



UNESCO

General Assemblies

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Topic 1
Desecration of cultural and
ancestral sites for resources

Topic 2
On repatriating cultural
artifacts

October 5-6, 2026

Committee
Educational, Scientific
and Cultural Organization

Georgia Tech
Model United Nations

Bridging technology and diplomacy.



Georgia Tech
Model United Nations

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#GTMUN2026



Letter from the Secretary General



Esteemed delegates,

My name is Henry Bui, your Secretary General for the 2026 edition of the Georgia Tech Model United Nations Conference, also lovingly known as GTMUN. As your Secretary General, I would like to give you all a warm welcome as you begin your journey this conference cycle.

Every year at GTMUN, we see hundreds of you delegates spend hours speaking about your ideas, deliberating with others about the efficacy of solutions, and collaborating with compatriots to draft extensive resolutions. It is always impressive to see each delegate's ability to tackle these very significant issues affecting the real world today, proposing novel solutions, creatively applying international policy, and synthesizing resolutions that solve these urgent questions comprehensively and on a global scale.

I am especially excited to see everything you all will achieve this October. With over 1,000 delegates attending, this will be the largest GTMUN to date, and with it, we are bringing you 18 diverse committees to further test your abilities. Each committee has been carefully crafted to open unique perspectives and to allow each delegate to apply their skills in possibly new, unique ways. I hope that in the midst of being lost in deep research rabbit holes and hours of debate in each session, you all are satisfactorily challenged and that you all leave with joy and excitement in the work you accomplish.

Outside of the Scheller building where you will debate for two days, you will find that many of the skills you have used will be applicable to other aspects of your professional career: your ability to speak publicly, to improvise and adapt, and to act diplomatically. As a computer science student and teaching assistant, I have found that my experience in Model UN has been some of my most valuable. It has taught me to be confident in what I say, and it has taught me how to work with people with all different kinds of backgrounds and perspectives. One of our core values at Georgia Tech is that we thrive on diversity, and that is something that shines strongly at GTMUN.

As you prepare for committee, I want you to remember the most important thing you should get out of GTMUN—even more important than demonstrating your abilities or honing your skills for your professional career—is having fun. Not every speech has to be perfect, and not every unmoderated caucus has to go your way! Take the opportunity to try eccentric things in your speeches and diplomatic approach, and take the opportunity to meet new people. Do not forget that you are surrounded by many others who have similar goals, aspirations, and interests as you do! You might find a future close friend. Though competing is quite fulfilling (and the prospect of awarding is exciting), it can also be very stressful, so it is critical to find joy in what you are doing.

Once again, we, the GTMUN Secretariat, are excited to see everything you will achieve.

Good luck & have fun,

Henry Bui

Secretary General of GTMUN 2026



What is a *Position Paper*?

A position paper is a paper which describes how a country intends to address the topics of the committee, detailing tangible solutions to committee issues and connection to the country's policies. A position paper should contain details for each topic that will be addressed by the committee.

Formatting Requirements

- 12-point font, double spaces Times New Roman
- 1-2 pages per topic (excluding Works Cited page)
- A Works Cited page with citations in MLA format
- Files submitted in .pdf format with title "GTMUN26_COMMITTEE_COUNTRY.pdf"
- e.g., "GTMUN26_DISEC_Germany.pdf" or "GTMUN26_UNEP_United_States.pdf"

Start Each Topic Page With

- Committee: [Name of committee]
- Delegation: [Name of delegation]
- Topic: [Topic name/decription]

Position Paper Rubric

In order to be eligible for awards, delegates must submit a position paper and receive a score of at least 12/20 (for single-topic committees) or 24/40 (for double-topic committees). Refer to the next page for the exact scoring guidelines.

Our AI Policy

Delegates are expected to be drafting documents during the span of the conference using their own thoughts and ideas. As such, GTMUN **does not permit** plagiarism, pre-writing, or the use of generative AI during conferences.

- Plagiarism is the act of using another individual's work or writing and passing it as one's own without proper citation or credit. This includes writing from other delegates in the committee or from online sources.
- Pre-writing is the act of writing material for in-conference documents (e.g., working papers, draft resolutions, crisis directives) ahead of the conference. While doing prior research and bringing research notes is permitted (and encouraged), these notes should not contain text that is intended to be directly copied and pasted into a document. Suspicion of pre-writing is subject to the chair's discretion.
- Generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini) cannot be used to partially or wholly write a conference document. GTMUN recognizes the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence engines as a tool for research. Though discouraged, GTMUN accepts the use of such tools to locate resources and brainstorm starting solutions. However, generative AI must not be used to generate content for the conference, such as in-conference documents and position papers. GTMUN encourages the development of creative, unique solutions in committee and knows delegates are more than capable of producing such ideas without relying on generative AI.

Delegates that violate the writing policy will face consequences that may include disqualification from awards.

	Great (5)	Good (4)	Adequate (3)	Poor (1)
Background	• Detailed description of the topic (including dates and stakeholders) • Several facts and statistics • Discusses many relevant UN documents and resolutions	• Basic description of topic (including some dates and stakeholders) • Some facts and statistics • Discusses some relevant UN documents and resolutions	• Minimal description of topic (with no or few dates and stakeholders) • Few facts and statistics • Misses some key relevant UN documents and resolutions	• Unclear or incorrect description of topic • Incorrect or missing facts or statistics • No mention of relevant UN documents and resolutions
Policy	• Country's detailed history with issue • Detailed present position (or a strongly-defended inferred position) of country • Several references to statements from appropriate officials or documents • Several facts and statistics	• Country's basic history with issue • Present position (or reasonable inferred position) of country • Some references to statements from appropriate officials or documents • Some facts and statistics	• Sparsely describes country's history with issue • Present position (or basic inferred position) of country • Few references to statements from appropriate officials and documents • Few facts and statistics	• Incorrect or missing description of country's history with issue • Incorrect present position (or unreasonably inferred position) of country • No references to statements from appropriate officials and documents • Incorrect or missing facts and statistics
Solutions	• Detailed personal objectives • Proposes well-supported potential solutions • Identifies delegates to work with and provides strong reasoning for selections • Actionable, reasonable solutions which are within the scope of the committee	• Expresses personal objectives • Proposes reasonable potential solutions • Identifies delegates to work with and provides reasonable justification for selections • Actionable solutions within the scope of committee	• States personal objective • Proposes potential solutions • Identifies delegates to work with • Actionable solutions	• No proposed goals or plans • No potential collaborators mentioned • Implausible or missing actionable solutions
Mechanics	• No grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors • Numerous and diverse citations from appropriate sources	• Few grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors • Citations from appropriate sources	• Some grammar, spelling, or punctuation mistakes • One or two citations from inappropriate sources	• Many grammar, spelling, or punctuation mistakes • No citations from appropriate sources

