

Debate on Restitution for Ethiopian
Censer: Should It be Returned?

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Throughout the first half of the 19th century, colonialism extended its influence in Europe and attained unprecedented endorsement. Great Britain, for instance, has built up relations and imposed influence on the political developments of kingdoms in South and East Africa. In exchange, the empire offers economic and military commitments within a limited range. One of the kingdoms that agreed on this transaction was the Kingdom of Abyssinia, the predecessor of current-day Ethiopia. However, when the emperor Tewodros II sent his request for assistance in military training in the form of a letter addressed directly to Queen Victoria in 1862, the British authorities intercepted the letter and gave no response.¹ Consequently, Tewodros II was irritated and took several British residents hostage, and he also accused them of conspiracy against him. Five years later, the British government officially launched an expedition led by Sir Robert Napier and Captain Tristram Speedy toward Abyssinia and proclaimed that they aimed to liberate the hostages. Nevertheless, historical records seem to be inconsistent with the stated aim.

Indeed, scholars Lucia Gunning and Debbie Challis pointed out that the Maqdala Expedition, other than several previous ones, has included a member of the British Museum Richard Holmes.² According to them, this indicates that the British Museum has deliberately planned the Plunder of Maqdala, the central library, treasury, and church of Tewodros II's kingdom. Particularly, they state in another study that the failure of diplomatic negotiations between Great Britain and the Kingdom of Abyssinia and the trigger of military conflict

¹ British Museum. "Maqdala collection." Accessed July 25, 2024. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/maqdala-collection>.

² Patrizio Gunning, Lucia, and Debbie Challis. 2022. "The Plunder of Maqdala: Ethical Concerns Around Belongings and Ancestral Remains in Museums." *Museum International* 74 (3–4): 60–71. doi:10.1080/13500775.2022.2234192.

made the museum officials “seek for another approach of acquiring the artifacts.”³ Therefore, the conflict was seen as an explorative opportunity for the British Museum that enabled them to access the undiscovered range of Ethiopian culture and expand their collection of artifacts, hence fleshing up the foundation of a universal museum. On the other hand, the collection process during the expedition was not systematic; rather, it was composed of random looting and robbery of soldiers, religious objects and manuscripts acquired through partly-compulsory auctions and trades made by Richard Holmes, and human remains came from Ethiopians who were taken by the troops.⁴

The artifact I chose as a subject of the debate about restitution is one of the censers previously used by Ethiopian Christian churches. Used as a tool of incense, censers occupied a vital role in the theocratic society of Ethiopia. Suggested Eggert Götsch, a researcher on both botany and ethnohistory, the use of incense for ritual purposes that often include church services and praises goes back to 500 BC, a time when Orthodox had not been introduced to the region. After Orthodox emerged in around 400 CE, incense continued to be popular and widely appreciated as an offering to god.⁵ The censer was made of copper alloy and was cast in two parts: a rectangular container upon the pyramidal



Figure 1. Image of the censer

³ Patrizio Gunning, Lucia, and Debbie Challis. “Planned Plunder, the British Museum, and the 1868 Maqdala Expedition.” *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 3 (2023): 550–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2200036X>.

⁴Patrizio Gunning, Lucia, and Debbie Challis. 2022. “The Plunder of Maqdala: Ethical Concerns Around Belongings and Ancestral Remains in Museums.” *Museum International* 74 (3–4): 60–71. doi:10.1080/13500775.2022.2234192 .

⁵ Götsch, Eggert. “TRADITIONAL AROMATIC AND PERFUME PLANTS IN CENTRAL ETHIOPIA (A Botanical and Ethno-Historical Survey).” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 19 (1986): 81–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41965939> .

base and an open word lid with carved sides. As shown in Figure 1, there are also bells tied to chains connecting the upper handle and the container, fixed by several suspension rings on the side. There is no evidence indicating who created this artifact at what time, while the inscriptions inside the container suggest that the censer was given to Aba Tekle Haymanot, who is an Ethiopian saint and monk in the 13 to 14th century. This means that the censer is likely to be used as a ritual object during the memorials of Aba Tekle Haymanot.

