

# Aspiring Anthropologists

Vol. 1 / 2022

Julia Singh

November 30, 2022

## Extracted Material Cultural Heritage: A Matter of the Commons?

### *Essay*

The debate around the provenance and restitution of objects in European museums is not new, however highly topical. With today's political dynamics and the 'western' states' attempt to escape colonial power asymmetries, re-launching the debate asks for a profound rethinking of object and state identity. Imagining their trajectory within the processes of extractivism and commoning might bring fresh perspectives.



Benin Bronzes in the British Museum in London  
(photo by Son of Groucho, cf. bibliography)

# Extracted Material Cultural Heritage: A Matter of the Commons?

The debate around the provenance and restitution of objects in European museums is not new, however highly topical. With today's political dynamics and the 'western states' attempt to escape colonial power asymmetries, re-launching the debate asks for a profound rethinking of object and state identity. Imagining their trajectory within the processes of extractivism and commoning might bring fresh perspectives.

In her inaugural lecture at the newly created *Chair of Cultural History of Artistic Heritage in Europe* at the *Collège de France* in 2017, art historian and professor Bénédicte Savoy sketches an image of a future where cultural heritage is governed through common engagement of the world's nations (Savoy 2018). Savoy, a pioneer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's restitution debate, pleads for an ideological and practical rethinking of Europe's dealing with its past and the material cultural heritage it currently has in its possession. This includes, among other things, a stronger orientation towards an international bundling of efforts in regard to the restitution of said material cultural heritage – namely the vast number of objects with non-European provenance that have filled European cabinets of 'curiosities', museums and their depots mainly since the colonial plundering and discovery expeditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The highly topical discussion around the restitution of non-European material cultural heritage revolves around the question of ownership and possession<sup>1</sup> and is to be located in the postcolonial discourse and the frequently discussed attempt at 'decolonization'. It is thus worth taking a closer look at the idea of a joint governing of cultural heritage, that Bénédicte Savoy and others touch upon, and to raise the question: is material cultural heritage a matter of the commons? In other words: can, or should it be governed commonly? And if so, who are the parties involved, and how would their commoning practice look like? In the following essay, an approximation to answering these questions will be attempted.

One particular theoretical premise might help

us with approaching the questions above: material cultural heritage can be understood as an *extractable* resource<sup>2</sup>: It can be collected, displaced and stolen, transferred and shifted across different spaces, disintegrated and decontextualized. In this sense, the extracted material leaves behind empty spaces that are re-filled with the feelings of loss, grief, or despair.

Moreover, material cultural heritage is a *non-renewable* resource. For the present example, this would mean that former colonial powers have extracted and expropriated unique objects from the ones who originally created and/or owned them. By being extracted, these objects change their possessor, but not the content they were given by their owners. An extracted object remains to be a bearer of its owner's knowledge, (collective) memory or meaning, sometimes even an ancestor's spirit. Its multi-layered biography is intrinsic.

This highlights the importance of distinguishing between 'owner' and 'possessor' before going any further. Dealing with extracted and displaced objects can therefore only happen multilaterally by bringing together owners (those who have been expropriated) and possessors (those who have appropriated). Thus, these two parties are the actual 'commoners' in the context of this essay.

What arises next, however, might not only be an ideological but also a logistical challenge: Who exactly are the original owners of material cultural heritage and what if they no longer exist? Who are the commoners then? For example, British colonialists invaded the Kingdom of Benin in 1897. They plundered, destroyed, and later traded off a myriad of artworks from Benin's Royal Palace (the so

called 'Benin Bronzes', MKB 2022). The Kingdom of Benin ceased to exist – today, its former regions lie on the territory of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Although the original creators and owners of those bronze works are not alive any more, their descendants are. It is all the more important that the present-day state of Nigeria is recognized as a *sovereign* state and, thus, as a commoner, when discussing restitution of those objects. The same applies to other once colonized states: acknowledging their independence and sovereignty is a must, not only in terms of processing history, but also in order to actually make a fair commoning practice happen.

If objects that were extracted under asymmetrical power relations in the course of colonialism are treated as a commons, and the present day states as commoners, it becomes clear that they are embedded in an intertwinement of transnational relations that cannot be ignored. Put into rather euphemistic terms; these objects will always tell of a shared history. Treating material cultural heritage as a commons is thus inevitable.

However, this should not imply that they simply "belong to everyone" but rather that the commoners have a shared responsibility towards dealing with the objects in discussion. This includes proactively restituting stolen material cultural heritage, or at least enabling and increasing access to knowledge about their existence. And even more so, it means finding ways to fill the voids left behind as well as to organize the new spaces created once the artefacts are transferred. This can be accomplished by establishing places and institutions of memory, and constructing spaces where knowledge is maintained and transmitted broadly.

As mentioned above, treating material cultural heritage as a commons should by no means lead to the utopia of a "world museum": This would only be the extended version of an old idea: a museum that grants access to those who can afford to pay the visit. And after all, why should an Amazonian Machigen-gua member have to travel to Europe and buy an entry ticket to a museum to see the flute that once belonged to their grandfather<sup>3</sup>?

Looking at the accessibility and excludability of material cultural heritage as a commons, it can be concluded that the idea of a 'transnational commons' can only come into fruition under the following condition: if the locations of knowledge storage and transmission (either through the presence of the object in a museum or the creation of knowledge vessels as placeholder for the missing object) are not limited to the so called 'western' countries, but spread out more widely and flexibly. Object and knowledge transfer must be negotiated through joint action in order to turn the material as well as their intellectual dimension into a truly accessible commons.

Thus, if cultural heritage is treated as a commons, its extractive dimension, as well as the multilateral responsibility around it becomes clear. With this in mind, questions of restitution and rethinking of museum practice can be tackled decisively and without recreating or reinforcing power dynamics of past times.



## Footnotes

1 Here, I use 'ownership' and 'possession' as two different modes of holding an object, as also used in legal understanding. For example, Greece is the rightful owner of the metopes of the Athenian Parthenon, whereas the British Museum possesses them.

2 The main idea of 'cultural extractivism' originates from an exhibition in 2021 called "Extractive Zones" at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, in whose course Bénédicte Savoy held a presentation about the extractive character of European museums' collecting practice.

3 After the idea of Arno Bertina's *Mona Lisa in Bangoulap* (Bertina 2016).

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Cover image: "Benin Bronzes 1" by Son of Groucho, used under CC BY 2.0 (cropped from the original)



This article is available online at:

<https://fg-ethnologie.unibas.ch/de/blog/details/2022/singh-cultural-commons>

# Aspiring Anthropologists

## The Project

Through this pilot project, the student association enables students of Ethnologie (BA) and Anthropology (MA) in Basel to gain valuable experience in publishing during their studies, and to practise collaborating in the peer-review process.

The contents of this publication are written by students and reflect steps in the educational process. Our authors represent their personal opinions, which are not necessarily shared by the Student Association Anthropology, the Institute of Social Anthropology, or the University of Basel. Such opinions may change in the course of the learning process and will certainly evolve.

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Mirian Margiani, Julia Singh, Bessy Purayampillil



Student Association Anthropology  
University of Basel  
Institute of Social Anthropology  
Münsterplatz 19  
4051 Basel  
Switzerland