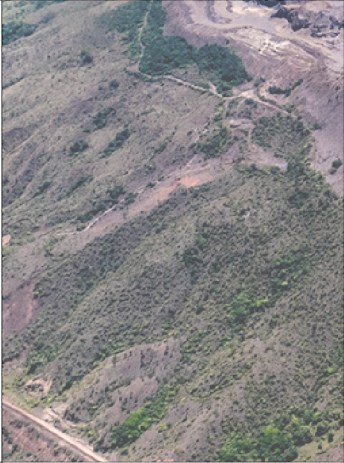
Introduction to Committee

Since 1946, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has promoted peace, heritage, education, and science to foster international cooperation, sustainable development, and human rights. Governed by the General Conference, composed of member states and associate members, which meets biennially to set agendas and budgets, UNESCO plays a vital role in safeguarding social and cultural foundations and aiding recovery for communities affected by crises. Among its flagship initiatives is the designation of World Heritage Sites: landmarks and areas with special legal protection due to having cultural, historical, or scientific significance.

While the organization cannot impose international sanctions or legal penalties, it is able to encourage policy frameworks, recommend state action, and draft resolutions as guidelines for international cooperation. As a delegate of this committee, you are tasked with proposing actionable solutions and innovative frameworks within these diplomatic constraints. Specifically, this committee will address the desecration of cultural and ancestral sites caused by natural resource extraction while navigating through the broader socioeconomic impacts on affected communities.

Disclaimer

Model United Nations provides an opportunity for delegates to engage diplomatically with topics of global importance and explore possibilities for conflict resolution in a meaningful way. Many of the topics at hand may involve sensitive or controversial subject matter. We ask delegates to be respectful and professional when engaging with their committee and communicating with fellow delegates and GTMUN Conference staff. The content warning below is meant to warn you of potentially controversial topics that are present in the content of this background guide, as well as content that may appear in other aspects of the committee (e.g. debate, speeches, directives), so that you can prepare yourself before reading this background guide and participating in the committee. At GTMUN, we take equity violations very seriously and require delegates to fully comply with our equity guidelines. Failure to do so will result in an immediate disqualification from awards, and you may be asked to leave the conference. Please remain respectful in committee, and avoid overgeneralizations as well as take into account individual differences and contexts during your speeches. If you have any questions regarding our equity guidelines, we encourage you to contact one of our staff members. If, because of this committee's content warning, you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to our staff via email at gtmunconference@gmail.com.



Topic 01

**Desecration of cultural and
ancestral sites for
resources**

Key Terms and Acronyms

<i>Cultural Heritage</i>	The collection of physical artifacts, traditions, knowledge systems, practices, values, and cultural expressions inherited from previous generations and preserved for future generations. It encompasses material and immaterial elements that contribute to the identity, memory, and continuity of a community or society.
<i>Intangible Heritage</i>	Consists of the non-physical cultural practices, knowledge, and expressions passed between generations. This includes oral traditions, languages, performing arts, rituals, ceremonies, traditional craftsmanship, social practices, ecological knowledge, and cultural customs that communities recognize as part of their identity and heritage.
<i>Natural Heritage</i>	Refers to the landscapes, ecosystems, geological formations, biodiversity, and natural sites that possess environmental, scientific, cultural, spiritual, or historical significance. For many indigenous communities, natural heritage includes sacred landscapes, rivers, forests, and ecosystems that are deeply tied to cultural identity and traditional ways of life.
<i>Tangible Heritage</i>	Physical and material manifestation of culture that can be preserved and protected. This includes monuments, buildings, archaeological sites, artifacts, sacred sites, historical structures, cultural landscapes, and objects of cultural significance.

<i>Ancestral Lands</i>	Territories, landscapes, waters, and natural resources that Indigenous peoples or tribal communities have traditionally occupied, used, or maintained connections with across generations. These lands often hold cultural, spiritual, economic, and historical significance and are closely linked to community identity and survival.
<i>Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)</i>	The standard used by UNESCO to determine whether a site possesses exceptional cultural or natural significance that transcends national boundaries and is considered important for present and future generations of humanity. OUV serves as the basis for inclusion on the World Heritage List.
<i>The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)</i>	A non-binding international declaration adopted in 2007 that establishes minimum standards for the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights, including rights related to self-determination, culture, land ownership, political participation, identity, and traditional territories. Although not legally binding, it serves as an important normative framework for states and international organizations.
<i>Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)</i>	A principle recognizing Indigenous peoples' right to provide or withhold consent regarding projects, policies, or activities that may affect their lands, territories, resources, or rights. FPIC is widely recognized as a key safeguard in Indigenous rights and resource governance. • Free: without coercion or intimidation. • Prior: before decisions or project approvals occur. • Informed: with access to complete and understandable information. • Consent: through meaningful participation and decision-making processes.

***The Resource Governance
Index (RGI)***

Assessment framework developed to evaluate how effectively countries govern their extractive sectors, particularly oil, gas, and mining industries. It measures transparency, accountability, revenue management, institutional quality, and governance practices to assess whether natural resources are managed in ways that benefit the public.

