

The Return of Artifacts from Colonial Collections and its Effect on Museums and their Communities: The case of the *National Archaeological Museum of Aruba* and the *Wereldmuseum* in Leiden

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Does repatriation of colonial collections to their countries have any effect on the museums involved and their communities? In 2009, four objects were given in long-term loan by the former *Museum of Ethnology* in Leiden to the *National Archaeological Museum of Aruba*. These artefacts, originally from Aruba, were displayed immediately in the new permanent exhibit of the Aruban museum, officially opened to the public shortly after. This paper presents the initial results of a project which aims to research and document, for the first time, which effects the return of these artifacts had on the museums involved and on their communities. The journey of these artifacts from Aruba to the Netherlands in the 19th century, their movement between museums in the Netherlands and the process for their return in 2009, will be presented as well as the preliminary results of archival research regarding the process in which the objects were returned. The first results of stakeholders' consultations will be discussed and a comparative analysis of voluntary restitution cases in the region and similarities and differences with contemporary repatriation debates, highlighted.

La devolución de objetos de colecciones coloniales y su efecto en los museos y sus comunidades: El caso del Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Aruba y el Wereldmuseum de Leiden

¿Tiene la repatriación de colecciones coloniales a sus países algún efecto sobre los museos implicados y sus comunidades? En 2009, cuatro objetos fueron cedidos en préstamo a largo plazo por el antiguo Museo de Etnología de Leiden al Museo Arqueológico Nacional de Aruba. Estos objetos, originarios de Aruba, se expusieron inmediatamente en la nueva exposición permanente del museo arubano, abierta oficialmente al público poco después.

En este artículo se presentan los resultados iniciales de un proyecto cuyo objetivo es investigar y documentar, por primera vez, los efectos que el retorno de estos artefactos tuvo en los museos implicados y en sus comunidades.

Se presentará el viaje de estos artefactos desde Aruba a los Países Bajos en el siglo XIX, su movimiento entre museos en los Países Bajos y el proceso para su devolución en 2009, así como los resultados preliminares de la investigación de archivos en relación con el proceso en el que se devolvieron los objetos. Se debatirán los primeros resultados de las consultas a las partes interesadas y se destacará un análisis comparativo de los casos de restitución voluntaria en la región y las similitudes y diferencias con los debates contemporáneos sobre repatriación.

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Le retour d'objets provenant de collections coloniales et ses effets sur les musées et leurs communautés : Le cas du Musée archéologique national d'Aruba et du Wereldmuseum de Leiden

Le rapatriement des collections coloniales dans leur pays a-t-il un effet sur les musées concernés et leurs communautés ? En 2009, quatre objets ont été prêtés à long terme par l'ancien musée d'ethnologie de Leyde au musée archéologique national d'Aruba. Ces objets, originaires d'Aruba, ont été immédiatement exposés dans la nouvelle exposition permanente du musée d'Aruba, officiellement ouverte au public peu de temps après.

Cet article présente les premiers résultats d'un projet visant à rechercher et à documenter, pour la première fois, les effets que le retour de ces objets a eus sur les musées concernés et sur leurs communautés.

Le voyage de ces objets d'Aruba aux Pays-Bas au 19^e siècle, leur déplacement entre les musées néerlandais et le processus de retour en 2009 seront présentés, ainsi que les résultats préliminaires de la recherche archivistique concernant le processus de retour des objets. Les premiers résultats des consultations des parties prenantes seront discutés et une analyse comparative des cas de restitution volontaire dans la région, ainsi que les similitudes et les différences avec les débats contemporains sur le rapatriement, seront mis en évidence.

Introduction

This paper presents the initial results of an ongoing case-study on the return of five objects by the *Wereldmuseum* in Leiden¹ to the *National Archaeological Museum of Aruba* (NAMA), in 2009. These objects, with their rich cultural and historical significance to Aruba and the region, have sparked discussions on the broader implications of repatriation and restitution in the museum community. The case-study, which runs from February to October 2024, aims at studying the process by which this collection was returned and the effect the repatriation had on the museums, their professionals, and communities.

