

Return of the Sacred

A critical evaluation of the focus on cultural continuity in repatriating sacred objects from Western museums

Master Thesis Arts and Culture: Museums & Collections

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Date: 13/06/2021

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Introduction

When strolling through a Western museum, whether that be an ethnographic museum, a museum of natural history or a museum of antiquities, one often encounters objects from all over the world that have been collected during the era of European colonialism. In recent history, many of the countries and communities from which these objects were taken, have begun to make claims for the return of their cultural heritage. Today, discussions about, and processes of, repatriation and return of objects from colonial contexts have become very pressing matters within museum contexts. This thesis is concerned with one specific type of object that has been very prominent in these discourses and processes, namely objects that are considered sacred in their communities of origin. Within Western museums, we find sacred objects from many different traditions, from all over the world and from different periods in time. The prominent position of sacred objects in the repatriation debate is due to the unique character of these objects and the particular problems that the absence of these objects from their places of origin present to local communities. Generally these objects were central to a certain belief system or used in rituals that required the objects to be treated with special reverence. Their absence means that the religious system cannot work properly and it can cause damage to the bond between the people and the sacred. This has caused many countries and communities of origin to fiercely pursue the return of these objects and in many cases with success. Over the past thirty years or so, growing numbers of sacred objects have been returned to their respective countries and communities of origin.

This thesis is concerned with the question of how sacred objects are dealt with in the current repatriation movement. Drawing on an extensive literature research, this question will be answered by presenting an argumentation that is illustrated with various examples. In this thesis it will be argued that contemporary practices and discourses concerning sacred objects have largely focussed on indigenous communities, mainly from settler countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which present high levels of cultural past-present continuity.¹ Generally, these communities have held on very strongly to the religious traditions of the ancestors from whom the sacred objects were taken. The religious traditions from which these objects

¹ For studies on the repatriation of sacred objects to indigenous communities see for example: Dekker, 2018, Nash & Colwell, 2020; Pickering, 2015; Putnam 2014

were part are often still in place. When sacred objects are repatriated, this is typically done in order to re-install them into their 'original' religious settings. However, sacred objects from communities that do not present such high levels of cultural continuity, I will argue, have so far been excluded from the discourse of repatriating sacred objects. These communities with lower levels of cultural continuity are generally not viewed as legitimate claimants for sacred objects and they are actively discouraged to reclaim ancestral heritage. This thesis will provide a critical evaluation of the focus on cultural continuity in discourses and processes of repatriating sacred objects and it will be argued that communities with lower levels of cultural continuity need to become involved in these discourses. It will be demonstrated that most of the communities that have been affected by European colonialism, and the collecting frenzy that accompanied it, have actually gone through great changes over time. Many of the religious contexts from which we find sacred objects in Western museums have disappeared or have been displaced by, or transformed into, new traditions. This does not mean however, that within these contemporary communities there is no longer any interest in the sacred heritage of the past. Within many post-colonial societies, there is actually a strong interest in pre-colonial and ancient religions. Revivals and revisions of ancestral religious traditions are occurring frequently and the material culture of the past is often re-appropriated and incorporated in these processes. It will be argued that sacred objects from the past can regain their sacred values within these new contexts of revivals and re-appropriations. This reality however, is not at all accounted for in the current repatriation movement of sacred objects, where only communities with high levels of religious continuity are considered as legitimate claimants. This paper will argue that the contemporary discourse is marked by an essentialist model of religion, whereby the departure of old traditions and the arrival of new traditions are perceived as aspects of religious decline. This essentialist view is harmful because it demands from cultures that they stay the same over time and it denies them the right to change if they wish to make claims on their sacred heritage. This could prevent contemporary communities from connecting in meaningful ways with the sacred heritage of their ancestors. Drawing on Stuart Hall's articulation theory, this thesis proposes that the contemporary discourse needs to move away from this essentialist model and towards a so called articulated model of religion, which recognizes that religions and religious forms are not static, but that they are made, unmade and remade over time. In doing so,

it should become evident that not only communities with high levels of cultural continuity have the right to reclaim, and reconnect with, the sacred objects of their ancestors. In the following pages, the term 'descendant communities' will be used instead of the more commonly used 'source communities', to identify any community that is claiming back the cultural heritage of its ancestors. This term suits the discourse better because it acknowledges that culture and cultural identities always change over time.

In the first chapter of this thesis, a general overview of the repatriation practices of objects from colonial contexts will be presented. It will be argued that in the past few years, the repatriation discourse has intensified and that currently two types of cultural objects are eligible for return. The first type concerns those objects that have been acquired in immoral or illegal manners and the second type concerns objects that present great cultural, historical or religious significance to descendant communities or countries of origin. Sacred objects are central to this second category and the current repatriation practices dealing with sacred objects are discussed in the second chapter. In this chapter the unique position of sacred objects in the repatriation discourse will be further explained through Igor Kopytoff's theory of the cultural biographies of objects and Arjun Appadurai's framework of objects' trajectories. In addition, this chapter will demonstrate the strong focus on religious continuity in decision processes of repatriation by providing several examples. This focus will be criticized in the third chapter, which argues that history is characterized by religious change and discontinuity and that only a small amount of communities have been able to hold on to their cultural and religious traditions in the face of colonialism. It is argued here that descendant communities that have changed considerably over the years still interact in meaningful ways with the religious heritage of their ancestors and that these descendant communities should become involved within the repatriation discourse. The chapter will zoom in on two case studies of sacred objects that have been returned to communities with low levels of cultural continuity, the sacred *Oukwanyama* stone from Namibia and the Zimbabwe stone birds. These examples illustrate how sacred objects of the past can be re-integrated in the descendant communities of the present after they are repatriated. The fourth chapter will present some suggestions to improve the current repatriation narrative and practices concerning sacred objects. First and

foremost, it is argued that the current discourse is in need of a new theoretical model of religion and to this end Hall's articulation theory is presented.

Chapter 1. Decolonizing the museum: repatriation and return of cultural objects

1.1 The colonial roots of Western museums

European colonialism was one of the most significant processes that shaped the modern world. The European colonial era denotes the period, from roughly the 15th until the 20th centuries, in which European powers, such as Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and the Netherlands conquered and settled distant lands in the America's, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.² Ania Loomba has defined colonialism as the “conquest and control of other peoples lands and goods”.³ In this sense, she notes that colonialism did not start with the expansion of European powers; instead it has been a common and recurring feature throughout human history. She points to different historical empires such as the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire and the Aztec and Inca Empires to illustrate this point. European colonialism was unique however, because over time, it has altered the entire globe in a way that previous forms of colonialism have not.⁴ The start and end dates of major historical developments are always difficult to pinpoint and there are diverging views on the periodisation of European colonialism.⁵ Generally, the Portuguese and Spanish ‘discoveries’ and invasions of the America's at the end of the 15th century are regarded as a starting point of the European colonial era.⁶ In the course of the following centuries small or newly-formed European nations, such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Britain, and later Belgium, Germany and Italy needed colonies to strengthen their unity and identity and to fuel their economies.⁷ Defining the European colonial era is not an easy task, since it subsumes phenomena that date back six hundred years and that have evolved and changed during that period. It has affected the interaction of people from many different societies and cultures all over the globe.⁸ Therefore, European colonialism had many faces and different kinds of colonialism can be distinguished. Historian Wolfgang Reinhard has proposed three types of European colonies: trade and

² Chidester, 2018, 105

³ Loomba, 2015, 20

⁴ Idem. 21

⁵ van Beurden, 2017, 53

⁶ Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 24

⁷ van Beurden, 2017, 53

⁸ Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 25

military bases, colonies of exploitation and colonies of settlement.⁹ The first type, trade and military bases, mainly served strategic purposes, that is, as enclaves for the economic, political or military penetration of remote regions. In the course of widespread power protection they also helped to informally control countries and areas outside of the control of formal colonial rule. These places were formally independent, but in reality they were under the economic and therefore also political control of a European power. An example is Cape Town in the 17th century, as a crucial Dutch stepping stone on the maritime route to India. Other examples are Hong Kong and Singapore up until the 20th century.¹⁰ The second type, the exploitation colonies, is most closely connected to the general idea of colonialism. In these areas, only a small number of members of the colonizing power were present, and most of them only temporarily, to run business, administration and defence. British India and Dutch East Indies are well-known examples, as are large parts of Africa.¹¹ The last type, colonies of settlement, is characterized by the mass influx of European immigrants. They were in charge of the administration, the military and the economy, but they also appropriated and managed the land themselves. Often they used and exploited indigenous labour or imported slaves. Obvious examples of this type are the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.¹² The distinctions between these three types of colonialism are by no means rigid, instead these types are fluid and numerous hybrid forms have existed over time. German historian Jurgen Zimmerer has argued that a common characteristic of all of the different colonial situations has been the dichotomy between the colonizers and the colonized, between the Europeans and the non-Europeans.¹³ He has stated that “From the beginning, the contrast in terms of geography and techniques was accompanied by strong ideological and philosophical underpinnings. Initially, it was the opposition between Christians and ‘pagans’ that justified invasions and exploitations and later biological-racist arguments”.¹⁴

The expansions and discoveries of the European powers from the late 15th century onwards went hand in hand with the rise of collecting objects and other

⁹ Reinhard, 2015, 225-226

¹⁰ Idem. 226

¹¹ Idem. 226

¹² Idem. 226

¹³ Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 25

¹⁴ Idem.25

curiosities.¹⁵ It has been argued that European collecting can be dated back to the late medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance, when wealthy people began to collect Greek and Roman artefacts. This practice led to the emergence of 'cabinets of curiosities' or 'Wunderkammern', which were collections of nearly everything and they could include geological specimens, plants, antiquities, animals, paintings and so on.¹⁶ When Europeans began to 'discover' overseas lands, this practice of collecting was further stimulated and the cabinets were enriched by the inclusion of 'exotic' objects of other peoples.¹⁷ The excitement of finding new things in the world during the age of discovery in Europe produced explosions of interest in collecting and displaying wondrous objects.¹⁸ Collecting in this early colonial period was not yet a large-scale and regulated enterprise. Jos van Beurden has argued that during this time, the newcomers were scarcely interested in the cultures and religions that they encountered and that a great deal of the cultural objects that were encountered were destroyed and valuable objects made from silver and gold were melted down.¹⁹ The collecting in this period was more a sporadic activity in the form of collecting curiosities as '*souvenirs of contact*' or as '*trophies*' which acquired prominent places in these cabinets of curiosities.²⁰ This practice changed over the course of the 18th century, when European collecting became more diverse, more specialised and more popular. The popularity of the cabinets of curiosities declined with the onset of the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment. During this time collectors realized that knowledge could be derived from the study and classification of objects, and the public museum would become the ideal place for this, rather than the private confines of the cabinets.²¹ As a result, people began to hand over their own private collections to museums and to public expositions. As European powers acquired colonies all over the world, they began to move objects from other peoples into museums to show the living cultures and everyday life in the colonies. Many of the greatest museums in the world were founded in the course of the 19th century, which was a period of extreme growth in collections.²²

¹⁵ Matenga, 2011, 46

¹⁶ idem. 46

¹⁷ Belk, 1995, 29-35

¹⁸ idem. 30

¹⁹ van Beurden, 2017, 55

²⁰ Idem. 55-56

²¹ Matenga, 2011, 48

²² Idem. 48

1.2 Colonial collecting

Over this long period of European colonialism, numerous objects have been collected in many different ways and different contexts. Some general types of collecting that were prominent during this period have been identified.²³ A first category concerns objects that were presented as gifts to colonial administrators and institutions. Gift exchange between colonial administrators, local rulers and commanders happened frequently and gifts were often used as instruments for cultural diplomacy. Van Beurden has argued the nature of gift giving and the degree of equality between stakeholders and colonial actors could vary greatly. Certain valuable gifts presented by indigenous rulers to colonial administrators were expressions of subjugation, whereas in other instances replicas of valuable objects were presented as gifts to foreign visitors and rulers, while the original objects were kept in hiding.²⁴ Another type of collecting was done through private expeditions. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a peak in scientific and commercial collecting expeditions. These were initiated by governments with close contacts with scientists or by collectors with contacts in the museum world. Unfortunately it has been very poorly documented exactly how objects were acquired in private expeditions, but it is evident that this could be done in very different manners. A number of objects collected in these kinds of expeditions were the result of normal trade with local craftsmen and art dealers who produced some artefacts solely for foreign visitors.²⁵ In addition, many objects were taken from abandoned ancient monuments and other archaeological sites.²⁶ Unfortunately there are also accounts of Europeans robbing indigenous graves and taking human remains and funerary objects.²⁷ A third type of collecting concerns objects that were collected through military expeditions. Military confrontations were numerous in colonial empires and war booty was often brought home in the form of relics or trophies to be displayed in museums or sold in the art market.²⁸ One of the most infamous examples of collecting through military expeditions is the ransacking of the royal palace of Benin during a punitive expedition

²³ These types of collecting are derived from the typology provided by Jos van Beurden 2017, 40-48. In addition to the four types discussed here, Van Beurden has provided a fifth type that is not mentioned in this section, namely the collecting of archives. This type is not relevant for this thesis, since this study is solely concerned with sacred objects.

