself against the often repeated argument that the West has done the world a favour in preserving cultural heritage with the risk of collections going missing by theft should be greater there (Östberg 2010:64). The reason that so many objects get stolen from third-world country museums is,

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[7]A native-American people living in Kitamat, British Columbia, Canada

according to Opoku, because of the economic benefits thieves can receive by selling them to collectors back in the West (Ibid); "dealers and collectors - who like to see themselves as art lovers and patrons of culture - are often the ones who create the conditions for and ultimately fund the continued overexploitation of the world's cultural heritage." (Unescorådet 2008:11, my translation) Hence, the objects that go missing from third world museums could be traced to an interest in, but lack of respect for, third-world heritage in the West (Feest 1995:39), once again indicating an underlying Western apprehension of being superior.

6.2.3 Education

Brunius argues, quite correctly, that museums never can claim to speak *for* another people, only *about* them (Interview 2). The actual, physical control of an object gives museum the control over the interpretation of that object, and it is this interpretation that is later conveyed to the museum visitors (Rea 2008:139). The context in which the object is put becomes vital for how we look at it and the culture for which it was made (Ames 1992:49, Frese 1960:112). It is possible to see the results of this control of interpretation in the ways that artefacts are catalogued and cared for in museums; they are grouped into Western technological categories such as clothing, cooking and hunting tools. These systems often work well and provide a clear image of the objects to the visitors. However, just as often, these categorizations obscure important cultural attitudes. (Conaty & Janes 1997:32) "A Paigan first-nations weasel tail shirt is most certainly an article of clothing, but when worn by a ceremonial leader it also becomes an object of spiritual significance; something most museums fail to mention" (Conaty & Janes 1997:32).

The language the museums use also plays a big role. Studies have shown that museums are more likely to use words such as 'worship' and 'adore' in exhibition texts about non-western religious items than about western. (Conaty & Janes 1997:30) This could contribute to the creation of a primitive image of non-western societies, the opposite to what museums claim their aims to be. Talking about the users of the objects in third person might also pose a problem if Conaty and Janes are right in claiming that "use of the third person suggests a dispassionate, uninvolved and critical understanding of the subject. It leads the visitor to accept without qualification the veracity of what is presented." (1997:32).

European colonialism has left its traces in the way museums classify peoples and cultures into different categories, e.g. superior, inferior, civilized and primitive. Traces of colonialism in words, images and objects has been preserved in museum tradition and is today one of many charged conflicts (Interview 1).

6.2.4 Accessibility

The question of accessibility is directly related to an object's probability to be repatriated – as it is almost always the native peoples themselves, and very seldom the museums who take the initiative to repatriate an object (Unescorådet 2008:23). And the accessibility of the cultural heritage is limited in a number of ways when at a museum: few museums have exhibition texts in other languages than their own (Ekarv 1994:201), the majority of museums of world culture lie in western capitals where far from everyone can access them (all of the 18 biggest Museums of World Culture lie in western states) (Interview 1) and more and more museums are charging for entry. The digital documentation ICOM suggests is almost never carried out to a sufficient degree (ICOM 2005:7 UNESCO writes that museum visits have become a class issue where only a very small percent of the world's population have access to them (Unescorådet 2008:23). Museums might be accessible for many people – but almost exclusively to people in the West. If native peoples cannot gain the same access to the collections as us in the West, we are disregarding the voices of the peoples we study, not allowing for the voices of the subalterns to be heard.

7 Can museums of world culture be defended?

Given that museums of world culture are carrying, and in one way defending a colonial heritage, can their existence be defended? From the reasoning in the above chapter, it might be possible to claim that repatriation of cultural objects is necessary and that Swedish museums should adopt an even more open attitude towards this, to re-evaluate what they stand for. But "rethinking the structures of knowledge and power means that museums will have to relearn what they are and why they exist" (Conaty & Janes 1997:36) and "museums, as bastions of knowledge and keepers of society's material memory, often feel that their raison d'être is threatened by demands for repatriation" (Ibid:31). Museums would not be museums without their collections. Without anything to exhibit, they wouldn't get any visitors, and all the values they need to live up to, shared by everybody or not, would be unachievable (Macdonald 2006:81). They would lose the faith of the public and the state (ICOM 2005:6). The museums are dependent on the artefacts in order to be able to live up to the values that create their identity. This identity is then what makes them able to argue for keeping the artefacts – the artefacts, values and identity are intertwined.

Artefacts

Identity   **Values**
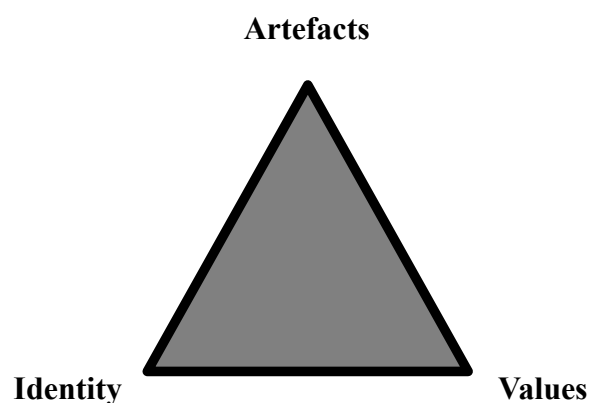
It is thus necessary to evaluate if the museums, despite carrying a remainder of colonial thinking, can be defended. Given that museums are carriers of a legacy of the colonial era, how should we discuss the potential repatriation of the foreign cultural artefacts in their collections? Can this legacy in any way be defended? Using three normative logics, different answers can be reached. These are by no

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means the only reasonings that can be made by these logics, and they are of course criticisable. They should therefore be seen as examples of how one might argue rather than definite answers.