Relying on archival research, this paper locates the repatriation process fifteen years ago within the contemporary debates that are currently underway. This process is important not only to establish the current, but also the future relevance of this case for the discussions about repatriation and restitution both in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and beyond. The current findings are based on initial archive research at the National Archaeological Museum of Aruba as well as a public awareness survey that assesses community knowledge and visitor awareness and engagement has been finalized and is being analyzed. Consequently, the findings of this paper rely on key definitions that apply to the return of cultural materials to colonial spaces from imperial collections. These definitions will help to ground this analysis within the contemporary discussion on a historical process of colonial collecting. Though this is a preliminary investigation, it allows for the thinking through of the impact of repatriation in Caribbean communities where they occur.

¹ Formerly *Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde*

Which contemporary terms within the context of repatriation and restitution would apply today to the return of the objects from the Netherlands to Aruba? And why would this be relevant to the study. The response to the first question evolves out of the definitions used in the 2009 debates around the return of the objects currently being discussed in this paper. International Council of Museums (ICOM)² defines a museum as

“a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”³

This new definition emerged in 2022 due to ICOM’s ambitious attempt to create an inclusive and transparent process that engaged the diverse global membership of the institution. As a participant in the discussions of the ICOM-Netherlands to establish the Dutch input to this new definition and having led a focus group of Dutch Caribbean Museum professionals and stakeholders to formulate their contribution, I can attest to the differences but also to somewhat unexpected similarities between museums of the European and the Caribbean part of the Kingdom (Ruiz & Roper, 2022).⁴

Stakeholders in the Dutch Caribbean museums agreed that it was more important for a museum to be an inclusive and accessible space than a formal institution. The reality in the Dutch Caribbean is that often museums are established and operated by volunteers. This in turn influences aspects like professionalism, accessibility and inclusiveness while having implications

² ICOM is the International Council of Museums.

³ ICOM, 2022

⁴ This as part of the extensive engagement and consultation process of the Museum Association of the Caribbean amongst Caribbean museum professionals and stakeholders.

for a remarkable best practice component in engaging their communities. For Dutch Caribbean Museum professionals and stakeholders, the need to emphasize that museums should research and present topics that are a comprehensive portrayal of the societies they serve, would have had a more prominent mention in the current definition.

Exhibiting both tangible and intangible heritage is an essential requirement for museums within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. So is fostering diversity and sustainability, this latter more urgent to the Dutch Caribbean, facing drastic changes within their communities and environment due to economic growth. Although access to financial resources was considered as the one most obvious difference between museums within the Kingdom (Caribbean versus Netherlands), the need to create experiences for the enjoyment and education of their communities was marked as a priority for all.

At the time of the request by the National Archaeological Museum of Aruba for the objects, the museum was working towards complying with standards defined by ICOM for best practices in museums. This includes best practices as it related to storing and presenting the collections (collections management) and exhibition design. Facilities report of NAMA's new premises was provided as part of the repatriation request by the National Museum of Aruba. The difference in reaching and keeping international museum standards between the Dutch Caribbean Museum and the Ethnology Museum in Leiden were obvious but were not considered an obstacle for the return of the objects. The comprehensive facility report was submitted by the Aruban museum and accepted by the museum in the Netherlands.

There are many avenues to repatriation that are generally not known, however one such avenue is voluntary repatriation. For the Alliance of American Museums (AAM), voluntary repatriation is the

“Return of cultural artifacts, material from nature, human remains, and/or associated data and documentation to individuals and groups representing the culture or country of origin, or to former owners or heirs, when such acts of return are not mandated by law, regulations, or international agreements.⁵”

The term most commonly refers to returns made to a government entity, rather than a family or individuals. It is unclear if the return of collections after a formal request is also considered a voluntary repatriation, within the scope of this definition. For many Dutch institutions’ scholars, the term ‘restitution’ refers to the process of returning colonial museum collections back to their countries of origin. The Dutch Council for Culture⁶ and the leading author on this topic in the Netherlands, van Beurden van Beurden, *Inconvenient Heritage*, 2022) made no clear distinction between the various terms being used to describe the process of collections being returned to their countries of origin. The AAM on the contrary differentiates repatriation and restitution accentuating that the latter being ‘the return of cultural artifacts to individuals or heirs of the original owners, as opposed to communities, groups, or countries.’ These are acts taken to restore the situation that existed before a wrongful act was committed. For example, restitution might take the form of restoration of rights, livelihood, land ownership, citizenship, legal standing, or

⁵ American Alliance of Museums. *The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution and Reparations Today*, 2023.