²⁴ Van Beurden, 2017, 41

²⁵ *idem.* 43

²⁶ *idem.* 42-43

²⁷ Van Beurden, 2020, 69

²⁸ *idem.* 44-45

by the British Empire in 1897. During this event, the Brits confiscated all the royal treasures, after which these objects became distributed in museums all over Europe. A final prominent category concerns missionary collecting. From the start of colonialism, tens of thousands of European missionaries travelled to the colonies to Christianize the indigenous inhabitants. According to van Beurden, missionaries “intentionally and massively confiscated and destroyed traditional religious objects and that countless objects were send to Europe”.²⁹ In addition, other sources have also emphasized that many indigenous people voluntarily sold or gave the objects of their old faiths to the European missionaries, by way of distancing themselves from their old religions.³⁰ In Europe, the missionary orders put the collected objects on display in missionary museums for the instruction of new missionaries or for fundraising.³¹ From all these examples of collecting, it is evident that there was a wide spectrum of historical and local acquisition and negotiation processes.³² Sometimes objects were collected violently by dominant invaders, while other times objects were acquired through normal purchase or barter and at more equal levels.

1.3 Decolonizing Western museums

A first wave of decolonization begun in the 19th century when many of the Spanish colonies in Latin America gained official independence. It would last until the second half of the 20th century, when many countries in Asia and Africa also gained their independence, before Europe had lost all its official colonies.³³ If decolonization would merely mean the independence for a colony, then today it would lie in the past. However, decolonization is considered to be an ongoing process and an unresolved conflict. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued that colonialism is not a ‘finished business’ and she notes that, although the rise of new states has radically changed the world order, much of the colonial legacy persists, and many new states do not control their economic recourses.³⁴ European colonialism has left marks on all areas of culture, science, business and politics all over the world. It has become evident that

²⁹ idem. 45

³⁰ Hans, 2020, 17- 21, Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 20

³¹ van Beurden, 2017, 47

³² idem. 40-41, Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 15

³³ For a compact summary of stages in the decolonization process see Reinhard, 2015, 226. For an overview of European formal colonial rule see Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 110- 125

³⁴ Smith, 2012, 25

this is very relevant for contemporary Western museums whose collections often contain a large number of objects from colonial contexts.³⁵ The ethnological museums of Europe are seen by many as the epicentres of colonial collecting. However we find colonial objects in almost all types of museums, including natural history museums, historical museums, art museums and archaeological museums.³⁶ In addition to European museums, we also find these colonial objects in large numbers in museums of Western settler countries such as Canada, Australia and the USA. Over the past decades, these museums in the West have tried to tackle the challenge of decolonizing their institutions. According to the Washington Post, decolonization is “a process that institutions undergo to expand the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonizers.”³⁷ So museums are now trying to make their museums reflect the diversity and the voices of the people represented within their collections and around them. In this sense, museum decolonization can include many aspects of museum work, such as the recruitment of staff members from divergent backgrounds, the representation of diverse peoples and consultation processes with the people of whom the objects in the collections originated. In addition, many museums have become involved in debates about, and processes of, restitution and repatriation of colonial objects in their collections to the descendant communities or countries of origin.³⁸

1.4 Returning objects from colonial contexts

The European collecting during the Colonial Era has resulted in an unbalanced distribution of cultural heritage over the world, whereby the countries of origin have been poorly endowed.³⁹ The severity of this imbalance varies in different parts of the world. On the one hand, certain regions of the world have been able to hold on to significant shares of their cultural heritage. An example is Indonesia, where in the 18th century, Dutch VOC officials had established the *Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences* in Batavia (nowadays Jakarta) which housed a museum and collections. Many of the most

³⁵ Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 6

³⁶ For an overview of the types of museums that contain colonial objects see Deutscher Museums Bund, 2018, 37-49

³⁷ Quoted from Schoenberger, 2019

³⁸ Giblin, Ramos, Grout, 2019, 472

³⁹ Van Beurden, 2017, 118

precious antiquities from the Indonesian archipelago came to be housed there and after independence Indonesian authorities have recognized it as a unique and valuable starting point for Indonesia's National Museum.⁴⁰ On the other hand, there are parts of the world that have lost the vast majority of their cultural heritage in the colonial era. In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa it has been argued by experts that roughly 90% of its material cultural legacy is housed and preserved outside of Africa.⁴¹

Requests for the return of colonial objects to their descendant communities and countries of origin are not a new phenomenon. Already long before transfers of sovereignty took place, politicians, educated elites and religious leaders in colonies had begun to claim their lost cultural heritage.⁴² When independence came, many of the new nation states were eager to claim their cultural heritage from the Western museums that housed them, but the former colonial powers did not turn out to be generous returners of the objects they had acquired from all over the world. For example in the case of Indonesia. Right after independence in 1949, the new republic made it clear that the return of cultural objects from the Netherlands had priority for them.⁴³ For a long time negotiations concerning the return of cultural objects were unfruitful, but in 1975 both countries established a bilateral agreement. Over the following years, mainly in the 1970's and 1980's, several hundreds of objects were transferred to Indonesia. Since then there have scarcely been any other returns.⁴⁴ Another case is presented by DR Congo. In 1960, immediately after gaining independence, Zaire, as the country was then called, sent a request to Belgium asking for the transfer of objects housed in the "museum of the Congo" (the present-day Tervuren Museum), to Kinshasa. 15 years later, 144 pieces out of the 122,000 objects inventoried at Tervuren were transferred.⁴⁵ In 1968, Nigeria submitted a restitution project to ICOM (the International Council of Museums), requesting Western museums to make available and return several significant objects from Great Benin to the national museum that had just been opened in Lagos. They never received any response to their request.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Idem. 65 & 123-125

⁴¹ Sarr & Savoyy, 2018, 3 & 15

⁴² Van Beurden, 2017, 87

⁴³ Idem. 125

⁴⁴ van Beurden, 2017, 123-173

⁴⁵ Sarr & Savoyy, 2018, 18

⁴⁶ idem. 18

Van Beurden has argued that the European former colonies and their museums have generally developed strategies to minimise the loss of colonial objects.⁴⁷ He notes that the sporadic return of a small number of objects served other goals than to undo the injustices of the past, instead these returns were intended as an instrument of foreign policy and cultural diplomacy in order to safeguard other major economic interests.⁴⁸ He notes that since the independence of the former colonies, only a very small amount of objects have been returned, and when this happened European countries rather spoke of 'gifts' or 'transfers', rather than 'returns' or 'restitutions'.⁴⁹ This reluctance to use certain vocabulary was caused by the conviction that the objects had not been acquired unlawfully or improperly.⁵⁰ The European institutions generally strongly opposed the notion that the objects in their collections would have been acquired improperly. This European attitude towards returning colonial objects is probably best illustrated in the 2003 *Declaration on the Importance of Universal Museums*, issued by a group of major museums in Europe and the USA. The declaration emphasizes the need for discouraging the contemporary illegal traffic in 'archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects'.⁵¹ But it argues that objects acquired in earlier times should be viewed in the light of different sensitivities and values, reflective of that earlier era, and therefore there is no reason to return them. In addition, the declaration claims that after many years in Western museums, the objects have now become a part of their own history.

In a strictly legal sense, it is often clear that the contemporary Western museums or the nations of which they are part, are the official owners of the cultural objects.⁵² Relevant hard law instruments and conventions that deal with the illicit outflow of objects from their countries of origin only came into existence in the latter part of the 20th century. The two most prominent conventions are the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* and the 1995 *UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects*.⁵³ The two offer no legal solution for disputes about colonial

⁴⁷ van Beurden 2017, 133-134 & 182

⁴⁸ Idem. 167-168 & 184-185

⁴⁹ Idem. 168-171

⁵⁰ Idem. 168-171 & 182

⁵¹ Declaration, 2003

⁵² For a discussion on the hard and soft law instruments dealing with cultural objects see van Beurden, 2017, 99-118

⁵³ Idem. 100-101

objects, since the conventions are non-retroactive. In addition to these hard law instruments, a number of soft law instruments have been published such as UN resolutions and declarations, codes of conducts and guiding principles. But since these documents are not binding, the return of colonial objects to their countries of origin has mainly relied on moral considerations, rather than legal ones.

This distinction between legal and moral motivations for the return of cultural objects is also relevant for the terminology that is used. So far, the terms restitution, repatriation and return have occurred in this paper, but the terms are distinctly different. Restitution is a legal concept that is used for undoing the wrongful act of disputable acquisitions. The term came out of UNESCO discussions in the late 1960s that were concerned with the illicit trafficking of antiquities and it is also used in discourse about artworks looted in the Nazi era. Essentially it denotes the return of an object to its rightful owner, based on an analysis of property rights.⁵⁴ Repatriation on the other hand, refers to objects that are considered to have a patria, Latin for fatherland.⁵⁵ This is often a state or sub-state groups such as an indigenous people. Repatriation is often applied where the claim is perceived as being moral, rather than legal.⁵⁶ Thus for the present thesis, which is concerned with sacred colonial objects, the notion of repatriation is suitable. In addition, the more general term 'return' has also often been used. This term essentially overlaps with the above definition of repatriation, being not a legal matter, but one of cultural, historical, or moral judgement.⁵⁷

1.5 The recent intensification of the repatriation movement

Up to this point, Western states and their museums have only sporadically returned colonial objects to their countries and communities of origin.⁵⁸ Yet, there has been somewhat of a shift in attitude among many heritage professionals in recent years. As it was discussed in the previous section, Western states and museums have long fought the idea of returning colonial objects, because they claimed that the objects were obtained legally. However, over the past three decades or so, the moral dimension of returning objects that have a great significance to their communities and countries of