7.1   Deontological ethics

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Badersten 2006:109). If one agrees to that museums should be allowed to keep what they, by reason of the colonial era, have got in their collections, then are we not violating the universal laws that it is wrong to steal and take advantage of other people? Deontological ethics hold that actions should be valued regardless of their consequences and by that forbids certain actions from taking place - not because the actions in themselves are forbidden, but because we in doing them are violating the rights of somebody else, thereby preventing them from fulfilling themselves. (Ibid:110) A Nigerian teenager comments on the Benin bronzes that were taken in the late 1800's, some of which can be seen at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm today: "These items should be sent back, taking them was like robbing our soul. When you took them, it's like you took our centre, our core. Only if they are returned, we become whole again" (Östberg 2010:56, my translation). Conaty and Janes reason in a similar way: "First Nations, as an underclass of society, find pride and meaning in these objects and the demands for repatriation can be read as demands for recognition as equal partners in society." (Conaty & Janes 1997:31)

Robert Nozick claims the central rights of humans to be the rights to life, freedom and property (Badersten p. 110) – the UN agrees to some extent by saying that actions which cannot be carried out in order with the human rights are immoral and cannot be defended in any way (UNHR). That artefacts at museums are accessible to more people, or in safer surroundings, or contribute to a deepened understanding about the world – all the values of the museum - are therefore, by deontological reasoning, unimportant. The objects were stolen and should be sent back.

Prince Edun Akenzua of Benin wonders why repatriation is even discussed and asks the question "In which other case does anyone take account of what a thief wants? Thieves have absolutely no right to opinions" (Östberg 2010:52). King Opuku of Benin agrees by claiming that no matter which values an object might hold in a museum exhibition, us in the West have no right in talking about what we know nothing about and that the stolen goods should be returned (Östberg 2010:65), because: "as long as the objects remain in the conquerors' hands, the colonial assault continues" (Ibid:66, Macdonald 2009:93).

7.2   Consequentialism

According to consequentialism then, one could argue differently. Yes, many of the objects ended up at museums of world culture because of immoral actions, and museums might well be maintaining a trace of colonialism by keeping these objects in their collections or on display, but the ends justify the means, so all foreign objects should be kept. The positive consequences of the existence of museums outweigh the negative background. By looking at the core values of the museums of world culture, and what they contribute to society, their existence can be defended.

Consequentialism holds that good things are those that contribute to the greatest use in society (Badersten 2006:110). By keeping the objects at museums, we are providing the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people (Cuno 2008:155). "The emphasis of most collections lies not within the actual object, but in the values the object bring. The main goal of these collections is not the preservation of the actual object, but of technical, cultural or scientific processes." (ICOM 2005:5)

The British Museum argues that the foreign cultural objects they have in their collections belong there and nowhere else. They refer to the fact that the mission of the museum is to convey the story of cultural achievements in the world, from the emergence of human kind until today. The British Museum is therefore a "unique resource for the entire world" (Östberg 2010:52) as it tells the important story of England's colonial past, a time in history which should never be forgotten (van Dommelen 2006:105).

That foreign cultural artefacts should be sent back to their places of origin so that the natives of these countries can regain some sort of "lost identity" as mentioned in the above section about deontology (Östberg 2010:25) is contradicted by Feest who claims that while the importance of cultural property for the affirmation and validation of identity is important, it should not be used as a reason for repatriation "because the example of Native American communities has decisively shown that it is quite possible to maintain a separate identity in spite of the fact that most of the cultural property of the past had ended up in museums." (Feest 1995:35) Instead, one should focus on the identity of the people where the museum is. According to Östberg, the African cultural objects at Swedish museums are linked to the descendants of the Africans who were once abducted and if the objects were to be returned, it would be to deprive the African diaspora evidence of the violence they have experienced. (Östberg 2010:60f) The same reasoning is made by a Swedish-Bolivian writer who claims that the Bolivian government in asking for a number of cultural heritage objects back fail to take notice of the fact that the Bolivian diaspora in Sweden view these objects as one of few remaining connections they still have to their home country. "By returning these objects, Sweden would be denying the Bolivian diaspora their

cultural heritage and make a subtle claim that we too have no right to be here"
(Unescorådet 2008:25).