⁶ The Dutch Council is a government entity appointed to give advice.

wealth. In fact, UNESCO use the term restitution to describe a process which corrects a clear act or element of wrongdoing (Rassool & Gibbon, 2023). Perhaps, the most distinct difference between repatriation and restitution is discussed by South African authors Ciraj Rassool and Victoria E. Gibbon, who argue that restitution should include some kind of compensation by the museums or related institutions storing the collections⁷. They emphasize that this compensation should not be interpreted as reparations. Of equal relevance for this discussion are the terms ‘places of origin’ and ‘descendant communities.’ The AAM describes descendant communities as ‘people with direct ancestral, racial, or cultural ties to groups who have been harmed by historical or ongoing atrocities, exploitation, and displacement’. These terms help to establish the historical context under which the five objects were removed from Aruba to the Netherlands and shapes public engagement around the objects.

The journey of five

Aruba is located approximately 25 kilometers of the South American mainland (Venezuela), and its geological formations and geographical location are also linked to the islands of Curacao and Bonaire (ABC islands). European scientists and amateurs collected geological, biological, and cultural artifacts from the island. The most well-known collection of these artifacts date from the nineteenth century although it is most probable that artifacts were collected before this period as well.

The first humans are thought to have arrived on the island approximately 3500 years ago. The first groups were thought to have come from the mainland, had a nomadic lifestyle, little

⁷ Rassool, C., & Gibbon, V. E. (2023). Restitution versus repatriation: Terminology and concepts matter. *American Journal of Biological Anthropology*, 1–4.

agriculture, and ceramics. The material remnants from these group are scarce but their presence in Aruba has been very well established most recently (Kelly & Hofman, 2019). It is currently impossible to establish if any artifacts from this Archaic Period (1465 BC - 900 AD) are stored in European institutions. From 900 AD on another indigenous group from the mainland established communities on the island. They settled in villages, practiced agriculture, fished, and used other marine resources and their presence is evident in hundreds of recorded archaeological sites on the island. It is mainly the heritage of this cultural group that the Roman Catholic priest Van Koolwijk, who lived in Aruba from 1880 to 1886, collected, documented, and sent to the Netherlands. The five objects which were repatriated in 2009 are part of this *Van Koolwijk Collection*. This collection is thought to contain artifacts from the indigenous culture which inhabited the island from 900 until their deportation by the Spaniards in 1515 to work as slaves in the Dominican Republic (Versteeg & Ruiz, 1995). Consequently, the five ethnographic objects date to this Historical period (1515-1924).

The artifacts requested and returned were 2 ceramic ceremonial artifacts and 3 decorated calabash bowls. These artifacts reflect beliefs, skills and the indigenous knowledge of their environment. The characteristics of the ceramic objects are relevant to understanding the relation of the indigenous community of Aruba at the time of the arrival of the Europeans, with indigenous groups in the wider Caribbean and beyond. An anthropomorphic vessel with characteristically coffee bean shaped eyes, painted and decorated, is probably one of the most well-known artifacts from this collection, having been studied and photographed from the early twentieth century by Dutch scholars. The coffee bean shaped eyes are like the Dabajuro and Tairona cultures of Venezuela and Colombia respectively – thus reinforcing existing research on

the migration patterns of indigenous people from Central America to the Caribbean. The patterns painted on the vessel seem to have been applied by a stencil method using woven organic material to create these. The aesthetics of this object suggest a ceremonial role for this vessel. An alteration done most probably during the Historical period, is a small hole perforated on the backside of the vessel where a cork was inserted. The top was also sealed with a cork. It is believed that these adaptations were linked to a more functional use of the vessel as a container for seeds after the deportation of 1515.