⁵⁴ van Beurden, 2017, 33 & Bienkowski, 2015, 432

⁵⁵ van Beurden, 2017, 33

⁵⁶ idem, 432-433

⁵⁷ Bienkowski, 2015, 433

⁵⁸ van Beurden 2017, Sarr & Savoy, 2018, 16-17,

origin has become prevalent in the discourse about colonial objects. The notion that objects of particular historical, cultural or religious importance for their countries and communities of origin should be eligible for return has become a prominent feature in the debate. According to Piotr Bienkowski we increasingly find museums directors and curators who see repatriation as a legitimate and morally correct thing to do, and who believe that museums should be proactive actors in these processes.⁵⁹ The impetus for this development has come from indigenous communities, especially in settler countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, who have increasingly been speaking out and demanding cultural objects of their ancestors to be returned by Western museums.⁶⁰ They have advocated especially for the return of certain sensitive objects of which it was vital that they would be restored and returned such as human remains of ancestors and sacred and funerary objects. This development will be discussed extensively in the next chapter, but for now it is important to note that since the 1990's Western museums have increasingly been returning such culturally sensitive objects to indigenous communities, especially the repatriation of human remains seems to have progressively found its way into the institutional consciousness.⁶¹

Despite these changes, the repatriation of cultural objects has remained a slowly evolving matter, with only sporadic instances of actual returns. Yet, in the past four years, the debate has intensified and many Western countries and museums have been very active in publishing guidelines and reports that deal with the return of colonial objects. The catalyst for this development was in 2017 when French president Emmanuel Macron gave a public speech at the University of Ouagadougou, in Burkina-Faso, in which he emphasized the severity of the situation in which a large part of the African heritage is kept in French museums. Macron stated that “within five years, I want the conditions to exist for temporary or permanent returns of African heritage to Africa”.⁶² Following his speech, Macron instructed the French Ministry of Culture to prepare a report to further reflect on the return of cultural goods to African countries and to establish recommendations and guidelines on how to proceed. In November 2018 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy published their now famous *Rapport sur la Restitution du Patrimoine culturelle africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. This report

⁵⁹ Bienkowski, 2015, 431

⁶⁰ Deutsches Museums Bund, 2018, 4

⁶¹ Sarr & Savoy, 2018, 17

⁶² Paquette, 2020, 2

advises to return objects that have been acquired in unlawful or immoral manners, if a country of origin asks for them. The report was very innovative in that it reversed the burden of proof: when a country would claim an object, it is not up to this country to prove the illicit provenance of the object, but it is up to the museum to prove that the object was obtained legitimately.⁶³ Many have viewed this report as too radical, and its recommendations have not been fully followed up.⁶⁴ In the aftermath of Macron's speech the German Museums Bund has also published guidelines for dealing with requests for the return of colonial objects. A first document was published in 2018 and in 2019 the association came with a revised version. A remarkable change was made in the second version of the report. In the first version it was stated that objects are eligible for return when the legal and ethical standards of the time were violated when an object was acquired or if the circumstances under which it was acquired contravene today's standards.⁶⁵ In the second version another type of object was added as appropriate for return, namely objects that are 'of special significance for the former owners or keepers'.⁶⁶ This emphasis on the inclusion of objects with cultural significance can also be observed in recent publications from the Netherlands. In 2019, the National Museum of World Cultures (a body of four museums with collections from all over the world) has published guidelines for the return of objects.⁶⁷ In addition, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science published an advice on dealing with colonial collections in 2020.⁶⁸ Both these documents emphasized that objects that had been acquired in illegal ways or objects that had been involuntarily lost by their original owners, should be returned. In addition they mention that objects of great cultural, heritage or religious value to the countries of origin should also be eligible for return.

In sum, it is evident that over the past years the debate about the return of colonial objects has intensified. Currently we see that roughly two categories of objects are seriously considered in claims for returns. The first concerns objects of which it can be demonstrated that they were either acquired illegally or that the former owners were involuntarily separated from the objects. The second category concerns objects that are

⁶³ Sarr & Savoy, 2018

⁶⁴ Paquette, 2020, 8-12

⁶⁵ German Museums Association, 2018, 94-96

⁶⁶ German Museums Association, 2019, 146-148

⁶⁷ NMVW, 2019

⁶⁸ Adviescomissie Nationaal Beliedskader Koloniale Collecties, 2020

of great historical, cultural or religious significance to the descendant communities or countries of origin. Sacred objects are central to this second category, and over the past years many sacred objects have been returned to their respective communities and countries of origin. The next chapter will discuss the particular issues involved in repatriations of such objects.

Chapter 2. Repatriating sacred objects: current practices and the focus on religious continuity

2.1 Defining sacred objects

Throughout history, sacred objects have been central to various religious practices and traditions worldwide. The kinds of objects that are considered sacred and their respective functions can vary greatly within different cultural contexts. In many religious traditions, icons and depictions of deities and ancestors are considered to embody spiritual powers and they are worshipped through rituals and sacrifices. Many religions also have rich traditions of relic veneration, where surviving material from important people such as saints are venerated and are believed to contain special powers. Other examples of sacred objects are tools or instruments that are used in rituals, such as dance sticks or masks. Even natural objects such as stones and shells are considered sacred in certain contexts and are believed to carry powers that can bring fortune or cause misfortune. From these examples it is evident that many different kinds of objects can be sacred within certain contexts. But what exactly makes an object sacred? And how do these objects differ from those that are not sacred?

The term 'sacred' is widely used, however there is no consensus about a straightforward definition of the concept. In much of academic and popular usage, the term is often used as a simple synonym for religion, with sacred texts referring to scriptures of established religions, sacred sites as places for religious worship, and sacred objects as objects of religious relevance.⁶⁹ For this analysis the sacred is not used as a synonym of religious. Here, a more confined definition of the sacred is required. Not all religious objects are sacred; some of these objects merely shed a light on religion and help to tell a story. Take for example paintings of biblical scenes that one finds in churches. Few will regard them as inherently sacred, but they can play a crucial role within the church in illustrating a particular biblical story.

Then what is the sacred? In the study of religion, the sacred has often been defined as both highly transcendental and essentially social, as an otherness that transcends the ordinary world and as an otherness that shapes the social world. In his very influential work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), French sociologist Émile Durkheim has argued that religion is essentially about the separation

⁶⁹ Lynch, 2012, 9

between the realms of *the sacred* and *the profane*. Sacred things, he argued, are always set apart as superior, powerful, forbidden to normal contact, and deserving of great respect. Profane things on the other hand are the opposite; they belong to the ordinary, uneventful, and practical routine of everyday life. In Durkheim's words "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred things*, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden".⁷⁰ Further, Durkheim has argued that the aim of the sacred is to "unite into one moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them".⁷¹ The key word here is 'community'. He argues that sacred things always involve large concerns: the welfare and interests of a larger group of people, not just of a few. Profane things, on the other hand, are smaller matters; they reflect the day-to-day business of ordinary individuals such as family and working life. This thesis follows Durkheim's notion of the sacred as that which is set apart from the ordinary, everyday rhythms of life, but set apart in such a way that it stands at the centre of community formation.

Even though the sacred is not used as a synonym for religion, the religious aspect is fundamental to the notion of sacred used in this paper. David Chidester has argued that in between the transcendence of the sacred and the social dynamics of the sacred, we find ongoing mediations in which anything can be sacralised through the work of intensive interpretation, regular ritualization, and contestation over the means, modes and forces of the sacred.⁷² So in this sense, anything can become sacred through the work of a community. It is important to note that there are also many 'secular' objects that have undergone some kind of sacralisation process. An example of this is provided by Robey Callahan, who has argued that the Liberty Bell in the USA has been transformed from an obscure and everyday object into a 'sacred symbol' of American freedom.⁷³ He notes how over the course of 250 years, the bell gained special attention and mythic stories were written and promoted about the bell and its role in the American Revolutionary War. Eventually it became known as the Liberty Bell and Callahan writes that today the bell can be found in a shrine-like museum and it is promoted and visited as a sacred object, with people touching it for good luck. These kinds of 'sacred objects' as in the context of secular traditions are not the subject of the

⁷⁰ Durkheim, 1912, quoted in Pals, 2015, 91

⁷¹ Idem.

⁷² Chidester, 2018, 30

⁷³ Callahan, 1999

present thesis. Instead this thesis is specifically concerned with sacred objects in a religious context.

In short, this paper considers sacred objects to be objects that are part of a religious tradition, they are generally connected to a transcendental or higher power - either as occupying a position of power, or as intermediaries with that power - and the objects are found at the centre of community formations.

2.2 Repatriations to indigenous communities

In the previous chapter, it was described how Western museums have obtained many cultural objects from all over the world during the period of European colonial domination. Many of these objects were considered sacred by the communities that produced them. The collecting of these sacred objects took place in many different contexts. Some of them were found in the abandoned ruins of temples, churches, or other ritual places during private expeditions. In addition, many sacred objects were also collected from 'living' traditions. The previous chapter touched upon the collecting by Christian missionaries all over the world, whereby objects from indigenous religious traditions were obtained through both voluntary donations but also through force and theft. Further, it was also noted how, in certain settings, graves of indigenous people were robbed and sacred objects, human remains, and other funerary objects were taken. All these different collecting enterprises have resulted in the presence of a great variety of sacred objects within contemporary Western museums.

The issue of repatriating sacred objects emerged from the 1960's and the 1970's with indigenous rights movements in settler countries most notably the USA, Australia and New Zealand. During this period, native inhabitants of the former settler colonies gained political influence and recognition. Native communities became more vocal about their resentment of the public display of indigenous human remains and their funerary and religious objects in Western museums and they started to demand repatriations.⁷⁴ Within these former settler colonies official and unofficial mechanisms have been created to facilitate the repatriations of these objects. In the United States, the indigenous demands culminated in the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation act (NAGPRA). This law required museums to list, and to return when asked, human remains and three types of cultural items: Funerary objects, sacred

⁷⁴ Bray, 2001, 1-5; Strutz, 2013, 172

objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, to lineal descendants and federally recognized tribes.⁷⁵ Australia had in part led the way with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act in 1984.⁷⁶ On an international level indigenous communities have been backed by the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Especially article 12.2 is crucial, which states that:

‘States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned.’⁷⁷

UNDRIP is retroactive and it has been signed by former settler colonies and the former European colonial powers. Even though the declaration is nonbinding, it has been argued that it is the most far-reaching and comprehensive instrument available to indigenous people for repatriation on a global scale.⁷⁸ As is evident from the documents mentioned here, the debate about the care of sacred objects has been closely connected to debates about the care of human remains.⁷⁹ In practice, these documents have resulted in the repatriations of numerous human remains, funerary objects and sacred objects to indigenous communities from settler countries over the past thirty years.