Introduction

“Our native land charms us with inexpressible sweetness, and never never allows us to forget that we belong to it” (Ovid)

Cultural heritage is defined as the combination of “physical artifacts and intangible attributes that have been inherited by a group from the past” (Cultural Heritage Studies, n.d.), and which help define a community’s identity. This concept can be divided into tangible heritage, such as physical items and immovable sites, intangible heritage, like folklore or oral history, and natural heritage, referring to the landscapes and natural sites that hold historical significance to the community (ScienceDirect, n.d.). In other words, a group’s cultural heritage is defined by properties and sites of archaeological, historical, and cultural significance, the environmental features where the community is located, their traditional lifestyle, and the cultural knowledge (tangible or intangible) that should be preserved for current and future generations (World Bank Group, n.d.).

There are an estimated 5000 tribal communities around the world, encompassing roughly 476 million people across 90 countries (Stagner, 2025). Historically, their cultural heritage is strongly tied to ancestral lands, which encompass the “territories on which they depend for their economic, spiritual, cultural, and physical well-being” (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, n.d.). These include ecosystems, water, and sacred sites that are foundational to the cultural, spiritual, and economic lives to the indigenous communities. By international standards, the indigenous or tribal community is recognized with the property rights of their ancestral land, and by extension, to the resources within their territory. These resources are



“The Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and Far East of the Russian Federation, believe that the Air, the Land, and Water are blessed; Nature is the source of life, Man is but a drop in the whirlpool of life; The river of time is but a reflection of the past, present, and future and that how their ancestors lived in the past is how they now live and how their children will live in the future.”-RAIPON Charter

often necessary for the survival, development, and continuation of their way of life (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, n.d.), and are closely tied to their practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, recognized as intangible heritage. For indigenous and tribal communities, the land provides them with a sense of identity and continuity (UNESCO, n.d.).

But despite their cultural importance, one third of the world’s heritage sites remain



Mining, fossil fuels, dams, and the AFFL sector are the extractive activities that most heavily affect the AFFL sector. Photo: AB Magazine; ACCA global.

exposed to extractive activities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). Large-scale infrastructure development and extractive operations can cause the loss of biodiversity, disruption of ecosystems, pollution, displacement of people, and loss of livelihoods and cultural heritage. More than half of the sites have been continuously affected for extractive activities since 2015 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). Within this category, 48% of natural sites lie within one kilometre of extractive activity,

while 73% are placed within 20 kilometers, close enough to suffer from impacts of pollution, habitat destruction, and cultural disruption (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025). From UNESCO's list of cultural sites, 124 are found in the vicinity of oil and gas extractive activities, while 45 are found near mining sites (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025).

From all documented environmental conflicts worldwide, 34% directly and heavily affect Indigenous Peoples (Scheidel et al., 2023). More than three quarters of these conflicts stem from mining, fossil fuels, dams, and the AFFL sector, composed of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and livestock industries. 56% of these conflicts are reported to result in landscape loss, 52% in livelihood loss, and 50% in land dispossession, disproportionately affecting indigenous and tribal communities (Scheidel et al., 2023). These challenges have been identified on Indigenous ancestral lands across Central and South America, India, Western Africa, and Southeast Asia, with the number of cases likely to be much higher due to lack of documentation in global data sets (Husain, 2023).

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues specifies the key challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples, categorized by:

- a) Lack of implementation and representation: despite being protected by national and international frameworks, land-related rights are often weakly implemented. The demarcation process are "delayed, incomplete, or reversed" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.), while extractive allocations (mining, logging, agribusiness, or infrastructure projects) are performed without informed consent. Participation in decision-making processes is often limited or symbolic, avoiding secure tenure for indigenous communities.
- b) Large-scale and unsustainable development: forced displacement can be caused by the development of certain technologies, such as industrial agriculture and

monoculture plantations, which can degrade ecosystems and affect the livelihood of indigenous communities. Additionally, the advancement of touristic areas, conservation projects, mining zones and dams can cause loss of access to lands and resources. The effects often evolve into forced displacement and poverty against indigenous communities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

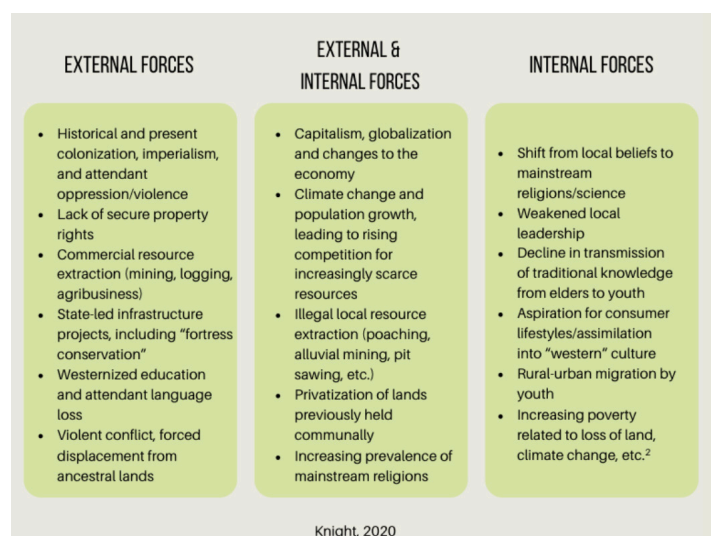


The United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is one of the most important mechanisms for indigenous peoples all over the world.

- c) Impacts on marginalized groups and response: land degradation and dispossession reinforces existing inequalities and severely affects indigenous women through increasing unpaid workloads (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

From all reported environmental conflicts involving indigenous communities, a total of 95% began during or after the 1970s (Scheidel et al., 2023). Just like the long term effects caused by social and environmental impact, the erosion of community traditions occurs over time. Elders retain the value and connections to their ancestral and spiritual land, while younger community members may see the land as a “transactional resource” (Knight, 2020). This is directly derived from the lack of available opportunities and protections, which sometimes can lead communities to transform vibrant local ecosystems to “resources.”

