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YUNMUN
Yeshiva University National Model UN

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United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Topic 1: Repatriation of Cultural Artifacts

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How did the Egyptian Rosetta Stone end up in the British Museum in London? This question is one of many in the debate over repatriations for cultural artifacts. This discussion has become increasingly prominent as countries seek the return of objects removed from their territories, specifically those taken forcefully during periods of armed conflict, colonial rule, or military occupation. Another notable example is the Bust of Nefertiti, an ancient Egyptian sculpture currently housed in the Neues Museum in Berlin, Germany. The bust was discovered by German archaeologists in Egypt in 1912, who brought it back to Germany. Egyptian authorities have called for its return, while German authorities maintain that it was acquired legally.[1] The Penacho de Moctezuma, an elaborate feather headdress from the Aztec era, is now held at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna. Mexico has repeatedly called for its return, while Austrian institutions have raised concerns that it would be too dangerous to transport it.[2]

International efforts to address this issue have developed over time. In the 1970 UNESCO Convention, a framework was created to prevent the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property.[3] The Convention does not, however, apply retroactively to artifacts that were already removed from their countries of origin before these new laws were put in place. UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP) facilitates dialogue and offers recommendations to both countries seeking return and those holding the objects. It does not have any binding legal power to force decisions, leaving most disputes unresolved.[4]

When writing your position paper, please consider the following points:

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[1] https://www.reuters.com/world/egyptian-archaeologist-calls-berlin-return-nefertiti-bust-2024-09-08/
[2] https://west86th.bgc.bard.edu/bookreviews/the-contested-crown-repatriation-politics-between-europe-and-mexico/
[3] https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking/about
[4] https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking/return-and-restitution

- Legal Framework
    - Should modern standards of ownership apply to artifacts acquired before the establishment of international agreements?
    - What authority, if any, should UNESCO have in determining the rightful ownership of disputed artifacts?
- Cultural Identity and Historical Responsibility
    - Should artifacts acquired during periods of colonialism or armed conflict be treated differently from those acquired through trade or archaeological excavation?
    - Should the cultural significance of an artifact to its country or community of origin outweigh the legal ownership claims of the country or institution currently possessing it?
- Preservation and Accessibility
    - Should concerns regarding a country's ability to safely preserve an artifact influence whether it is returned?
    - Should cultural artifacts be considered part of the heritage of all humanity, or should countries of origin have primary authority over their ownership and display?
- International Cooperation and Enforcement
    - What mechanisms can UNESCO establish to facilitate negotiations and resolve disputes between countries seeking repatriation and those currently possessing artifacts?
    - How can UNESCO encourage compliance with repatriation agreements while respecting national sovereignty and the independence of cultural institutions?

Please do not limit yourself to these topics in your research; rather, use them as a starting point as you gather information. Be sure to thoroughly research your country's position as well as the topic as a whole to thoroughly prepare yourself for the conference.

Remember that your job is to represent your country's views, not your own. Please be sure to cite your sources and not to plagiarize or use AI to write your papers, or you will be

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disqualified from winning an award. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at psterman@mail.yu.edu. I am looking forward to reading your papers and to working together to find a solution to this pressing issue.

Sincerely,

Perri Sterman

Chair, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

YUNMUN XXXVII