What these repatriations of sacred objects have looked like in practice can be illustrated with some high-profile examples. A first example is provided by the repatriations of Zuni war gods from different museums in the USA.⁸⁰ The Zuni are Native American Pueblo peoples, native to the Zuni river Valley. Zuni war gods, or *Ahayu:da*, in Zuni language, are cylindrical wooden sculptures. The sculptures are made during annual ceremonies and when they have been completed they are placed in shrines that surround the Zuni homeland (fig. 1). When the newly created *Ahayu:da* are placed in the shrines, the previous ones are ‘retired’ and respectfully laid on a nearby pile with other retired *Ahayu:da*. All these war gods remain near their shrines, exposed to natural elements, until they disintegrate and return to the earth. The war gods contain vast and

⁷⁵ Nash & Colwell, 2020, 226

⁷⁶ Paine, 2013, 46; Strutz, 2013, 172

⁷⁷ United Nations General Assembly, 2007, article 12.2, 12

⁷⁸ van Beurden, 2020, 70-71

⁷⁹ For an account on repatriations of human remains see Jenkins, T., 2011

⁸⁰ For accounts on the repatriations of Zuni war gods see Colwell 2014; O’Keefe, 2008, 232-233

destructive powers and when they are in their proper homes and taken care of by religious officials, their powers are channelled in ways to protect and order the universe. Zuni traditionalists have emphasized that the retired war gods on the pile retain an important role in Zuni ritual until they are disintegrated. In spite of this, numerous of these retired war gods have been taken by Western collectors since the late 1800's. It has been argued that some of the collectors saw these piles of wooden statues believing that they had been discarded and had no more value for the Zuni and so taking one or two would not harm anyone.⁸¹ On the other hand it has been emphasized that there also must have been collectors and ethnologists that were aware of the degree to which Zunis value these war gods, since it was precisely this importance that made them such valuable collectibles.⁸² In 1978 Zuni leaders started to request repatriation of the war gods known to have been taken. The leaders emphasized that the war gods were not simple inanimate statues. The images are made in acts of creation and even though they are constructed from inanimate materials like wood, feathers and paint, they are considered as living deities and they are spoken of as persons in Zuni languages.⁸³ By 1990 dozens of these war gods had been returned to Zuni land as a result of the efforts made by the tribal delegations to convince museum professionals of the inanimateness of the objects and their crucial roles in the performance of Zuni religion. After NAGPRA became law in 1990 the return of war gods by museums that received federal funding became inevitable.⁸⁴ After their repatriation, the war gods have been placed back in open shrines to eventually disintegrate back into the earth.⁸⁵

Other important examples of repatriations of sacred objects include the return of Aboriginal secret-sacred objects from Australian museums. These types of objects are traditionally used in religious ceremonies and they are restricted from being viewed by, or sometimes even known to, the uninitiated and to members of the opposite sex.⁸⁶ Many of these objects have ended up in Western museums and Aboriginal people have pursued their repatriation and/or cultural appropriate management. Over the past years repatriation of these secret-sacred objects has received explicit support from all

⁸¹ O'Keefe 2008,, 232

⁸² Colwell, 2014, 13

⁸³ Idem, 13

⁸⁴ Idem, 13

⁸⁵ Colwell, 2014, 19

⁸⁶ Pickering , 2015

levels of government in Australia and the removal of public display, and the return of such objects, is now a general part of Australian museums policies.⁸⁷ It has been noted that after their repatriation some of the objects have been deposited with representative organisations, where they are kept in secure stores and made available to authorised custodians upon demand. In other cases, custodians take the objects and store them in an appropriate keeping place such as caves or special huts, where eventually they will also disintegrate, as they would have done after use traditionally.⁸⁸

In addition to these national repatriations, there have also been repatriations of sacred objects from European museums to indigenous communities in other countries. Because there are no hard laws in place in Europe, these returns have been more incidental and have been undertaken voluntarily by museums. An example is the Haisla spirit pole, which was returned from the National Museum of Ethnography in Sweden to the Haisla people in British Columbia.⁸⁹ The pole was created for G'psgoalux, the chief of the Eagle clan in Haisla, in 1862. In that year, the chief lost his whole family due to a smallpox epidemic. According to the legend, during a supernatural experience, the spirit Tsooda reunited the chief with his deceased children. After this experience, the chief commissioned the production of the memorial pole, which acted as a portal to the spiritual world and it stood as a gateway to the village for fifty-seven years, until it was taken and shipped to the Ethnographic museum in Sweden in 1929 (Fig. 2). The spirit pole was returned as a gift to the Haisla people in 2006 (Fig. 3). Following its return the pole was placed in a shopping mall, where school children could listen to elders telling the history of the pole. In 2012 the contemporary clan chief decided that it was time to let the pole rest and it was moved to an old graveyard, close to the original place of the pole, where it was left to disintegrate, as would have happened if the pole had stayed in its original context.⁹⁰

What is evident from these examples is that the absence of these sacred objects from their place of origin has raised particular problems. Often these objects are central to certain belief systems or used in rituals that require them to be treated with special reverence. Their absence means that the system cannot work properly and it can cause damage to the bond between the people and the sacred. In general, when these objects

⁸⁷ Idem. 427-429

⁸⁸ Pickering, 2015, 439

⁸⁹ Greenfield 2007, 316-320

⁹⁰ Björklund, 2018

have been repatriated, they were incorporated back into the proper setting of the religious traditions from which they came.

2.3 The unique position of sacred objects as non-commodities

So far it has been demonstrated that sacred objects represent an important and unique focus point within repatriation debates. For now it is important to define more precisely why these objects are so unique and why they occupy such an exceptional position in the repatriation discourse. One of the reasons for the uniqueness of sacred objects is that they escape the conceptual category of commodities. A commodity is a thing that is intended principally for exchange. Things that are not intended for exchange can become subject to the dynamics of exchange and this process is referred to as commoditization.⁹¹ Thus, anything that can be bought for money, or exchanged for something that is seen to represent the same value, is at that point in its life a commodity. In his highly influential essay Igor Kopytoff has argued that objects have cultural biographies, just as people do and at the centre of his argument is the notion that objects can move in and out of states of commoditization throughout their lifetimes.⁹² The sacred objects discussed in this paper have found their ways into museums due to their commoditization at certain points in their biographies.

According to Kopytoff, exchange is a fundamental and universal part of human activity, and every culture utilizes commodities. However, every culture has its own framework and its own way of identifying and making things into commodities. Out of the total range of things available in a particular society, only some of them are considered as appropriate for marking as commodities. In addition, in every society there are things that are publically precluded from being commoditized. For example, in most cultures it is inconceivable for a person to sell their mother. This fact, or value, is obvious. In this respect Kopytoff has opposed commoditization to singularization.⁹³ When we regard something as singular we regard it as something non-buyable, something priceless. Kopytoff has argued that Western economic thought on what kinds of things are appropriate as commodities is governed by a polarity between people and

⁹¹ For discussions on commoditization processes see Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986

⁹² Kopytoff, 1986

⁹³ Kopytoff, 1986, 73-77

things.⁹⁴ On the one side we find things – physical objects and rights to them – that represent the natural universe of commodities. At the opposite pole we place people, who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization. In contemporary Western culture, commoditization of people is morally condemned, with the clearest example being slavery. Another example is that adoption of children through financial compensation is viewed as child-selling and it has been made illegal. There are also things that escape this rigid duality between people and objects, such as human organs, female reproductive capacities and ova. The commoditization of such things causes a lot of discomfort and has often been made illegal in Western countries. Other examples of things that fall outside this strict dichotomy include objects with certain symbolic values that have strong connections to a certain person. Take for example a precious heirloom, like a wedding ring that has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations. These objects feel like more than just things and selling such an object will almost certainly come with great feelings of discomfort. The sacred objects that have been discussed in the previous sections are remarkable because they also fall outside of this clear dichotomy between things and persons. These things are not simple inanimate objects. They are animated with, or connected to, a force or transcendent power and therefore they escape this rigid category of commodities. The human remains we find in museum contexts are obviously also part of this grey space between persons and things.

Further, it is important to note that sacred objects do not just escape the category of commodities; in fact, they have often been created specifically as non-commodities. This notion is best explained through the work of Arjun Appadurai, who has presented his scheme of ‘trajectories’ (which largely parallels Kopytoff’s methodology of cultural biographies).⁹⁵ According to Appadurai, in order to understand the different meanings and values of objects, we must follow their biographies, or what he calls, their trajectories. In his work, special attention is paid to the cultural intention of certain objects. It looks at what roles objects are anticipated to play in a social system, and what happens when cultural expectations diverge from actual practice. The sacred objects we find in museums belong to a type of commodity that Appadurai has identified as

⁹⁴ Idem. 84-86

⁹⁵ Appadurai, 1989

commodities by *diversion*.⁹⁶ These are objects that have been placed into a commodity state even though originally they were specifically protected from this. Within different societies, we find certain objects that are removed or protected from the relevant social commodity context. The best-known examples of such “enclaved commodities” are perhaps royal monopolies, but this also applies to much of what is considered as the symbolic inventory of a society, such as public lands, monuments and ritual and sacred objects.⁹⁷ Appadurai has argued that within different societies; certain zones of activity and production are devoted to producing objects of value that cannot be commoditized by anybody and he names the space of ritual in small-scale societies as such an enclaved zone. According to Appadurai, it is a widespread tendency to put sacred objects beyond the reach of commoditization and he notes that when such objects become commoditized this is only under conditions of massive cultural change.⁹⁸ This notion, that sacred objects are produced in enclaved zones becomes evident when we look at the examples of the Zuni war gods, the Aboriginal secret-sacred objects and the Haisla spirit pole from the previous section. These objects were created solely to fulfil central roles in the ritual and religious lives of the communities. They are a category of objects that can be called “terminal” commodities.⁹⁹ These are objects that, because of the context, meaning, and purpose of their production, make only *one* journey from production to consumption. After their initial commoditization the objects are placed into the positions that their sacred destinations required of them and afterwards they are not allowed to re-enter the commodity state. The sacred objects discussed so far have all been created for ongoing sacred purposes or to disintegrate after their sacred purpose was fulfilled. The arrival of sacred objects within museum collections is therefore the result of what Appadurai has called *diversions* of their anticipated trajectories. This has happened through theft and looting, but also through abandonment, sale or gift giving under conditions of cultural and religious change. In addition, sacred objects have also been sold or exchanged by indigenous individuals who actually had no authority to sell or dispose of the objects. For example, there are accounts of Aboriginal guides and informants who have been killed for revealing

⁹⁶ Appadurai, 1989, 16

⁹⁷ Kopytoff, 1989, 73

⁹⁸ Appadurai, 1989, 22-23

⁹⁹ Kopytoff, 1989, 75; Appadurai, 1989, 23

locations of, or selling, sacred objects.¹⁰⁰ Thus, sacred objects represent a unique category because they are made to be kept by the community and generally individuals do not have the authority to sell them or dispose of them.¹⁰¹

2.4 Persistence of sacredness within museum contexts

It is clear that the arrival of sacred objects within museum collections is the result of diversions from their anticipated, sacred, trajectories. These diversions have often caused problems and feelings of distress among descendant communities and this brings us to the primary reason for the repatriation of sacred objects. Sacred objects have been repatriated to descendant communities because for these communities the sacred value of these objects has remained the same, despite their radical recontextualization. In an article on sacred objects in museum spaces Ronald Grimes has argued that when sacred objects enter a museum space, they lose their sacredness and they become scientific-aesthetic objects.¹⁰² He notes that the ritual of installing a sacred object in a museum is a 'performance of aesthetic values, an educational and political ceremony, that fundamentally alters the function of the image'.¹⁰³ He has proposed that the sacredness of objects should rather be considered as a "moment in a cultural and historical process rather than as an allusive thing in itself".¹⁰⁴ While it is obviously true that sacred objects in museums are strangers in a strange land and visitors of the museum will generally not be devoted to these objects, it is not correct to state that the objects have simply lost their sacredness. As the examples in the previous section have demonstrated, these objects often continue to hold their sacred value to the descendant communities from which they originate.