As a result, the efforts by communities to fight or reclaim their ancestral lands are

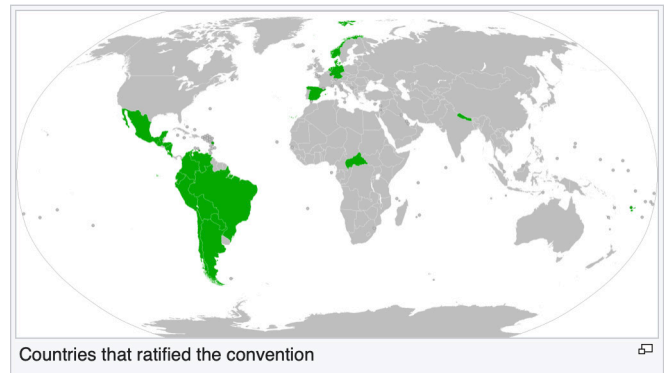


often hindered by local people who have interest in mining, logging, or leasing their own lands and resources for profit, giving an advantage to government officials and international investors (Knight, 2020). These struggles divide communities and damage the spiritual relationship between people and their land. Those who defend their rights often face criminalization, prosecution, and violence.

The main external and internal forces that disrupt indigenous peoples' land, one of the most important mechanisms for indigenous peoples all over the world.

Previous Actions

Indigenous people's lands intersect some of the most unexploited natural areas, which have been a target for extractive development and environmental conflict from colonialism to the present (Scheidel et al., 2023).



Countries that ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on 2007 by a majority of 144 states in favor, 4 votes against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, these four countries have since supported the declaration), and 11 abstentions (Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Samoa, and Ukraine) (United South & Eastern Tribes, 2021). This declaration supports several rights for indigenous communities, including the right to self-determination, ancestral land, culture, and non-discrimination. This non-binding agreement serves as a tool for advocacy when drafting national legislation. However, while most countries endorse UNDRIP, signatory nations are not upholding their commitments to protect indigenous rights. Specifically, industries and corporations keep causing environmental harm and violating environmental rights, while being insufficiently addressed by the UNDRIP.

Currently, the only legally binding agreement is the Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention No. 169. This is the most important operative international law guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples through principles like Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Most countries with lands under indigenous stewardship and with environmental conflicts affecting indigenous peoples have not yet ratified it (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), 1989). Other binding tools, such as the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM - 2002) have made landmark commitments not to explore or mine in World Heritage sites, with only a small number of companies, lenders, and investors following suit.

Common Threats to Indigenous Land Preservation

Mining

Mining on indigenous land has historically been a major human rights issue. Despite representing a small share of the global population, indigenous and tribal peoples are disproportionately affected by extractive projects. The establishment of mining



Around the world, the rights of indigenous peoples are often in tension with the economic interests of extractive companies and governments. Photo: Brookings

infrastructure (such as roads, stations, and ports) often leaves a big footprint in the land, leading to pollution, water contamination, biodiversity loss, and destruction of cultural sites (Simon, 2024). The resulting land degradation can be devastating for local agriculture. Activities cause loss of fertility, reduce crop yields, and contribute to food insecurity and poverty (Terracon, 2024). This poses a risk of disrupting indigenous identity, cultures, and economies, and in some regions, it can also be linked to

increased rates of violence against women (Kellner, 2025).

The “green” transition to renewable energy comes at a large cost for indigenous communities, with 50% of the world’s critical projects in lithium, copper, and nickel located on or near indigenous communities. In the United States, 75% of these mineral resources are found within 35 miles of Native American reservations (Simon, 2024). These minerals are necessary for the manufacturing of batteries and solar panels driving the transition to clean energy (Simon, 2024). The complex issue of mining is nuanced and highly divisive amongst indigenous communities. According to the United Nations, tribes have different opinions on mining, but rarely is their legal right to refuse extraction projects recognized (Stagner, 2025). Indigenous peoples are increasingly expressing concerns about renewable energy development and mining on their lands, evidenced by persistent resistance by peoples in Argentina, Chile, Peru, the Resolution Copper Mine project in Arizona (US), Canada, Samis in Sweden, and Australia, among others (Kellner, 2025).

Resource Governance

An important tool is the Resource Governance Index (RGI). The RGI assesses the practices and policies that countries employ to govern their countries oil, gas, and mining sectors.

Frameworks for the management of mineral resources vary by state. In most cases, mineral resources are nationalized or owned by the state, with the government participating in all stages of the mining process. Other countries allow private entities to own minerals, as long as they’re not located or extracted from federal or indigenous land, with mining on tribal lands requiring some type of lease or agreements. Finally, there are other nations where all subsurface minerals are owned by an entity, such as the Crown in Canada (Leiss, 2025).

Good	≥ 75	A country has established laws and practices that are likely to result in extractive resource wealth benefiting citizens, although there may be some costs to society.
Satisfactory	60-74	A country has some strong governance procedures and practices, but some areas need improvement. It is reasonably likely that extractive resource wealth benefits citizens, but there may be costs to society.
Weak	45-59	A country has a mix of strong and problematic areas of governance. Results indicate that resource extraction can help society, but it is likely that the eventual benefits are weak.
Poor	30-44	A country has established some minimal procedures and practices to govern resources, but most elements necessary to ensure society benefits are missing.
Failing	< 30	A country has almost no governance framework to ensure resource extraction benefits society. It is highly likely that benefits flow only to some companies and elites.

The different stages of the Resource Governance Index (RGI)

For the purpose of this committee, delegates are expected to align, discuss, and negotiate solutions that align with their country's specific policy when considering extractive projects and their impact on tribal and ancestral lands.

Oil and Gas

The past few decades, the search for new oil and gas resources has endangered more exploration and development in lands that indigenous peoples traditionally occupy or customarily use. This expansion has intensified tensions between resource development, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and Indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples constitute distinct social and cultural groups with specific rights recognized under international law, and often national legal frameworks. Governments hold the primary responsibility for protecting these rights; however, Indigenous communities have historically experienced discrimination, exclusion, displacement, and political marginalization, leaving many communities disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of resource extraction.

