Beyond the spotlight: A need for regulating community-led object repatriation?

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Many cultural institutions and heritage professionals have recently advocated for a more inclusive approach to the repatriation of cultural artifacts, highlighted in the 2022 UNESCO MONDIACULT Declaration that was discussed in a previous blog post. However, challenges persist, particularly when considering how repatriation has been historically used to strengthen national cultural identities, as seen in the case of the Diponegoro kris. When repatriation has been largely framed within nation-state contexts, what does it mean to truly foster inclusivity in this process? Is it essential to involve the communities directly affected for such inclusivity to be achieved? What insights can we gain from community-led repatriations regarding local priorities, needs, and cultural practices?

To explore these questions, we can look beyond national narratives and focus on Nias, a small island off the north-western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. In this blog, I aim to identify gaps in the current repatriation process, specifically in relation to the power dynamics between national and local stakeholders, as well as issues of inclusion and exclusion in heritage practices.

The Nias Heritage Museum, established in 1991 and operated by a non-profit foundation, is dedicated to preserving the culture of Nias, including objects tied to the island's history, communal feasts, daily life, and ancestral rituals. The museum was founded by Pastor Johannes M. Hammerle, a German-born Catholic missionary who arrived in Nias in 1971. While striving to learn the local language, he began recording oral histories and documenting cultural practices. During our conversation in 2022, he shared that many locals offered to sell him their belongings when he inquired about the names of objects he encountered. Due to financial pressures at the time, it was common for people to sell items, including gold objects, in larger cities like Medan in North Sumatra or Jakarta, Indonesia's capital. While stationed in Teluk Dalam, on the island's southern coast, from 1978 to 1987, Pastor Johannes' collection grew significantly as he acquired many affordable objects. With support from the Capuchin Order, he initiated the creation of the Nias Heritage Museum in Gunungsitoli, the island's largest town, where he also recruited and trained a dedicated team of local staff. The museum began repatriating objects from Germany and the Netherlands in the late 2000s as part of its collection-building efforts.

As the museum gained recognition beyond the island, Pastor Johannes was approached by Horst Krank, a former Protestant missionary, while on holiday in Germany. After visiting the museum in 2007, Krank decided to return a crocodile skin battle vest that he had collected during his time as a deacon in Nias. This unique vest remains the only one of its kind on the island.

Through Krank, Pastor Johannes was introduced to Magdalena Eckert, a former Protestant sister from Germany who had served in Nias from 1971 to 1982. During her mission, Eckert acquired the cover of a treasure chest, which was traditionally filled with gold jewellery and used as part of a royal marriage dowry. Previously misidentified as a hat, she donated the cover to the museum in 2009.

The latest repatriation involved a collection from the Capuchin Order, which included objects not only from Nias but from other parts of Indonesia as well. Pastor Johannes was contacted while on leave in Germany and learned that the Order had been asked to relocate objects on loan at the Ethnology Museum of Raboud University in the Netherlands, as the university needed the storage space. Thirty objects, identified as originating from Nias, were repatriated to the museum in 2009. A decade later, Pastor Johannes was informed of another Capuchin collection in Germany that needed a new home. The Nias Heritage Museum is now in the process of receiving this collection as well.

These case studies from Nias highlight repatriation efforts driven by convenience. Objects were returned as donations when the museum was actively building its collection. Notably, the returns took place without the fanfare typically associated with national-level repatriations. Pastor Johannes shared that some items were personally hand-carried in his luggage on commercial flights, while others were sent via international postal services. No special ceremonies were held upon the arrival of these objects, and there were no conditions attached to the returns. They simply entered the museum's collection. Nonetheless, the returns are quietly celebrated, with their stories documented and shared through the museum's object labels.

However, the smooth process of acquiring missionary-related objects at the Nias Heritage Museum contrasts sharply with the repatriation process for the Nusantara collection in 2019. After the closure of the Nusantara Museum in Delft in 2013 due to lack of funding from the city government, the Dutch government began discussions with Indonesian ministry of culture about returning some of the collection. The negotiations, which included the selection of objects, took several years to finalise. However, there was no involvement from local museums or communities in Indonesia. When I asked Pastor Johannes if he had contacted the Nusantara Museum regarding Nias-related objects after its closure, his response was blunt:

"No, I had not. Because they already talked about the return with the Indonesian government, so it was impossible for us to enter into the negotiation. I do not think the people in Jakarta were thinking about the Nias Museum when they were dealing with the Delft collection."

This response underscores the lack of efforts in engaging local museums in national-level repatriation processes led by the Indonesian government. Based on interviews with government officials, they frequently referred to the absence of a legal framework as a reason for the lack of local community involvement in repatriations. This also reflects a broader issue of insufficient political will to actively involve relevant local stakeholders.

In this context, it is important to note that Indonesia's repatriation committee—founded in 2021but whose mandate was not extended by the new cabinet minister last year—focused only on historical artifacts currently held in Dutch collections. This committee followed the repatriation of 1,500 objects from the defunct Nusantara Museum in 2019 and the return of the Diponegoro kris by the Dutch Ministry of Culture in 2020. The Indonesian government's repatriation framework relies primarily on bilateral agreements with the Netherlands, which has opened the door for repatriation requests from their former colonies.

The solution to this issue may seem straightforward—filling the regulatory gaps—but I hesitate to claim that this is the ultimate answer. The question remains whether such a regulation is truly necessary, especially when local communities like Nias have managed repatriation independently. There is a danger of government overreach through excessive regulation. Therefore, guidance on engaging local communities of origin may perhaps be sufficient to ensure that state-led processes do not exclude local communities. Furthermore, the government should provide local communities with what they may need most, i.e. practical support to be in the lead of more return processes: assistance with shipping, customs, and funding for daily museum operations. More importantly, they need help in building networks, as not all local communities are as well-connected as the Nias Heritage Museum.

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