Chipp Colwell has proposed an interesting framework to assess this. In his article on the repatriation of sacred objects, and of Zuni war gods in particular; he has argued that certain sacred objects, like the war gods, present a particular kind of sacredness, which he refers to as 'intrinsic sacredness'.¹⁰⁵ He has argued that intrinsically sacred

¹⁰⁰ Pickering, 2015, 432

¹⁰¹ Appadurai's theory of ritual objects as enclaved commodities largely parallels the concept of *inalienable possessions* in the work of Annette Weiner. Weiner has used this term to describe wealth objects that are kept out of circulation by their owners. See Weiner, 1985

¹⁰² Grimes, 1992, 422

¹⁰³ Idem, 422

¹⁰⁴ Idem, 419

¹⁰⁵ Colwell, 2014

objects have an inherent sacredness that always persists despite radical re-contextualization.¹⁰⁶ According to Colwell, intrinsically sacred objects start their trajectories with a moment of creation in which their sacredness is established and in which these objects are imbued with agency. Further he notes that the knowledge to produce these objects is often secret and esoteric and the meaning and value that these objects embody are static and multiple meanings cannot be accommodated. Colwell has opposed these intrinsically sacred objects to what he calls 'extrinsically sacred objects'.¹⁰⁷ These are objects whose sacredness is not inherent, but is dependent on their context. An example of an extrinsically is the Liberty Bell that has been discussed previously in this chapter, and which has also been referred to as a 'secular sacred' object. For these objects, radical re-contextualization may result in the dissipation of their sacredness. Extrinsically sacred objects become sacred through historical events, the objects are inanimate and the knowledge to produce such objects is public and exoteric. Their meanings are not static and they can accommodate multiple meanings. According to Colwell, the distinction between these two types is important because the diversion of these objects' trajectories creates different kinds of predicaments.¹⁰⁸ Colwell's main argument is that the diversion of intrinsically sacred objects from their trajectories causes a unique form of loss and suffering among the descendant communities. In the case of the Zuni War Gods, when they were taken to museums, this diversion created ethical concerns among the Zunis because they perceived that these gods would suffer and that their diversion would threaten the wellbeing of the community and even the world. According to Colwell, it is the intrinsic sacredness of these objects that creates an ongoing need for these communities to have authority over these objects. The tireless efforts by contemporary members of descendant communities can be explained by the need for the repossession of, and reconnection to, these sacred objects and the urgency to reintegrate them back into their proper settings where they can receive appropriate treatment.

Colwell's article provides a very clear framework that explains why the diversion of certain sacred objects from their trajectories can be very painful for contemporary descendant communities, and why contemporary members of these communities will go

¹⁰⁶ Idem. 16-19

¹⁰⁷ Idem. 16-19

¹⁰⁸ Colwell, 2014, 18

to great lengths to ensure the return of these sacred objects into their proper settings. However, by stating that the sacredness of intrinsically sacred objects is static and always persists despite radical re-contextualization, Colwell fails to recognize one very important aspect of sacred objects, namely the cultures in which they function and their versatility. As discussed in the definition of sacred objects provided earlier in this chapter, a fundamental aspect of sacred objects is their link to the communities in which they function. The sacredness of objects can never be completely intrinsic because it is dependent on descendant communities themselves and the developments that take place in these communities. Some of the objects that we find in museums check all the boxes of Colwell's category of intrinsically sacred objects, yet because the communities from which they came have gone through great cultural changes, they might not view these objects as sacred anymore, or their sacred values and functions might have changed over time. Colwell's article has focused on the suffering and ethical issues caused by diversion of sacred objects whose values have remained the same over time. He has focussed on descendant communities that have held on very tightly to the traditions from their ancestors from whom the objects were collected. This is a tendency that is actually very widespread throughout the repatriation debate, where a very strong focus on cultural continuity is omnipresent.

2.5 Legitimate claimants and the focus on cultural continuity

As it was previously discussed, in the current situation, museums or other holding institutions are the legal owners of the objects they hold. When descendant communities or countries of origin wish to see objects repatriated, they have to submit a claim for the return of these objects. In places where statutory provisions are in place, such as the USA and Australia, these will be used to guide a decision. In places where such legislations do not exist, repatriation processes are often on a case-by-case basis and guided by policy statements, such as the Code of Ethics for Museums published by the ICOM (International Council of Museums).¹⁰⁹ Sometimes there are national guidelines available as well, such as the *guidelines for dealing with objects from colonial contexts*, published by the German Museums Bund in 2019.¹¹⁰ In addition, many museums have

¹⁰⁹ ICOM, 2004, article 6.2.

¹¹⁰ German Museums Bund, 2019, pages 144- 155 provide recommendations for the return of objects.

also created their own policies for reviewing such claims.¹¹¹ In the first chapter of this thesis it was argued that generally there are two types of objects that are considered eligible for return. The first concerns objects that were illegally or immorally removed from their owners. In deciding whether such claim should be granted, provenance research into the collecting histories of the objects are conducted in order to find evidence for the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the ownership of the objects by the holding institutions. Among these, we also find claims on sacred objects, but here an emphasis on the sacred values of the objects is not always necessary if it can be demonstrated that these objects were stolen or involuntarily lost. For the second type however, those objects that are claimed because of their cultural, historical or religious value, the decision on whether these objects should be returned is based on a different kind of process. In these cases the country, group or individual making the claim is required to demonstrate their legitimacy to make exclusive claims to these objects. When groups make claims for certain objects based on their cultural value they are generally put through extensive tests and trials to prove their legitimacy.¹¹² Most importantly, they are required to prove that there is a clear cultural link between them and the groups from which these objects were collected. Within the guidelines that are used to assess these claims there is typically a strong emphasis on the necessity of cultural past-present continuity. In NAGPRA, for example, it is articulated that in order to make a legally proper claim it must be established that there is an ‘affiliation’ between the claimant and the historic or prehistoric group from which the item originated.¹¹³ In other words, past-present continuity must be demonstrated empirically. Under NAGPRA “cultural affiliation” means that there is “a relationship of shared group identity which can be reasonably traced historically or prehistorically between a present day Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization and an identifiable earlier group”.¹¹⁴ NAGPRA’s underpinnings are legal in nature and therefore everything is strictly defined. In the document only federally recognized tribes within federal definitions of identity are included, thereby it excludes tribes that regard themselves as Native American but that lack this federal status.¹¹⁵ This essentialist view on Native American groups is one of the

¹¹¹ For example NMVW 2019, Oxford Universities and Libraries, 2020

¹¹² Bienkowski, 2015, 437

¹¹³ NAGPRA, 1990,

¹¹⁴ NAGPRA, 1990, section 2.2

¹¹⁵ Bienkowski, 2015, 438

most prominent criticisms on the legislation.¹¹⁶ The emphasis on cultural continuity can also be observed in guidelines published by European museums. For example, in the guidelines published by the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, a “cultural continuity/genuine link” is emphasized. This refers to a “demonstrable continuity/genuine link between the claimants and the cultural object(s) claimed, in terms of national heritage, persistence of beliefs, persistence of culture.”¹¹⁷ The guidelines from the Oxford University Museums and Libraries states that the board will take due regard of evidence “that there is a genuine link or cultural continuity with the object(s) in question.”¹¹⁸ It is evident that these policies have been written in response to the efforts of the indigenous descendant communities from settler countries to retrieve their ancestral cultural heritage and human remains. In the documents, the notions of which groups are legitimate claimants for ownership are tied to tightly defined concepts of lineal descent and kinship and cultural continuity.¹¹⁹

In their 2013 article *Contesting ‘Claims’ on Human Remains: Which traditions are treated as legitimate and why?* Piotr Bienkowski and Elizabeth Burns Coleman have argued that a lack of a demonstrable continuity has been used as a motivation to decline certain repatriation requests on human remains. In the article, they argue that decisions on the legitimacy of claimants have generally been informed by a distinction between religions or other deep connections that have been perceived as traditional, as having a requisite historical connection with contested human remains, and religious beliefs and connections that are considered to be invented or re-invented. They argue that especially when claims are made on the basis of religious beliefs, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that the religious beliefs of the group needs to have the right kind of historical continuity to be considered legitimate.¹²⁰ One of the examples provided to substantiate this argument concerns discussions that have taken place regarding Indigenous Australian human remains. They note that certain indigenous communities have been accused of ‘being inauthentic, culturally extinct, inventing traditions and of moving away from traditional beliefs and rituals’.¹²¹ They state that many of the

¹¹⁶ Nash, Colwell, 2020, 228

¹¹⁷ NMVW, 2019, 7, article 5.3.3

¹¹⁸ Oxford Universities and Libraries, 2020, article 4.3

¹¹⁹ Bienkowski & Coleman, 2013, 95-96

¹²⁰ idem.

¹²¹ Idem. 83

Aboriginal people who have been the most visible in quests for repatriations have been those who are perceived externally as 'non-traditional' people and they have been accused of making claims for political purposes rather than genuine cultural and religious concerns. The article states that such accusations were commonly, explicitly or implicitly linked with the assertion that such requests were invalid because they had no basis in 'traditional' beliefs and were being made by non-traditional people.¹²² This resistance to repatriation to such groups uncovers the perception that only 'traditional' Aboriginal people are somehow 'real' Aborigines, and that they must practice a 'pristine' Aboriginal culture and lead a traditional lifestyle to be accepted as legitimate.

Retrieving sacred objects is thus a very difficult enterprise for descendant communities, as they are required to prove their legitimacy by the standards of the Western museums. Even when claimants tick all the boxes of 'legitimacy' and when they live in countries where legislations are in place, their requests are still not always accommodated.¹²³ For now it is important to note that the focus on cultural continuity in repatriation claims is unjust and even harmful because it demands from descendant communities that they always remain the same over time. The cultural groups discussed so far, which have successfully repatriated sacred objects, have been those groups that have held on very tightly to the culture and religious traditions of their ancestors. It should be emphasized that these cultures are a minority and they are greatly outnumbered by cultures that have gone through great changes since they were affected by colonialism. These kinds of communities, with lower levels of cultural continuity, have been largely overlooked in discourses on repatriations of sacred objects so far. The next chapter will deal with sacred objects from these contexts and how these objects have been involved in repatriation processes and debates.

¹²² Idem. 84

¹²³ For examples see Colwell, 2014, 20-21

Chapter 3: Sacred objects and the reality of religious discontinuity

3.1 Religious discontinuity during the European colonial era

Religions are often defined by their longstanding traditions and their tendency to endure through time. Yet throughout history religions have also been characterized by large changes and even the disappearance of certain traditions. In his article *How do Religions End*, Joel Robbins has argued that cultural anthropology, and especially the wing that studies religion, has largely been what he terms ‘a science of continuity’.¹²⁴ By this he means that the anthropology of religion has generally focused on religious continuity and that continuity is its null hypothesis: it does not need to be explained, but instead it can be assumed.¹²⁵ Religions persist, because this is what they do. Their doctrines, rituals and systems of authority, amongst other features, are designed to ensure their persistence. Robbins has argued that in the study of religion so far, scholars have rarely asked the question of how religions survive, especially during times of great cultural changes. A notable exception is the work of Steven Weitzman, a scholar of Jewish Studies. In his book *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity*, Weitzman has studied what he has called ‘the arts of cultural persistence’ that has allowed the Jews to foster the continuity of their religious traditions from the period between the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Weitzman suggests that Jews have employed a number of creative techniques in order to ensure the survival of the Jewish religion. Religious persistence, in Weitzman’s view, is a social project; it is something that people actively pursue, rather than something that just happens.¹²⁶ Like the Jewish community from Weitzman’s study, the indigenous communities that have been discussed in the previous chapter have also actively worked to keep their religious traditions alive throughout the era of colonialism. It is important to underscore that it has taken great effort from indigenous communities to hold on to their own cultures and religions in the face of the massive changes that were brought about by colonial domination. For the majority of communities and societies that have been affected by colonialism and the collecting frenzy that came with it, religious continuity has not been the outcome.