Also, if one museum agrees to the repatriation of a foreign cultural artefact,
this might lead to the museums having diplomatic problems with other museums
– this reasoning touches that of museums in old colonial powers – because, if one
object is returned, should not every object be? (Östberg 2010:67)

7.3   The logic of appropriateness

According to the logic of appropriateness, there are no universal rules for what is
right and what is not, instead, we have to look at each case individually and judge
its justification by to the circumstances. And in doing this, the claim that most of,
or at least some of the objects remain at the museums of world culture might be
defendable.

These objects were taken at a time when it seemed appropriate to do so – first
because of a will to exhibit the strangeness of other cultures, then because of a
perceived feeling that the vanishing, colonized cultures needed to be preserved
and exhibited. African debaters attach great importance to the idea that the objects
were stolen and therefore should be returned, but before the Hague conventions of
1899 and 1907, taking war bounty was legitimate in times of war
(Livrustkammaren, 2006:25). Thus, at the time of the acquisition of the objects,
no illegal action was carried out; it was not until The Hague convention for the
Protection of Cultural Property of 1954 and the 1970 Convention against illicit
traffic in cultural property that this became forbidden (Unescorådet 2008:31).

Also, even if one does think it was morally wrong by Westerners to take these
objects for their own gain, it is by no means obvious that the peoples and cultures
these items were taken from have the same right to ownership they once had
(Interview 1). What rights do Egyptians today have to claim 5000-year old
mummies? Do the citizens of modern Greece have sufficient cultural connections
to the old Greeks to can claim ownership of the Parthenon Marbles? Most
scholars would argue no. (Gillman 2010:189) And who is to say these objects hold
the same values for native peoples today they did 100 years ago? Cultures are
constantly changing and what once were power-charged objects affecting
developments in local communities, are now often just symbols of memories,
history, aesthetics. Their value has not necessarily disappeared, but changed;
today their role is to tell you what the culture they were created in used to be like
(Östberg 2010:59).

> The art of Benin has undergone a series of transformations: from art of the royal
> court, to war booty, to commodities and investment opportunities, to gifts and to
> museum pieces. Would the art be sent back, it would certainly not be back to the

royal court of Benin, but to the nation that now takes precedence over the kingdom, namely Nigeria. In this case, the art will once again be exchanged for prestige, namely that which accrues to the officials in Nigeria and Sweden, who will decide on the fate of the Benin cultural heritage. (Östberg 2010:42)

However, by the logic of appropriateness, because we cannot formulate any universal rules for how to handle normative questions, repatriation would not be unthinkable. If there are reasons good enough for an item to be sent back, it should be. By the logic of appropriateness, when the request for the return of an object arrives at the museum, one would have to take the above mentioned points in consideration. If it could be proved that the culture in which it was made still existed and this culture still placed a great value in the object, if one could argue that the object would fill a similar, or maybe greater role for society if it was to be sent back, the request for it should be adhered to.

8 Summary and conclusion

Museums of world culture have undergone a change in how they acquire and reason about their collections. From being chambers exhibiting peculiar memorabilia of what was thought to be strange and inferior cultures, to halls of objects rescued from what was believed to be vanishing cultures to an arena for the discussion and problematisation of these objects and their makers. During the course of these changes, museums have had to redefine themselves and what they stand for again and again. Museum visitors and native peoples alike have been affected by this change.

The issue of repatriation have become more widely discussed and museums today are more cooperative towards native peoples and repatriation requests than before. However, the current reasoning about what to repatriate, and upon what conditions, is insufficient as it takes little or no notice to the legacy of colonialism inherent in museums of world culture. Because of the history and the circumstances by which many of these objects came to end up here, keeping foreign cultural heritage on display is problematic, and for many people a very emotionally charged matter. The values the museum claim to work towards, the good consequences they claim to provide to society can all be problematised from a post-colonial perspective – the values might not be shared by everyone or they might be inaccurate. Three different normative logics can discuss the colonial heritage, and the existence of museums in three different ways.

The conclusion of my study is that it is possible to criticize museums of world culture from a post-colonial perspective by looking at their former and present role and by the values they hold important. This because of the fact that a vast majority of the foreign cultural objects came to the museums because of the colonial era, and because the values museums of world culture work towards can be argued to be biased towards Western thoughts of what is important. As I found the current guiding material for how to handle repatriation requests inadequate, other ways of thinking needed to be introduced and studied. Using three normative logics to answer the question of how museums of world culture should handle their foreign collections, given that they were maintaining a colonial heritage, different ways of reasoning were found. By deontological ethics, one could claim that all the artefacts should be sent back to their places of origin as the circumstances in which the objects were once taken cannot be defended. Consequentialism could claim that all objects should be kept here as they, by their presence at a place which is open to the public, are of greater use to a greater amount of people, that the ends justify the means. The logic of appropriateness provides an answer which can be seen as a compromise between the former two;

every case needs to be looked at individually, as it is impossible to provide any universal principles for how to work with these issues.

As the purpose of this study was not to take a stand for what should be done with foreign cultural heritage but rather to illustrate different ways of thinking, I suggest that a future study takes off where I leave and attempts to undertake a more qualitative study of the reasonings of the different logics, arriving at clear suggestions of how museums of world culture not only could, but should handle requests for repatriations.

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