The expansion of oil and gas projects into Indigenous territories creates several challenges for governments, corporations, and local communities. In many countries, projects operating in Indigenous territories must comply with specific legal standards regarding consultation processes, environmental protections, land rights, and consent requirements. Access to land remains a sensitive issue, as Indigenous communities may hold legally recognized ownership, customary tenure systems, or historical claims over territories and resources targeted for exploration and extraction. Additionally, many international financial institutions have adopted safeguards related to Indigenous rights, requiring projects to demonstrate meaningful consultation, impact mitigation strategies, and adherence to standards such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Ipieca, 2012).

Beyond regulatory requirements, projects that fail to adequately engage with Indigenous communities may face significant operational risks. As a result,

obtaining and maintaining a “social licence to operate” has become increasingly important within the extractive sector. Indigenous communities frequently expect companies operating within or near their territories to respect their rights, minimize environmental and cultural harm, and provide opportunities for local participation and benefit-sharing.

Despite the existence of national and international legal protections, many Indigenous communities (especially the isolated or voluntarily isolated groups), remain highly vulnerable. The continued expansion of extractive industries, including oil and gas, threatens the integrity of indigenous territories, disrupts cultural practices, degrades ecosystems, and jeopardizes the rights, livelihoods, and wellbeing of affected communities (Ipieca, 2012).



The government in Peru is auctioning off plots of pristine Indigenous reserves for fossil fuel projects. CR: The Guardian

Despite legal protections at both national and international levels, isolated indigenous peoples live in highly vulnerable situations, in extreme danger of being pushed from their lands or killed. The expansion of extractive activities, such as oil and gas exploration or production, mining, and logging, poses a severe threat to the integrity of these reserves and to the rights and well beings of their communities.

AFFL Sector

Although mining and fossil fuel activities accounted for more conflicts, the AFFL sector was most frequently implicated in the most predominant impacts, including the loss of landscapes (e.g. loss of aesthetics and a sense of place in 56% of cases), land dispossession (50%) and livelihood loss (52%). This sector was also responsible for the most deforestation and biodiversity loss impacts.

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples have practiced a multitude of different land and water stewardship practices, which have contributed to their outsized role in helping to preserve biodiversity and mitigate environmental harms. But centuries of colonial oppression and the frequent violation and breaking of treaties and agreements with indigenous peoples by colonizing nations have persistently threatened indigenous ancestral lands, knowledge systems, and



The government in Peru is auctioning off plots of pristine Indigenous reserves for fossil fuel projects. CR: The Guardian

ways of life (Husain, 2023).

Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sectors are mostly situated in rural communities, where 80% of those living in extreme poverty are also concentrated, resulting in a high exposure to human rights risks connected to poverty and deprivation.

Competition over land, water, and resources can exacerbate tensions and conflicts between different stakeholders, leading to human rights abuses, violence, and displacement. In conflict-affected areas, agricultural workers, indigenous communities, and small-scale farmers are particularly vulnerable to abuses by armed groups, security forces and private actors (UN Environmental Programme, n.d.).

Case Studies

The Destruction of Juukan Gorge, Australia

Juukan Gorge is a site of extraordinary cultural and archaeological significance located in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, on the lands of the Puutu Kunti Kurama and Pinikura (PKKP) peoples. The site's rock shelters contained evidence of continuous aboriginal occupation for 46,000 years. Artifacts such as ancient tools, animal remains, and strands of human hair have been excavated on-site, making it one of the oldest known sites of human habitation in Australia. For the PKKP peoples, Juukan Gorge was not only an archaeological site, but a living place that embodied their identity and connection to their country, spirits, and ancestors across millennia (Fredericks et al., 2021).



Before and after of Juukan Gorge after explosive detonation for Rio Tinto's project. CR: AAP

In 2013, the global mining group Rio Tinto was given ministerial consent under the Western Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Act of 1972 to impact the rock shelters of Juukan Gorge as an annexation to a nearby iron ore mine. Despite continuous protests by the PKKP people and widespread coverage of the archeological significance of the site, Rio Tinto detonated explosives at Juukan Gorge, destroying 46,000 years

of cultural heritage in a matter of minutes. It was estimated that the site contained approximately \$135 million worth of high-grade iron ore (HopgoodGanim Lawyers, 2021).

This act was not only legal but also protected under existing Australian heritage law. As a result of the global outrage, the parliament released a final report where it described Rio Tinto's decision to annex Juukan Gorge as "at best, corporate incompetence or,

at worst, deliberate corporate misdirection leading to the deception of a group of aboriginal peoples and the destruction of their sacred heritage” (Kemp et al., 2023). Directly leading to the establishment of an updated Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act in 2021, and protection alliances (Australian Government, 2022).

The Juukan Gorge case is an example of how inadequate domestic heritage law can legally permit the irreversible destruction of irreplaceable cultural heritage. It raises fundamental questions about the limits of existing international instruments (including UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

The Dakota Access Pipeline and Standing Rock, United States

The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation sits at the heart of the ancestral homeland of the Lakota and Dakota peoples of the Great Sioux Nation. The 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie guaranteed these lands to the Sioux for their “absolute and undisturbed use and occupation,” but subsequent Congressional acts reduced the original reservation boundaries. The Missouri River (Mni Sose - Water of Life) is not only the Lakota’s primary source of drinking water, but also a sacred presence in Sioux cosmology and ceremony. The broader landscape contains burial grounds, prayer sites, and places of spiritual significance that have been central to Sioux cultural life for centuries (Harvard Law School, 2026; Sioux, 2015).

In 2015, Energy Transfer Partners began construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a 1,100-mile conduit designed to transport oil from the Bakken oil fields



Map of the proposed routes for the Dakota Access Pipeline, affecting Bismarck and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. CR: Vox

in North Dakota to a shipping terminal in Illinois (Harvard Law School, 2026). The pipeline’s proposed route would have crossed the Missouri River, but was rejected due to concerns about the risk to Bismarck’s (the capital’s) drinking water. The route was relocated south, to cross the river half a mile upstream of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe argued that this relocation demonstrated a direct double standard: the pipeline’s environmental and cultural risks were considered unacceptable when they threatened a predominantly white city, but acceptable when they threatened a

Sioux reservation (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.). Despite continuous protests and litigations, this case remains as one of the most prominent unresolved conflicts over indigenous cultural rights in American history.