¹²⁴ Robbins, 2014, 3

¹²⁵ idem. 12

¹²⁶ Weitzman 2005

It was already briefly touched upon in the first chapter of this thesis that religion was an integral part of the colonial project, with large numbers of missionaries travelling all over the globe to spread the Christian faith. This is echoed in the African saying “When the whites came to our country we had the land, and they had the Bible; now we have the Bible and they have the land”.¹²⁷ In addition, European conquests were often justified by religious doctrines, such as the Roman Catholic division of the New World into Spanish and Portuguese Spheres or the Protestant notion of *Terra Nullius* (empty land), which deemed any territory empty of human habitation and thus available for European possession if the land was not being cultivated through settled agriculture.¹²⁸ The work of the tens of thousands of European missionaries has resulted in large amounts of conversions to Christianity on a global scale.¹²⁹ There are some historical examples of religions being completely replaced by other (Christian) traditions.¹³⁰ However, most of the time religious change is characterized by hybridity, mixing and merging, appropriation and subversion. Imperial religion was generally not imported as a ‘pure product’ to be consumed, but it was reworked within local and indigenous frameworks, resulting in many different local Christianities.¹³¹ The influence of the colonial era on the global religious landscape of today can hardly be overestimated. Over the past century, the centre of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorable away from Europe, southward, to Africa, South America, and eastward towards Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities can be found in these regions as a direct result of the efforts made throughout the European colonial era.¹³² Not only in terms of conversions has the colonial era left its traces in the religious spheres, but also through displacements of groups of people. Over the course of the transatlantic slave trade, many Africans were taken to the America’s and with them they exported their religious traditions. Such as the religious traditions of the Yoruba, which were made in Africa and remade in the Atlantic world into syncretic religions such as Santeria on Cuba and Voodoo on Haiti. By now it is obvious that the European colonial era

¹²⁷ Chidester, 2018, 106

¹²⁸ idem, 106

¹²⁹ See for example Nunn, 2010, on the conversions to Christianity in Africa

¹³⁰ For an example see Robbins, 2014, 4-10, on the disappearance of the Urapmin tradition and its replacement by Christianity.

¹³¹ For examples on how Christianity was adopted and reworked on local levels see Jenkins, P., 2011, 134-170

¹³² Jenkins, P., 2011, 1

was characterized by religious discontinuity rather than continuity. Thus, many of the religious traditions from which we find sacred objects in Western museums today have been greatly altered or have even disappeared over time. In addition, the sacred objects themselves have frequently gone through great alterations as well over the course of their lives as commodities. Often, the objects have been damaged by accident or even altered and adjusted to fit the desires of Western collectors.¹³³ This tendency of altering sacred objects for the art market and museum contexts is illustrated very vividly by the short film *Fang, an epic journey*, which was written and directed in 1990 by American scholar Suzan Vogel. The film follows the fictional life of a Fang statue after it leaves its original context of religious use in Africa in the early twentieth century.¹³⁴ Over the course of several decades, the statue is severely damaged. Among the damages that the statue endures are the loss of the reliquary – a box containing human remains – to which it was originally attached and the removal its penis, the metal rings around its neck and its feathers. At the end of the film, and after an eventful life, the statue looks completely different than it did in its original religious setting. In sum, simply repatriating and reinstalling sacred objects into their original religious settings is in many contexts not an option, since so many changes might have occurred over the course of their ‘lives’. This does not mean however, that the sacred values of these objects are lost and that the descendant communities have lost interest in them. Sacred objects from the past are frequently re-appropriated within new religious traditions and revivals.

3.2 Religious revivals and the re-appropriation of traditional material culture

The death of a religion, or its transformation into a different religion, does not mean that it is lost forever. Religions are comprised of ideas, beliefs, rituals, and other traditions and it is possible to revive these components, as whole systems or in parts, according to traditional customs or in new and revised ways. The reviving and revising of old religious traditions in creative and modern ways is a phenomenon that is observable in contemporary societies on a global scale.¹³⁵ In places that have been affected by colonialism, religious revivals of pre-colonial or ancient religions are frequent. Through

¹³³ Sarr & Savoy, 2018, 30

¹³⁴ While the film follows a fictional story, the events on which the story is based have taken place in reality. See van Damme, 2011, 17-19

¹³⁵ In the West, Modern spiritualities such as New Age spiritualities, Wicca, Druidry, modern Shamanism, and so on, all attempt to revive, re-create, and experiment with ancient religious traditions in contemporary contexts. See Aldridge, 2011, 181-207

revivals contemporary people are able to reconnect with the religious traditions of their ancestors. Further, revivals of pre-colonial religions have frequently been employed within frameworks of anti-colonial or post-colonial nationalistic frameworks.¹³⁶ The use of traditional religious art forms is often a fundamental part of these revivals and the employment of traditional forms of poetry, songs and dances can often be observed.¹³⁷ In addition, the material past – including monuments and artefacts – are often re-used and re-appropriated within these contexts.¹³⁸ Throughout the African continent, one can encounter revivals of pre-colonial indigenous religions. According to Kizito Chinedu Nweke the indigenous African religions “which were thought forgotten as part of the effects of aggressive Christianity are now gaining interest among Africans for various reasons”¹³⁹ Further he notes that this happens both within Christian frameworks and as part of anti-Christian movements.¹⁴⁰ The importance of the material aspect in revivals is evident from Nweke’s work, who has argued that revivals are most visible “in the trader who buries a charm in his or her shop hoping to attract more customers, in the driver who feels safer with a charm under his seat, and in the man who seeks for vengeance against injustice through an oracle” (a place or shrine used to foretell the future, to find the cause of a misfortune, or to make the wishes of deities, or ancestors, known).¹⁴¹ Further he notes that “it is possible to find written verses from the Koran or Christian Bible in an African amulet made by an African spiritualist”.¹⁴² The importance of traditional religious material culture is also illustrated in the reemployment of ancient Hindu temples in Indonesia for contemporary worship in the context of Hindu revivals.¹⁴³ Many of these ancient temples had fallen into disuse with the arrival of Islam in the fifteenth century. Since the 1970’s religious revivals of the ancient religions of Java have begun to occur and the use of ancient temples has become rather common in these movements. Another example can be found within the context of Maya revival movements. In these movements, pilgrimages are taking place to archaeological sites, such as ancient ceremonial pyramids and the Neo-Mayan rituals that are performed are

¹³⁶ Chidester, 2018, 110

¹³⁷ Idem. 110-111

¹³⁸ Strutz, 2013, 176 & 179

¹³⁹ Nweke, 2020, 305

¹⁴⁰ Idem. 305

¹⁴¹ Idem. 310

¹⁴² Idem. 310

¹⁴³ Reuter, 2001, 332

characterized by the use of specific accessories, ritual clothing and sets of objects.¹⁴⁴ From these examples it is evident that sacred materials from the past can be reemployed in the present. It is clear that descendant communities can express renewed interest in the religious lives of their ancestors and that sacred places and sacred objects that have been stripped of their sacred values in the course of cultural change can regain their sacred value within new contexts of revivals and re-appropriations.

3.3 Repatriation and reintegration of sacred objects

The reality of religious discontinuity and the contemporary potentialities of reemploying traditional religious material culture in new and somewhat reinvented manners is hardly accounted for in the current repatriation discourse on sacred objects. In the previous chapter it was discussed how repatriation processes have generally focused on communities with high levels of cultural and religious continuity and especially on communities from countries that have been exposed to settlement colonialism. In this discourse, religious change seems to be perceived as something that rules out a genuine connection to the sacred objects and descendant communities with lower levels of cultural continuity have not been seriously included in the discourse on repatriating sacred objects. In fact, it is difficult to find sources that deal with repatriations of sacred objects from communities that have gone through great changes. Two notable case studies of the return of such sacred objects that have been documented will be discussed here, namely the Oukwanyama stone and the Zimbabwe stone birds.

The sacred stone of the Oukwanyama Kingdom

In their article, *The Return of the Sacred Stones of the Ovambo Kingdoms: Restitution and the Revision of the Past*, Jeremy Silvester and Napandulwe Shiweda reflect on the return and reintegration of a sacred stone from Finland to the Oukwanyama Kingdom in Namibia (fig. 4).¹⁴⁵ These kinds of stones were traditionally the most important spiritual objects of the Ovambo kingdoms (situated in what is now northern Namibia and southern Angola) and they were used in rituals such as the coronation of a new king and

¹⁴⁴ Farahmand, 2021,

¹⁴⁵ Silvester & Shiweda, 2020

rain-making ceremonies. When Finnish missionaries became active in the region several of these sacred stones became part of the collection of the Finnish Lutheran Missionary Museum. The Oukwanyama stone was returned in 1995, five years after Namibia's independence. By this time, the descendant communities had largely been Christianized.

Through oral traditions, Silvester and Shiweda have conducted a biography of the stone.¹⁴⁶ The sacred stone called *Emanya IoMundilo Woshilongo shauKwanyama* was passed on from one king to the next since the early seventeenth century. Traditionally the stone was believed to be essential to the political stability and prosperity of the Kingdom and it served as a spiritual medium connecting the living people to their ancestors. In describing the biography, Silvester and Shiweda have emphasized that throughout its life, the sacred use and values ascribed to the stone have shifted. According to the oral tradition, the stone was initially kept in a special 'keeping place' by two spiritual healers, a man and a woman. The woman would remain in the room with the stone, which was balanced on five smaller stones, whilst the man was responsible for guarding the outside of the room where the stone was kept. In addition, the stone was implemented in various rituals. In the 19th century, a shift in meaning of the sacred stone took place. It was removed to another sacred site and it became incorporated within rituals that served to resolve succession disputes within the kingdom. This example shows how, even within their 'original' communities, the meanings of sacred objects are not always static, but they might be exposed to changes over time. Then, in 1942 the stone was taken by Finnish missionaries who brought it to the Finnish Mission Museum in 1948. When Namibia became independent in 1990, the Finnish museum decided to return these objects. Unfortunately Silvester and Shiweda are not explicit about the reasons why this stone was repatriated, but it is evident that historically this object was among the most important material culture of the kingdom, thus it would make sense that this community would desire the stone to be returned. The authors further note that the return of the stone was used to strengthen the positions of the traditional authorities of the kingdom in relation to the new democratic system of governance in Namibia.¹⁴⁷ This return is especially interesting because, as a result of the Christianization of the region, the stone needed to be reintegrated and revised within a new context. Silvester and Shiweda describe how the return of the stone was followed

¹⁴⁶ Idem. 33-34

¹⁴⁷ Idem. 30 & 34

by an initiative to revitalize, but also revise, the cultural and religious practices that were associated with the stone. They note that there have been changes regarding the conditions surrounding access to the stone with the stone now being displayed at traditional festivals so that the Oukwanyama people can see it and even touch it. Today it is believed that when you touch it bring prosperity to your life.¹⁴⁸ They also note that discussions about the particular keeping place and use of the stone are still ongoing and that discussions are taking place about the development of a museum where the stone should be displayed. Silvester and Shiweda's case study has demonstrated that the return of the sacred stone has provoked a renewed interest in pre-Christian traditions of the descendant communities and it shows how the return of sacred objects can contribute to the religious and cultural revivals within descendant communities. This article also indicates that the reintroduction and reintegration of objects as part of a 'living culture' is a complex process that might take several years to take shape. The study argues that it is important that descendant communities are provided with time and space to consider the role of objects from the past when they re-emerge in the present.