The censer was part of the religious artifacts in the Maqdala Collections in the British Museum. These objects are from, in most cases, the auctions done by Richard Holmes and the trades done by Captain Speedy during military conflicts. Thus, the censer is a solid target of repatriation and should be returned to Ethiopia because it occupies religious importance and is their cultural property, and because there exists precedent examples.

When the debate on the repatriation of African artifacts rises, common aspects of discussion often include the religious significance of the object. It is not only because Africa is a continent that has diverse native religions that developed within a similar time range but differentiated customs and gods, but also because of the prevalence of Christianity and Orthodox over East and South Africa. Therefore, it is not strange for religious usage to be a part of the reasons for repatriation. In Ethiopian Orthodox, the use of incense was considered one of the five divine liturgy and stood as a profound and symbolic practice.⁶ Although all the sensory liturgies—including sight, hearing, and touch—were expected to “give worshipers a glimpse of heaven on earth”, they were seen as less powerful and elicit fewer feelings of sacredness. This is because incense usually creates an atmosphere that sanctifies the environment and profoundly influences people’s mindset with its sensory impacts.⁷ This

⁶ Aaron Stevens, “The Smell of Holiness: Incense in the Orthodox Church,” Mt. Menoikeion Seminar, June 15, 2016,

<https://menoikeion.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf2036/files/stevens-paper.pdf>

⁷ ibid.

atmosphere, in essence, creates a space that allows the faithful to be temporarily isolated from the mundane world and society and nestle in heaven. In other words, incense helped to sanctify the surroundings of an Ethiopian Orthodox church and its existence spiritualized the church for holy rituals.⁸

On the other hand, incense is a symbol of prayer that showcases their devotion. Referencing from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, burning the incense “symbolizes the zeal with which the faithful should be animated.”⁹ In other words, the smoke and fragrance and ceremonial process brought by incense seem to be a criterion of faithfulness and a sign of religious rites. Indeed, the rise of smoke toward the ceiling visualizes the approach of orthodox prayers toward god in traditional Orthodox churches. In Psalms 141:2 of the Orthodox Bible, there is a sentence describing this conception: “Let my prayer be set forth as incense before thee.”¹⁰ From this, it is consequently clear that incense undoubtedly serves as a symbol of connecting to god. With both these significances of incense in Ethiopian religion, one can suggest that the restitution of censers is justifiable and logical. Some might argue that as the churches are currently producing large amounts of these censers, restitution should not be taken into debate. While it seems plausible, there are some potential issues surrounding this notion. It is important to note that the censer was looted by the British Museum, but not given, therefore they have an innate moral defect as they refuse to return the artifact. In addition to that, the censer, from another perspective, could also be

⁸ Orthodox Christianity 101. “Meaning of Incense in Orthodox Worship: A Deep Dive,” March 26, 2024. Accessed July 28, 2024.
<https://www.orthodoxchristianity101.com/post/meaning-of-incense-in-orthodox-worship-a-deep-dive>.

⁹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. “The Sacramental.” Accessed July 28, 2024.
<http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/Lent/sacramental.html>.

¹⁰ Nelson, Thomas. The Orthodox Study Bible. Thomas Nelson, 2008.
http://books.google.ie/books?id=KAh2OOGPsMMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Orthodox+study+bible&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api.

seen as a religious relic from the 19th century that has great importance to theology studies and the development of churches in Ethiopia, too. Hence, the censer should be repatriated to Ethiopia from a religious perspective.