The Belo Monte Hydroelectric Dam, Brazil

The Xingu River flows through one of the most biodiverse regions and is the cultural and spiritual heartland of numerous Amazonian Indigenous peoples. The river is necessary for their subsistence, since it provides food, water, transport, and ceremonial sustenance to communities who have inhabited its banks for millennia. Among them, the Kayapo people are renowned for their deep ecological knowledge, their warrior tradition, and their fierce defense of Amazonian lands. The broader Xingu basin contains numerous sacred sites, including burial grounds, ceremonial, fishing locations, and landscapes tied to Indigenous cosmologies and oral traditions (Scherer, 2016).

Plans for a massive hydroelectric dam on the Xingu were first drawn up in 1975 under Brazil's military dictatorship, which sought to industrialize the Amazon to fuel national economic growth. In 1989, the Kayapo mounted a massive public campaign in opposition; international stakeholders pulled their support and the project was shelved, only to be revived in 2007. When it was revived under President Lula da Silva's Accelerated Growth Program, the dam was redesigned, but still required diverting more than 80 percent of the Xingu's flow, causing the forced displacement of more than 40,000 people and severing their social and cultural ties. Indigenous communities were not meaningfully consulted, in direct violation of Brazil's constitution and ILO convention 169 (Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA), 2026).

The consequences for affected communities have been devastating and lasting. The dam's operations caused a permanent, man-made drought in the Volta Grande (or "Great Bend") of the Xingu river, resulting in the deaths of millions of fish eggs for four consecutive years and effectively ending upstream fish migration for spawning and reproduction, severely affecting the main source of protein for Indigenous peoples and riverside communities. The uprooting of communities



Fishermen approach the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam construction site, during a protest against its construction and its impact on their livelihoods, along the Xingu river. CR: STRINGER/Reuters

from the river and forest they had inhabited for generations produced a profound cultural rupture: an unprecedented rise in alcoholism, prostitution, and inter-tribal feuds, conditions so severe that they prompted a Brazilian public prosecutor to sue Norte Energia for causing “ethnocide,” the obliteration of indigenous culture (Hernández-Truyol, 2014; Scherer, 2018).

Directives / QARMAs

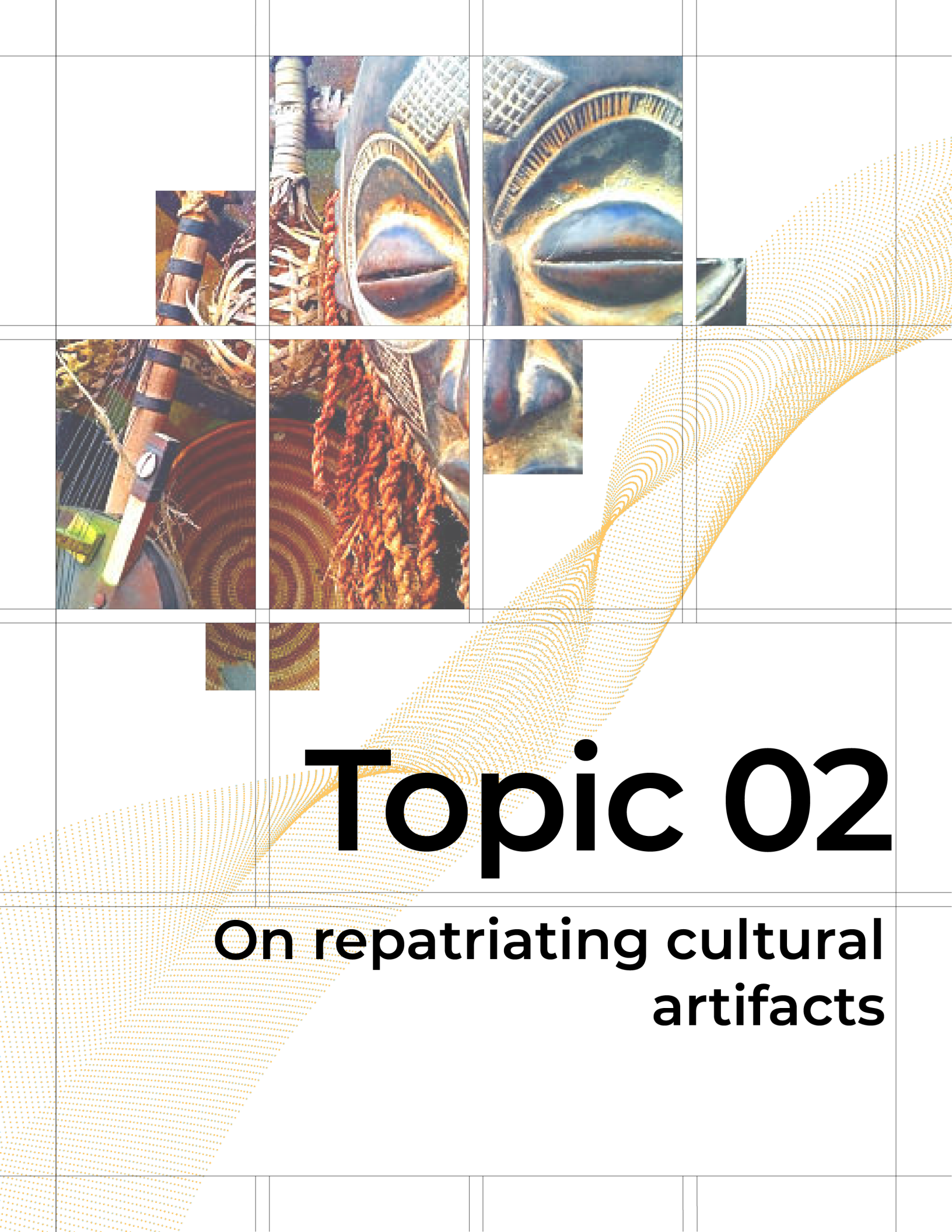
How should states balance extractive development and economic growth with the protection of Indigenous cultural heritage and ancestral lands?