The Zimbabwe Birds

Another valuable case study of sacred objects that have regained sacred value after their return is provided by the soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe was an ancient city that prospered in East Africa between the 13th and 15th century AD. Europeans 'discovered' the remains of this city in the 19th century and collected the treasures that could be found in the ruins. Among these treasures were at least eight soapstone birds, several of which have ended up in different museums in South Africa and Germany (fig. 5). Seven of these Zimbabwe Birds have been returned to the site since Zimbabwe's independence. Because it concerns an archaeological site, the exact purposes of the Zimbabwe Birds are not known. However, Edward Matenga has argued in his dissertation that "it is a reasonable assumption that the function and meaning of the stone Birds lie in the realms of religious ceremony at Great Zimbabwe".¹⁴⁹ Matenga has researched the particular places where the Birds were found and he notes that they

¹⁴⁸ Idem. 34

¹⁴⁹ Matenga, 2011, 125

were all located in sacred places.¹⁵⁰ Since the objects do not have an apparent utilitarian purpose, Matenga argued that is most probable that they served a sacred purpose in their original setting in Great Zimbabwe. In addition, historical accounts also suggest that when the Europeans ‘discovered’ Great Zimbabwe in the 19th century, the local people guarded the abandoned site and used it in religious rituals.¹⁵¹ Matenga argued that Great Zimbabwe as a site for traditional religious practices has continuously changed, from as far back as it has been known, and the agencies of change have for a long time been the local communities themselves.¹⁵² According to Matenga, over the past century, Great Zimbabwe has been subjected to a process of ‘desacralization’ or ‘secularization’, whereby the site has been used as a symbol of power in service of national ideologies.¹⁵³ First, it was appropriated as a cultural symbol by Rhodesian settlers, who claimed that it was created by an ancient Caucasian civilization and who ruled out the indigenous people as the builders of Great Zimbabwe. Then after Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, Great Zimbabwe was again re-appropriated as a symbol of the new nation state. In the post-colonial period, Great Zimbabwe ‘plays the role of soul and spirit upon which the state has constructed an ideology about itself’.¹⁵⁴ This is also evident from the fact that the new nation has been named after the ancient site. The post-colonial state has adopted the Zimbabwe Bird a national symbol and its sovereign emblem and in the wake of this national ideology, a determination developed to reclaim the soapstone Birds that were taken from the site. So far, seven of the eight Birds that are known have been returned to the ancient site (fig. 6).¹⁵⁵ The Birds are now housed in a site museum and they are curated by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ). According to Matenga, there is a strong desire to carry out religious ceremonies with the Birds among the local communities who feel that they have a right to maintain religious traditions that were inherited from an ancestral past.¹⁵⁶ Matenga, who was the director of Great Zimbabwe from 1998 until 2004, recalls an elder from a local clan that would come by every year, seeking a permit

¹⁵⁰ *idem.* 129-131

¹⁵¹ *idem.* 102-107

¹⁵² *idem.* 2011, 107

¹⁵³ *idem.* 2011, 108

¹⁵⁴ *idem.* 158-160

¹⁵⁵ In 1981, five Birds were returned from South Africa, one Bird was brought back from the Natural History museum in Bulawayo and half a Bird was returned from a museum in Harare. In 2003 a seventh bird was returned from Germany. See Matenga, 108-109

¹⁵⁶ *idem.* 110

to enter the site to perform clan rituals which, he said, his ancestors used to do.¹⁵⁷ The official position however, was that public ceremonies were not permitted, and until today, no rituals are allowed in Great Zimbabwe despite the ongoing wishes of the local communities.¹⁵⁸ Among one of the reasons for this is a longstanding historical rivalry between two local clanships, which has been played out mainly in the area of religion. The NMMZ has expressed a concern that the holding of ceremonies would further widen the rift between local communities. Thus the prohibition of religious rituals at Great Zimbabwe and with the Zimbabwe Birds is enforced to ensure the national interest of securing more coherence between different communities. This case illustrates the possibility that there are several distinct desires within the descendant countries or communities about what should happen to sacred objects when they are returned. There might be several opposing views on how the objects should become re-incorporated into these communities. The possibility of many different voices and desires will be discussed later in this chapter, but for now it is important to underscore how the sacred value of the Zimbabwe Birds have remained, yet changed, over time.

Both the examples discussed in this section illustrate that the sacred values of certain objects are fluid and they have the potential of changing over time. Even when the objects were still in their original contexts, the local communities have re-interpreted and re-invented the sacred values and purposes of these objects over time. Sacredness is not static and frozen; instead it is shaped by the social actors of a particular time. In both examples, after the return of the objects, local people expressed great interest in re-integrating these objects into contemporary religious traditions with reference to the religious traditions of their ancestors. In the current repatriation discourse on sacred objects, such communities are generally overlooked and it is doubtful that claims made by these kinds of communities based on the religious values of the objects would be considered legitimate, due to their lack of religious continuity. The objects in this section were not requested specifically on the basis of religious beliefs. Instead the objects seem to have been returned mainly for political reasons in the aftermath of the independence of the countries from which they came. In a certain way, it makes sense that sacred objects from these types of communities do not have primacy in the repatriation

¹⁵⁷ Idem. 104

¹⁵⁸ Idem. 110

discourse, since the precise sacred value or purpose of these objects might not be fully known yet. In the case of the Oukwanyama stone, the sacred value of the object had to be negotiated and re-invented over a period of time within the new context. On the other hand, it is also possible that the contemporary sacred values of the objects are known to the descendant communities. In the case of the Zimbabwe Birds, the local community has continued to regard Great Zimbabwe and the material culture that originated from it as sacred, even though the traditions and beliefs have altered over the course of history. In chapter two, the theory of Chip Colwell was discussed, who argued that the loss of intrinsically sacred objects causes unique feelings of loss among the descendant communities. It is evident that this feeling of loss can become relevant again in communities that are reviving certain traditions. It is vital that museums and other holding institutions begin to acknowledge these particular contexts and that they start to consider 'new' sacred values that are ascribed to these objects as legitimate. It is clear that many of the communities that have been affected severely by colonialism, and which have lost many cultural treasures, have been subjected to great changes over time. This does not make their contemporary religious practices and beliefs that reference or include the traditions of their ancestors any less legitimate than other religious traditions that have remained the same since time immemorial. The focus on cultural continuity is harmful because only within particular colonial contexts have communities been able to hold on so tightly to the traditions of their ancestors and thus it can prevent descendant communities in other contexts from reconnecting in meaningful ways to the religious traditions of their ancestors. In addition, it forces those communities with such high levels of religious continuity to practically freeze in time, in order to retrieve the sacred objects from their past. This reality of religious change and discontinuity should be acknowledged within the repatriation discourse.

3.4 A multitude of possible responses

To say that sacred objects from the past have the potential to regain a sacred significance in their descendant communities is not to say that they always will. Many different responses are possible when sacred objects from an ancestral past reappear in contemporary descendant communities. In certain settings, descendant communities might not be interested in the religious heritage of the past. In her article '*You Keep It – We are Christians Here*': *Repatriation of the Secret Sacred Where Indigenous World-views*

have changed, Kim Akerman discusses her involvement in negotiations for the repatriations of secret-sacred objects to Aboriginal groups and she notes that when presented with the opportunity of retrieving these objects some community ‘elders’ expressed indifference to these objects noting that they no longer ‘follow’ those objects and that the museums could keep these objects.¹⁵⁹ Another possible response of descendant communities is a desire to install the objects into local museums, where the objects can testify to, and educate about, the religious and artistic past of the community. In the case of the Zimbabwe Birds, a certain segment of the population desired the objects to be on display in a museum, while other locals desired the object to be re-implemented in religious rituals. This also illustrates that descendant communities are not homogenous groups and that competing opinions about the values and purposes of the objects can differ greatly within descendant communities. In the case of the Zimbabwe Birds, the authorities have decided to prohibit the performance of rituals with the objects in order to preserve coherence within the local communities. There might also be opportunities for finding middle grounds, where sacred objects can find their place at the centre of communities for ritual uses, while oscillating use and return of the objects to local centres charged with their preservation. This is the case in Mali, where the national Museum regularly loans out certain objects to communities for ritual practices, and after these rituals have taken place the museum will come and recuperate the objects in order to preserve them in the National Museum.¹⁶⁰ More research into the reintroduction and reintegration of sacred objects into their descendant communities is required in the future in order to gain better knowledge of how these processes work and what kinds of responses can be expected in certain contexts. This information could be of essential value in decision-making processes concerning whether or not to repatriate sacred objects.

¹⁵⁹ Akerman, 2010, 176

¹⁶⁰ Sarr & Savoy, 2018, 32

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 A new theoretical framework

The previous chapter has demonstrated that it is not sufficient to focus solely on communities with very high levels of religious continuity as legitimate claimants for sacred objects. It is evident that through this practice many of the communities that have been affected the most by colonialism are excluded from the possibility of reuniting in meaningful ways with the sacred objects from their ancestors. Therefore, the discourse and practices surrounding the repatriation of sacred objects are in need of some revisions. First and foremost, the discourse is in need of a different theoretical framework on religion. The essentialist model that governs the discussion today, and which considers the arrival and departure of traditions and practices as aspects of religious decline, should be replaced with an articulated model of religion. Articulation theory, as proposed by Stuart Hall, recognizes that religions are made, unmade and remade throughout time and it recognizes the reality of 'cultural transformations'.¹⁶¹ In this thesis, it has been argued that when the Europeans introduced Christianity to indigenous people, new forms of religion emerged that were characterized by hybridity, mixing and merging, appropriation and subversion. Christianity was reworked within local and indigenous frameworks, resulting in many different local Christianities. According to Hall's theory these are religious transformations, rather than religious decline. In Hall's words: "It is not something totally new. It is not something which has a straight, unbroken line of continuity from the past. It is transformation through a reorganization of the elements of a cultural practice'.¹⁶² Further, in this thesis it has become evident that religious transformations have always been the reality. Even within the contexts from which sacred objects have originated, their sacred meanings, values and purposes might have changed and adapted over time.

It is vital to acknowledge that the values and meanings of sacred objects are not static and fixed. In the second chapter of this thesis, two theories on the sacredness of objects within museum contexts have been discussed. On the one hand, Ronald Grimes who has argued that sacredness should be considered as a 'moment' in the history of an object, as something that ceases to exist once these objects enter the museum space.

¹⁶¹ Hall, 1985, 54

¹⁶² Hall, 1985, 54

Grimes seems to miss the point that even when these objects are present in museums, outside of these museums they might still be people within the descendant communities who attribute some kind of sacredness to these objects. The other theory that was discussed, by Chip Colwell, argued that certain objects contain an intrinsic sacredness that never perishes despite radical recontextualization in a museum. Colwell's theory has failed to consider those objects in museums that were created as 'intrinsically sacred' by their source communities, but which are no longer considered sacred by descendant communities because they have very different beliefs from their ancestors. Are these objects still sacred? Here it is argued that they are not. However, they might regain their sacred values. This might happen in ways that are in accordance with the traditions and beliefs of the past, or the objects' sacred values might be re-invented and revised in very new and modern ways. Both of the theories mentioned here have failed to recognize sacredness as something that is fluid, something that can emerge, fade out and reappear in different contexts and different manners. The sacredness of objects is depended on social agents and their beliefs, practices and traditions within ever changing contexts.

4.2 Practical problems in the current practices

Now that the theoretical problems of the discourse have been addressed, it is time to evaluate some of the practical problems within the processes of repatriating sacred objects. Piotr Bienkowski has accurately noted that today, processes of repatriation are often adversarial and the language used by museums is often one of 'claims' and 'conflicts'. He has noted that generally the processes are long-winded and inequitable in so far as they are stacked in favour of the holding institution rather than the claimant.¹⁶³ In the current situation, when legal claims are considered in contexts such as the USA or Australia, the repatriation cases are often complex, bureaucratic, long-running, time-consuming, and very expensive. Further, an atmosphere of conflict and mutual distrust is set up that cuts across valuable processes of dialogue, persuasion and mutual understanding.¹⁶⁴ In addition, claims that are made which are not based on legislation also tend to be adversarial. As it was previously discussed in this thesis, museums generally put claimants through extensive tests and trials to prove their legitimacy and

¹⁶³Bienkowski, 2015, 431

¹⁶⁴ Idem. 437

in doing so they are making assumptions about which groups are or are not legitimate claimants. These demands for proof can often be considered offensive by descendant communities since these criteria are imposed by the Western museums themselves and they are generally based on tight definitions of descent, kinship and cultural continuity.¹⁶⁵ Bienkowski has argued that a key role of museums in the globalized and fractured world is to use their collections in innovative ways to foster understanding between communities and cultures and he has argued that these adversarial processes actually run counter to and impede this purpose of museums.