A second artifact is a complete ceramic female figurine also decorated with coffee bean shaped eyes, with zoomorphic-like paws resting on its side. These latter resemble the extremities of the frog. This animal is associated with fertility amongst regional historical and contemporary indigenous cultures. Sherds and larger pieces of similar objects are part of the collection of the NAMA, but all too little is still known about this object.

Additionally, objects made from plant-based material are extremely rare in the archaeological record of Aruba. The weather conditions cause this type of material to decay long before research can be done. Some fine examples of the existence of such material are two objects excavated in Tanki Flip in the 1970's and some pottery shards which have imprint of woven material embedded in them (Boerstra, 1982). The three calabash objects returned to Aruba in 2009 are therefore examples of the craft and artistry of Aruban indigenous communities, which are rarely found *in situ*. It is not yet possible to assign these ethnographic objects to a specific group. But they were collected in Aruba by *Van Koolwijk* and resemble similar artifacts still

available today as part of regional indigenous communities' art and practices. No similar calabash objects are found in the collection of the NAMA.

The journey of the anthropomorphic vessel from Aruba is relatively well described by *Van Koolwijk* in a letter to the director of the National Museum of Antiquities at that time, Dr. C. Leemans. This latter was a renowned Egyptologist at that time, who took a particular interest in the artifacts that the Dutch priest was shipping to the museum in Leiden. The *Van Koolwijk* collection was transferred from the National Museum of Antiquities to the National Museum of Ethnology, presumably in the 1980's. The collection had been researched and described several times by Dutch scholars by then. Most of the collection was made accessible by the former *National Museum of Ethnology*, through an online catalogue in the 1990's. This gave those in the communities in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, for the first time an idea of the size and value of this collection and a view into their heritage abroad.

The NAMA requested the return of these five objects in 2008, they were repatriated in 2009. Within one day of their arrival, they were placed into a custom-made display case in the new premises of the museum. They were the last objects to be added to the new permanent exhibition of the National Archaeological Museum of Aruba before the opening of the museum on the 29th of June 2009. All costs related to the repatriation of this collection was covered by the NAMA, key element which defines this process as repatriation as opposed to restitution.

Narrative of the repatriation process

The NAMA was established as the *Archaeological Museum of Aruba* in 1981 in a historical building in Oranjestad, to showcase a collection which had been created with both amateur findings and through academic archaeological excavations by both Dutch and Antillean scholars. The institution boasted a two-story facility with a storage, study and administrative facilities on the ground floor and an exhibition on the first floor. A second somewhat smaller exhibition was set up in the city of San Nicolas and pre-dated the official opening of the museum in 1981.

The first permanent exhibition was adapted through the years, as research into mainly the indigenous cultures of the island, was being conducted by Dutch scholars working at and with the museum. The policy at that time to focus on the indigenous cultures was because this heritage was for the most part still *in situ*, throughout hundreds of archaeological sites around the island and was being threatened by rapid economic growth on the island. In the 1990 it was estimated that 80% of Aruba's archaeological heritage was still in these sites. The museum not only exhibited this heritage, but also started a tradition of consistently publishing research results.

It is this combination of research, publication and presentation on Aruba's earliest cultural heritage that attracted the attention of funders in the 1990's, when the museum formulated a plan to acquire, restore and equip a historical building complex in downtown Oranjestad, as its new location. Almost 20 years later the museum opened its doors to the public in this now local landmark.

The standards of the new facilities and permanent exhibit of the museum would be key elements to receiving the objects from the National Museum of Ethnology in 2009. Guided by an internationally renowned heritage consulting firm, made possible by a substantial investment of the Aruban Government, the content of this new exhibition was conceived by the museums' own professionals and local stakeholders. The subsequent design, construction and installation resulted in what would be for many years after, one of the best museums in the Caribbean.