Aside from that, the censer is also a cultural property of Ethiopia. In the 1970 UNESCO conference, cultural property was defined as the property specifically designated by states as being of importance to its archaeology, history, literature, art, or science and deserves protection or preservation. This is because, as the preamble of the UNESCO Convention mentioned, these cultural properties increase the knowledge of the human race, enrich the cultural life of man, and facilitate international diplomatic developments. However, historian Geoffrey Roberson put forward that cultural properties can only achieve their goals within a context that clarifies their origin and contains their traditions.¹¹ Through this, he accentuates the mutual importance between the cultural properties and agencies. Cultural agencies, referring to a range of innovative and cultural activities that can contribute to the development of society from art, research, and activism aspects, often require artifacts as a medium to be accomplished.¹² Therefore, they would have the ability to write their own historical narratives and reconstruct their past rather than acquiesce to European colonial history that is rarely reported objectively. Specifically, with the solid evidence of their history on their hand, Ethiopian people can indict the brutal story of British expeditions, and Britain's euphemism and disguise of their colonial history would thus have a decreased authenticity. To be exact, by serving to perform cultural agency, the censer would not only help Ethiopian

¹¹ Robertson, Geoffrey. *Who Owns History?* Biteback Publishing, 2019.
http://books.google.ie/books?id=SeuiDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Who+owns+hi+story%3F+Elgin%27s+loot&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

¹² Sommer, Doris. *Cultural Agency in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2006.
http://books.google.ie/books?id=_tUt_DEa3KsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Cultural+Agency+in+the+Americas&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

people to clarify and comprehend their own past but also rewrite the colonial history of Maqdala more objectively.

Moreover, the censer as a cultural heritage hinges contemporary Ethiopians to their ancestors, which can also take part in promoting Ethiopian national identities. In a sense, the repatriation of the censer is not only a diplomatic event but also a re-unification of a misplaced debris of the historical progress of Ethiopia. This means that the censer helps them to figure out their lost identities, whether religious, cultural, or national identity, from the historical progress plundered by Britain.¹³ Therefore, the restitution of the censer unifies Ethiopian people by linking them with a common identity and coagulating the political entity cohesively.

Besides, it is also important to mention that restitution is an act of supporting human rights and a measure of justice. Writer of *Who Owns History? Loot And The Case For Returning Plundered Treasure* Geoffrey Robertson augments the significance of cultural treasures to national sovereignty and dignity and to the evoking of people's human rights, and hence he pointed out that returning these objects would critically reinforce the human rights in these countries.¹⁴ He indicates that repatriation is a process that allows the sovereign rights of people to hold and study their artifacts to take place, and he believes that the process is an approach of slow justice that compensates for the plunder of the British expedition. There might also be several issues revolving around repatriation itself. For instance, it plays against most popular museums in Europe that proclaim themselves to collect representatives of the world's culture and display them to the universal public. These museums, including the British Museum, Louvre Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and many European and North American Museums, have a yearning for universality among their collections,

¹³ Robertson, Geoffrey. *Who Owns History?* Biteback Publishing, 2019.
http://books.google.ie/books?id=SeuiDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Who+owns+history%3F+Elgin%27s+loot&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api

¹⁴ ibid.

which means that they want their collections to represent at least most of humankind's creations.¹⁵ In general, they tried to turn this goal into reality, while their conception of universality is still questionable.

There are two major problems correlated to these museums, the first one originates from the ethical issues related to the acquiring process of the artifacts, and the second one is that the museums seem to have infringed on the ambiguous definition of universality. The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums manifested in 2002 contains many controversial sentences. In the declaration, museums state that objects acquired—despite how they are acquired—should be part of the museum's property and heritage because of the curation they gave.¹⁶ Additionally, they suggest that the original context of the objects is no longer important because museums provide a “valid and valuable” context, too. However, the museums should deal with the origins of the objects, given the context that French President Emmanuel Macron mentioned in his speech “There was colonial pillage, it's absolutely true.”¹⁷ The objects looted from military conflicts were obtained through illegitimacy and should not be further imprisoned. Furthermore, curation of artifacts is an obligation for the museums that reside in them, but not a sign of ownership. For instance, a thief who takes good care of the stolen properties does not automatically become the owner; rather, he might be a thief who is seeking moral justifications for his illegal possession.