Another practical problem within the current situation with regard to the repatriation of sacred objects is that negotiations over possible returns are often on bilateral bases. In their report, Sarr and Savoy have noted that restitutions should be negotiated with and granted to requesting states.¹⁶⁶ It is then the (requesting) state's responsibility to give this property back to its community or initial owner. Sarr and Savoy note as a motivation for this that the French state should be respecting of the sovereignty of various nation-states. In addition, the Dutch report published in 2020, has also argued that returns should be on a state by state basis.¹⁶⁷ This provides difficulties since the local communities might have very different wishes for the objects that they wish to see returned, than the sovereign states that they inhabit. This was clearly the case with the return of the Zimbabwe Birds. In some cases national governments might not even desire certain objects returned for political reasons, while the descendant communities from which the objects originated would be very interested in the return of these objects. For example, when the return of a sacred wooden statue, the Afo-A-kom from the Kom community in the Republic of Cameroon, was negotiated, the government of Cameroon was initially somewhat reluctant to have it back as it reinforced tribal solidarity at a time when the authorities were trying to form a national identity.¹⁶⁸ Both the French and the Dutch reports do however acknowledge that it is important that the interests of the descendant communities are part of the deliberation process, but they are not very explicit about how this needs to happen.

The move towards nationalism and ethno-nationalism within the repatriation movement has been noted as something to be very critical about by Liv Nilson Stutz. She

¹⁶⁵ Idem. 437-438

¹⁶⁶ Sarr & Savoy, 2018, 82

¹⁶⁷ Adviescomissie Nationaal Beliedskader Koloniale Collecties, 2020, 76-78

¹⁶⁸ O'Keefe, 2008, 229

has argued that repatriation practices have become central to contemporary national and sub-national identity politics.¹⁶⁹ As can be illustrated in the example of Great Zimbabwe, the material culture of the past can be used to create and legitimize new identities, whether these are nationalistic or ethnocentric. Strutz has noted that within nationalist frameworks, starting in the West, material culture from the past has been exploited to legitimize claims to political, military or artistic achievement, superior character or innate ability. And she notes that “if we are critical of the use of archaeology in nationalist discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe, and we are aware of the abuses that may be committed in its name – as a tangible and deceptively ‘objective’ proof of historical narratives, then we must remain critical as we see similar nationalist discourses emerge in post-colonial contexts as well.”¹⁷⁰

Thus, the repatriation of sacred objects for their religious value to descendant communities is not as straightforward as it might seem. Yet, there are some ways in which the current practices could be improved in order to better meet the rights of descendant communities to connect to their own religious past.

4.3 Moving forward.

Moving forward, museums and other holding institutions should stop viewing repatriation processes as threatening and limiting. For a long time a common fear within museums and other holding institutions was that one return could serve as precedent for further returns until the western museums would practically be empty.¹⁷¹ This thought has proven to be wrong, because in many cases descendant communities or countries of origin are not even that interested in returns. A prime example for this has been the de-accessioning of the collection from the Nusantara museum in the Netherlands. When the Dutch museum was closed in 2013, a decision was made to offer the collection to its country of origin, Indonesia. Initially Indonesia was not very eager to retrieve these objects, and only in a later phase of the de-accessioning did the country begin to express interest in adopting objects from the collection.¹⁷² Fortunately, over the past years, Western museums and other institutions have begun to see that a more

¹⁶⁹ Strutz, 2012, 175-197

¹⁷⁰ Strutz, 2013, 185

¹⁷¹ Bienkowski, 2015, 434

¹⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oClR5Fud7fs&t=10862s>

progressive repatriation policy does not automatically result in the emptying of Western museums.

The repatriation narrative today is generally focussed on repatriation as a means for the recovery of past injustices.¹⁷³ While the acknowledgment of past injustices is a very important aspect of repatriation, a downside of this narrative is that it seems to pass by the opportunities that are provided by processes of repatriation. Bienkowski has argued that museums should essentially be forums for discourse about the values and meanings of objects in their collections.¹⁷⁴ He has noted that repatriations and returns are actually no more than formal and practical recognitions that there are different values for objects and that the processes surrounding returns have the potential to create frameworks through which those different values can be expressed. Further, as this thesis has demonstrated, the return of sacred objects within their descendant communities or countries of origin can result in vibrant, exiting and innovating cultural transformations. Western museums collections have been assembled in the 19th century out of a curiosity for the world in all its diversity. Yet today these same museums hold on to essentialist views of the cultures from which these objects were first collected. Within the current narrative, the objects are frozen in the history from which they were collected and this history is narrated by the Western museums. Allowing descendant communities to engage with these objects could lead to very interesting, living, new traditions.

This is not to say that all sacred objects from colonial contexts need to be returned. In many cases there will be good reasons to keep the objects in their current musicological contexts. The question that essentially needs to be answered through these processes is where these objects are best placed. These processes need to retain their critical character, because the objects are important to many different people for different reasons. It is necessary to be critical towards underlying motivations and possible nationalistic or ethnocentric agendas. However, the critical character of the processes should be more democratic. Today the museums are the legal owners of the objects and when there is no legislation in place, they are also the ones who decide whether or not claimants are legitimate and whether the objects are eligible for returns. It has previously been pointed out that these processes are often adversarial and that

¹⁷³ See Sarr & Savoy 2018 & Adviescomissie Nationaal Beliedskader Koloniale Collecties, 2020

¹⁷⁴ Bienkowski, 2015, 432

they are characterized by feelings of opposition rather than collaboration. Bienkowski has presented an interesting framework through which museums can respond to requests for returns through open dialogue and in doing so create meaningful and sustainable relations with the claimants.¹⁷⁵ His model of *deliberative democracy* essentially denotes an inclusive practice through which those who are interested in, or affected by, repatriation and return issues (including the museums themselves) are involved in a form of democratic decision-making. Thus everyone with a special interest in the object in question can be involved in reasoning and persuading one another about the values or course of action to be taken. This practice might involve (multiple) claimants, museum staff, researchers, government officials, etc. Bienkowski proposes that through equal and open deliberation the repatriation processes have the potential to become loci for respectful dialogue and participation about the values and meanings of objects. He further notes that so far, the possibility of radical disagreement and conflict as a result of mutually exclusive and contradictory beliefs have tended to make museums shy away from creating such open opportunities for dialogue. But he argued that agreement by everyone involved should not necessarily be the outcome of such conversations. Often it might be unlikely that people from different cultural backgrounds come to agreements. But he notes that participants can still reach consensus based on reasoned disagreement by striving to understand the cultural tradition and/or conceptual framework of the other participants. Bienkowski acknowledges that this process will be recourse-intensive, slow and sometimes quite messy, but he claims that it is the process of deliberation itself that fulfils museums' essential purposes and not necessarily final decision and outcome. It is obvious that Bienkowski's proposal is very ambitious and idealistic and perhaps even unachievable. Yet it is a great striving and it is useful to keep this model in mind in the processes that will follow in the future. Since it has been established that discussions and decisions will mainly be based on a bilateral grounds, Bienkowski's model becomes difficult to implement. Yet, even within such bilateral processes, states can strive to implement the special interests of different groups within their decision-making processes. It is necessary for museums and states in negotiations on returns to acknowledge that there might be many groups that have a legitimate interest in these objects and it is important that these interests are heard. Such deliberation processes provide many new

¹⁷⁵ Bienkowski, 2015, 446-449

opportunities for the objects and the meanings that are ascribed to them. Further it also provides the opportunity of expressing special interests in objects without necessarily making exclusive claims to them. Therefore, such processes might contribute to exiting outcomes where international cooperation's are improved and where the objects retain the stage that they deserve, as musicological objects, as sacred objects, or perhaps as both.

Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to provide a critical analysis of the contemporary practices and discourses concerned with the repatriation of sacred objects that have been collected in colonial contexts. It has been demonstrated that these practices and discourses are characterized by a focus on cultural and religious continuity and it has been argued that this focus is not in accordance with the historical reality of religious change and discontinuity. Most of the sacred objects that we find in Western museums today, originated in traditions that are no longer in place. However, it has been noted that many contemporary descendant communities are often reconnecting in meaningful ways with the religious heritage of their ancestors. Therefore these communities deserve a place in the repatriation movement. The current focus on continuity deprives descendant communities with low levels of cultural continuity from reconnecting with the sacred objects that were taken from their ancestors. This thesis has proposed some ways in which the position of such descendant communities can be improved within the current repatriation discourses and processes. Most importantly, it was noted that the contemporary discourse is in need of a different conceptual framework, which acknowledges the reality of religious discontinuity and which values new traditions as valid and meaningful. Further it was argued that within future decision making processes concerning the repatriation of sacred objects, inclusive consultation processes should be set up that strive to implement the special interests of descendant communities.

It is important to underscore that this thesis does not argue that descendant communities always know what is best for these objects or that their interests are more genuine and important than those of other interested parties, such as the museums of which the objects are part. Instead, this thesis intended to emphasize that there are many legitimate interests that deserve to be heard. The sacred objects within museum contexts have been attributed with many different meanings over their lifetimes and it is important for the current owners of these objects to take notice of these values. It would be interesting to see what kinds of outcomes might present themselves when different interest groups can be heard through respectful deliberation processes. Many positive results might be possible if museums let go of the fear of losing certain objects and start thinking from a framework that asks the question of what the best place is for an object. With the collaboration of interested parties, many innovative and interesting outcomes

might be reached that contribute both to the connection of descendant communities with their sacred heritage, as to the museological interest of acquiring and spreading knowledge about the values of objects in museum collections.

Illustrations



figure 1: Zuni war gods in their shrines. The retired war gods are placed on shelves behind the new war gods. Picture taken by Cosmos Mindeleff in 1898.



figure 2: The G'psglox pole in the yard of the Ethnographic department of the Swedish Royal Museum in Stockholm, 1929



figure 3: The The G'psgolox pole after its arrival in the museum of Anthropology in 2006, right before it was returned to the Haisla people



figure 4: Eeva Ahtisaari, the wife of the Finnish prime minister, presents the sacred Oukwayama stone to bishop Dumeni on behalf of the Finnish Mission Society in 1995



figure 5: Richard Hall, the British curator of Great Zimbabwe, with one of the Soapstone Birds that he had found in 1903



figure 6: President Mugabe receives the lower part of one of the Soapstone Birds from a German ambassador on the 14th of may 2003

Credits Illustrations

- Fig.1: https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/#/asset/NMNH_125719172 consulted on 08/06/2021
- Fig.2: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G'psgolox_totem_pole#/media/File:G'psgolox_totem%C3%A5le,_Wallingatan,_ca_1929.tif consulted on 08/06/2021
- Fig.3: <http://www.cathedralgrove.eu/text/07-Totem-Websites-6.htm> consulted on 08/06/2021
- Fig.4: Image derived from the documentary *The Power Stone: A History of the Kwanyama Kingdom*, 1999, consulted from <https://vimeo.com/110481424> on 08/06/2021
- Fig 5: Matenga, E., “The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe. Archeological Heritage, Religion and Politics in Postcolonial Zimbabwe and the Return of Cultural Property.”, PhD Diss., Uppsala University, 2011, p.83
- Fig. 6: Matenga, E., “The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe. Archeological Heritage, Religion and Politics in Postcolonial Zimbabwe and the Return of Cultural Property.”, PhD Diss., Uppsala University, 2011, p.167

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