These standards which were being developed and could be visualized by 2008, would incentivize the NAMA to send a letter on to the *National Museum of Ethnology* in Leiden, requesting the five objects to be returned with the purpose to be placed in the new permanent exhibition.

Contrary to the present day, no arguments were being made on the global stage about repatriation and restitution back then. The objects were chosen by NAMA mainly based on three criteria: their value to the narrative the museum wanted to present to its community, the absence of similar objects in the museums' collection and their esthetics.

A long-term loan of the objects to the National Archaeological Museum in Aruba was proposed by the Dutch museum. An extensive facility report was to be submitted by the Aruban museum as part of the request and the long-term loan was subjected to the approval of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Inspection Agency. The initial loan term of five years was amended in 2015 with an extension until 2019. The museum in Aruba requested an extension in 2020 until 2022. The relevant correspondence and exchange between the Aruban and Dutch museum for this last extension are currently being studied.

Furthering community accessibility to the objects

One of main questions is what is the value that the repatriation had for the local community. After the initial press the return of the objects had in 2009, little attention was given to the objects or to the topic of repatriation or restitution of other artifacts. The five were part of approximately 600 being presented in the new exhibition space of the NAMA, many not having been exhibited before. Since then, two projects were developed where the repatriated objects were further presented to the public as a part of community engagement.

Museums go Tech, a pilot project designed and developed by *Fundacion 1403*, *Brenchi's Lab* and the NAMA in 2017, aimed at showing the value of 3D scan technology for research and presentation of archaeological heritage. As part of a first selection, two ceramic objects from the repatriated collection were scanned using 3D technology and subsequently printed using recycled plastic. The displays of the footage were exhibited in the *National Library of Aruba*, pop-up presentations and during Tech fairs held to promote innovation. This project stands out particularly in the resonance it had amongst a younger audience and creatives.

The second effort occurred in support of the international traveling exhibition, *Caribbean Ties*, a replica was made of the large ceramic vessel as part of the exhibition material. This exhibition was shown in the Netherlands and in various Caribbean countries between 2019-2022. Since then, the partners of the *Museum goes Tech* project have agreed recently to further develop this initiative. A renewed approach from the developers of the local heritage platform, *colleccion.aw*, led by the *National Archives of Aruba*, will be studied in the months ahead.

Prospects

The success of the pilot *Museum goes Tech*, engaging not only the traditional stakeholders and audiences, but reaching out to young creators and other age groups in the community, is an example of the potential of these repatriated artifacts for the NAMA and its Dutch counterpart to develop collaborative projects about these objects. The objects tell a local and regional story and one relevant to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. By involving stakeholders from both museums in establishing new narratives around these artifacts, the institutions may play a role in promoting knowledge about common histories amongst their communities.

Developing guidelines for future cases of repatriation and restitutions based on the experience with this case would be valuable. As restitution includes some form of compensation, it would be to open discussions about what compensation looks like as the latter does not need to be strictly a financial one. It is important to consider possibilities beyond this. In this case both museums could be creative and proactive about this experience and consider it an opportunity for both institutions to develop better practices.

Conclusion

The process and aftermath of the return of objects originally from Aruba, stored for more than 100 years in museums in the Netherlands, include extraordinary elements in the context of the contemporary debate about restitution and repatriation of colonial collections. This case-study aimed at researching the effect of this process, started in 2008, had on the museums, professionals, stakeholders, and communities involved is in its early stages.

The preliminary findings of this study points toward defining the process of the return of artifacts by the *Wereldmuseum* to the NAMA, as repatriation rather than as restitution. This latter definition includes a clear form of compensation and in this case no form of compensation was involved at the time of the return or after.

This early assessment of the case identifies the importance of accessing the relevant archives regarding the repatriation requests, subsequent return, and renewal of the loan agreements between these institutions. These documents are relevant to understand the context in which the return took place, to document the entire process and to inspire guidelines for future cases. In this initial phase of the study, it is already clear that the potential for both museums to engage their stakeholders and communities in programming about these objects is currently underdeveloped.

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