What mechanisms should be implemented to guarantee meaningful consultation and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for Indigenous and tribal communities?

How can international organizations, governments, and private companies strengthen protections for cultural and ancestral sites before projects are approved?

What measures should be adopted to prevent displacement, cultural loss, and environmental degradation when projects affect Indigenous territories?

How should the International community improve accountability and enforcement when governments or corporations violate Indigenous rights or damage cultural heritage?



Topic 02

**On repatriating cultural
artifacts**

Key Terms and Acronyms

Loot	Valuable objects that have been stolen, especially by an army from a defeated enemy or by thieves
Illicit	Refers to something not permitted by law, rule, or custom, such as smuggling and unauthorized trade
Restitution	The act of restoring something to its rightful owner, or compensating for loss, damage, or injury
Deaccession	The formal process by which a museum, library, or archive permanently removes an item from its permanent collection. Items removed are normally disposed of through specific channels such as sale, transfer, repatriation, and destruction
Diaspora	The dispersion of a population from its original homeland to multiple regions across the globe
Artifacts / Cultural property	Any object made, modified, or used by humans that holds historical, cultural, or scientific significance. Artifacts provide vital insights into how past and present societies live, innovate, and interact
Disputed	When it is the subject of disagreement, debate, or contestation rather than being universally accepted, agreed upon, or settled
Cultural stewardship	The practice of guiding, preserving, and sharing cultural heritage with accountability and care

Introduction to the Topic

The Benin Bronzes, a collection of works crafted by the ancient West African Kingdom of Benin, were taken in 1897 during a British military expedition and subsequently scattered to museums and private collections around the world. More than a century later, some of the pieces finally began their journey back home to Nigeria in 2022. This historic move has put the debate over the return of cultural artifacts to their country of origin, also known as cultural repatriation, into the global spotlight. Since its creation the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has encouraged the return and restitution of cultural objects. However, despite these efforts, the return of cultural property has continued to be hampered by numerous legal, political, and ethical hurdles, sparking an ever-evolving dialogue within the international community.

Throughout history, countless cultural artifacts have been acquired through centuries of colonialism, warfare, and geopolitical conflict. Alongside various plundering and looting, many of these objects remain in countries other than their places of origin and often under highly disputed circumstances. Large amounts of these artifacts are held in museums all around the world, and primarily due to legal grey areas, lack of enforcement, and safety concerns, their return has been significantly delayed and hindered. The British Museum in London is widely considered by historians and international agencies to hold the most controversial and looted artifacts in the world and exemplifies the phenomenon of “universal museums.” Many major institutions have also embraced this concept, claiming that humankind can be best served by artifacts remaining in heavily visited global hubs rather than returning to their geographic origins. Some proponents argue that universal museums should be in place because of the potential for cultural property to be destroyed or stolen when returned to regions suffering from domestic wars, severe environmental degradation, and/or lack of safety measures. However, this notion has also garnered backlash and

criticism, especially from many nations in the Global South, which believe that “universal museums can perpetuate imperialist ideals and maintain the hostage status of [artifacts] rightfully owned by others” (Obubo, 2022).

Beyond their physical form, these artifacts are also representations of identity, heritage, and tradition. Their return has the capability to restore a society’s dignity, right historical wrongs, and ensure items are understood within



Palace plaques from the Benin Bronzes, a collection of brass and bronze relief sculptures created by Edo artists.

proper geographical and social settings. Conversely, having items abroad can mean the origin country is deprived of potential funding, tourism revenue, and educational opportunities granted by having cultural artifacts. Additionally, further complicating the issue is the surge of modern-day art theft and illicit selling on the black market. The United Nations estimates the illicit antiquities and art market has been able to generate profits ranging from \$300 million to \$6 billion annually, with 37,000 objects being seized in 2025 alone.

The repatriation of cultural artifacts can serve as an instrument for cultural diplomacy. The way states navigate these requests can significantly affect diplomatic relations, either strengthening international partnership or becoming a source of friction that can weaken trust. While UNESCO has attempted to address their questions by creating international guidelines and regulations, due to ambiguous language and a lack of immediate and mandatory enforcement, the return of artifacts and the mitigation of illicit trafficking have proved to be complex. As a delegate of this committee, you are tasked with proposing actionable solutions to these pressing issues while deciphering through the broader implications of repatriation for the global community.

Historical Background

Although modern repatriation debates have become increasingly prominent, the movement of cultural property has existed for thousands of years. Throughout history and across the globe, cultural objects have changed hands through colonial expansion, warfare, theft, archaeological expeditions, diplomatic exchange, and trade. While some objects were acquired through voluntary means, many were removed under conditions of unequal power or armed conflict, laying the foundation for many of today's repatriation claims. One of the earliest examples is the stele of King Naram-Sin of Akkad. Originally created in Mesopotamia around 2254-2218 BCE, the monument was later taken as war loot before being excavated by French archaeologists in 1898 and displayed in the Louvre Museum.

The removal of cultural property expanded exponentially during the Napoleonic era through military campaigns, archaeological expeditions, and the confiscation of artworks. "Napoleon sought to establish an encyclopedic exhibition of art history," now known as the Louvre, by acquiring objects from "territories of the First French Empire, including the Italian peninsula, Spain, Portugal, Egypt, and Central Europe" ("Repatriation (Cultural Property)," 2026). One of the most well-known artifacts from this period is the Rosetta Stone, a grey slab carved with three translations of a decree issued in 196 BCE. After being discovered by French soldiers in Egypt, the stone was acquired by the British through the 1801 treaty of Alexandria, an agreement that Egypt argues it had no role in negotiating.

While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw dramatic increases in the removal of cultural artifacts, especially from nations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas, during this same period the world also saw some of the earliest documented cases of cultural repatriation, with cultural objects beginning to be returned to their countries of origin. The first modern international cultural repatriation occurred in 1815, following the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. Here, the Congress of Vienna, “the first international congress dealing with looting of artworks,” returned over “2000 paintings, 130 sculptures, and 289 cast bronze” objects to their country of origin (Dorau, 2023). These early efforts laid the groundwork for the modern repatriation movement and the development of international legal frameworks for the protection and return of cultural property.