¹⁵ Fiskesjö, Magnus. “Universal Museums.” In *Springer eBooks*, 7494–7500, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0465-2_2434 .

¹⁶ “DOCUMENT: Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums” In *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* edited by Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, 247-249. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388296-015>

¹⁷ Charlton, Angela. “‘Our imagination was violated’: France to return African art | AP News.” AP News, October 8, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/emmanuel-macron-benin-africa-europe-france-7a285a706448503697a736e04a14022d> .

Besides that, another issue is how to define universality. Since its first introduction, scholars cast doubt on whether the universality of museums is determined by the size of collection or wealth. Surprisingly, there seems to be no precise criterion on this issue. On the other hand, many African museums that have large collections and tourist flow have never been asked to join the group of universal museums. For instance, the National Museum of Kenya has over 2 million insect specimens and lots of research proceeds there, while it is still excluded from universal museums.¹⁸ Seemingly, it can be inferred that “universal museum” is a relatively eurocentric and western-centric term and its establishment is based on colonial extractions. With these two problems revealed, one can indicate that Western museums would not be an appropriate residence for the Ethiopian censer and it should be repatriated.

However, where should the artifact go?

In 2021, thirteen artifacts looted during the Maqdala expedition were repatriated back to Ethiopia. The objects were first sent to the Ethiopian Embassy in the United Kingdom, then back to Addis Ababa, the Capital of Ethiopia. After that, the government resides these objects in the National



Figure 2. Image of National Museum of Ethiopia

Museum of Ethiopia for display. Hence, it might be a plausible restitution method to put the censer in the museum for exhibition. As the censer is displayed in the museum with basic descriptions of its usage, Ethiopian people could retrieve their lost history from it and gain knowledge of their own orthodox culture.

¹⁸ Burlingame, Katherine. “Universal Museums: Cultural and Ethical Implications,” January 1, 2014, 384–98. <https://lup.lub.lu.se/record/e4dab17a-d50c-4b33-b67f-09ced4a25eaf>.

In conclusion, the Ethiopian censor should be repatriated to its own country because of its particular religious importance, and its character as a cultural heritage, and it helps to retain Ethiopians' human rights. In addition, issues revolving around the "universal museums" have receded the authenticity and reliability of these museums, thus making the artifacts better to be restituted.

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Response about censer restitution debate

Dear public:

I am writing to you as the representative of the British Museum of the United Kingdom to discuss the restitution of the Ethiopian Orthodox censer. I hereby declare that the information I provide is legitimate and correct, and the Museum's decision is based solely on truth. It is known that the Maqdala expedition has brought irreversible harm and destruction to the Ethiopian people with its chastening military conflict and colonial pillage. We as a museum felt sorry that most of our Maqdala Collections retrieved to the era of these extractions, and we acknowledge that there exists humanitarian concerns, meaning violations of human rights with the expedition.

This leads to numerous calls for restitution of the artifacts residing in our museum. People claimed that the artifacts should be repatriated not only because of their suspicious provenance, but also because they are part of Ethiopia's national property. Certainly, we appreciate their passion and effort, and encourage more debates to take place. However, the two arguments people often make seem not to be valid.

Firstly, the British military visit to Maqdala was in 1867, a year when two world wars have not yet occurred, and social morality standards are utterly different from modern United Kingdom. Therefore, it is not appropriate to condemn contemporary institutions with past events. In addition, there are no official obligations compelling museums to de-access their properties, thus the British Museum will not consent with the restitution calls.

On the other hand, the British Museum Act 1963 (“the Act”) is always the governing instrument of the British Museum, and all the de-accession decisions are based on this legislation foundation. Under the act, we trustees have no power of selling, exchanging or disposing of the object in other ways because it is the United Kingdom’s national property that cannot be offended.

For the listed two reasons, I hereby declare that the British Museum will not return the Ethiopian Orthodox censer to the Ethiopian government.