British military with cultural artifacts and ivory tusks during the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897.

Although the Congress of Vienna showcased the ability to return cultural property following armed conflict, repatriation remained uncommon until after the Second World War. During this period, the world began shifting to decolonization; long-standing independence movements gained momentum, and in 1945, the founding of the United Nations gave “countries a forum to raise global support for decolonization around the world” (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). With this, newly independent nations increasingly sought the return of cultural objects removed during periods of colonial rule and armed conflict. At the same time, the international community recognized the need for legal protections to prevent the continued loss of cultural heritage. Three major conventions, the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1970 UNESCO convention, and the 1995 UNIDROIT convention, played significant roles in repatriation.

The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted in 1954 “under the auspices of UNESCO.” It was the first international treaty focused on the protection of cultural artifacts in the event of conflict. “The commitments made by the State Parties to the Convention served to preserve cultural heritage through the implementations of measures” such as adopting emergency plans and routes to prepare for the removal of cultural property to places of safety, registering cultural property on the international register, establishing military forces to protect artifacts, and marking certain important buildings and

monuments with “a distinctive emblem of the Convention” (UNESCO). However, while the Hague Convention focused on protecting cultural property during armed conflict, it did not address the growing problem of the illicit export, import, and transfer of ownership of cultural objects during times of peace. As a result, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was established to fill the need for a broader legal framework.

During the 1970s and 1980s, many nations’ concerns were “mainly related to the growth of the black market” (UNESCO, n.d.) for cultural objects. Thus, the 1970 Conventions gave a central role to prevention through establishing export certificates, creating national services for the protection of cultural heritage, encouraging adoption of codes of conduct for dealers, and requiring compensation for certain stolen objects. The Convention also promoted greater international cooperation by encouraging member states to work together to prevent illicit trafficking and facilitate the return of stolen cultural property. Although the convention was a major milestone in international cultural heritage laws and had a positive effect on public attitudes on the issue, it suffered from major weaknesses such as certain provisions of national law limiting the effectiveness of the convention and slow participation from many member states. As a result, many repatriation disputes remained unresolved.

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a pivotal shift in global repatriation, shifting towards broader ethical and legal frameworks, as well as including newer adoptions of technology. The passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 mandated that all U.S. museums return Native American sacred items; the city council in Scotland agreed to return sacred Lakota Ghost Dance clothing; investigations began unraveling major international artifact smuggling networks; and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects provided a crucial legal mechanism to facilitate the restitution of illegally excavated or exported items. Together, these developments reflected growing international recognition that cultural heritage should be protected not only through legal ownership but also through ethical responsibility and greater transparency in museum collections amongst source communities.

As of more recently, significant progress has been made to expand diplomatic negotiations, reevaluate long-standing collection policies, and expand historical artifact databases. However, many disputes remain unresolved because of competing legal claims, historical circumstances, and differing views on cultural stewardship. Some of these legal hurdles include the British Museum Act of 1963, which has forbidden the British Museum from deaccessioning any objects in its collection, and France’s principle of inalienability, which has slowed and prevented the return of many colonial-era artifacts. Furthermore, recent events show that the displacement of cultural property is an ongoing issue, as 2025 saw the \$102 million jewel heist at

the Louvre and the thousands of looted historical and artistic artifacts by Russian forces during the Ukrainian war since 2022.

Current Challenges

In the current global landscape, a combination of new technological advancements and unresolved historical barriers has created an immense array of complex challenges facing the repatriation of cultural artifacts. While past conventions provide comprehensive international guidelines, notable lapses in legal enforcement, security, and illicit trade markets continue to affect modern cultural repatriation efforts. Additionally, new ways of using technology to repatriate artifacts have expanded the conversation by offering alternative approaches to restoring access to cultural items. As UNESCO and the international community continue to promote international cooperation, addressing these challenges remains essential to developing effective and equitable repatriation policies

Proving Ownership

One of the first steps in requesting the return of a cultural artifact is proving who it originally belonged to. Provenance, “the chronology of the ownership, custody, or location of a historical object” (“Provenance,” 2026), is used in relation to works of art with the primary purpose of tracing the path of an object to provide evidence for its original production or discovery. For museums and the art trade, provenance has become increasingly important in establishing the moral and legal validity of a chain of custody, given the growing amount of looted art. However, due to illegal exportation, undocumented excavations, and a lack of written documentation, the provenance of many artifacts is fragmented and often varies greatly. As a result, incomplete records

have delayed and prevented numerous repatriation claims, not only stalling legal proceedings but also prolonging cultural loss and preventing communities from reclaiming sacred artifacts.

Even when an artifact has well-documented provenance, there remains heightened debate over legal versus cultural ownership. In many historical communities, ownership was passed down through oral testimony, lineage, and collective memory; however, many Western legal systems and



People holding a large banner “Reparations and Repatriation” along with the Haiti flag and other slogans.

modern legal processes require written records or contracts that are often given greater legal weight than oral documentation. Additionally, past colonial powers often created treaties to acquire artifacts that were not fully understood by the source community due to language barriers or coercion. Furthering this complication is the differing perspectives amongst descendant communities. While some descendants argue that the repatriation of artifacts can strengthen their culture, reclaim their history, and heal historical traumas, others, particularly in the diaspora, have found connection in the proximity of artifacts housed in their local museums. Many descendants live far from their ancestral homelands, so museums in their current countries provide easier access to cultural artifacts they otherwise might never see

Security Concerns and Modern-Day Looting

One of the most substantial concerns against repatriation is the security risk associated with returning cultural artifacts. Some source countries requesting cultural items may lack financial or technical resources needed to preserve and maintain these objects, as some museums suffer from aging infrastructure, insect infestation, erosion, and/or inadequate climate control. Artifacts must remain in carefully controlled environmental settings, as fluctuations in heat and moisture can cause organic materials to warp and crack; chemical instability can accelerate deterioration, and harmful pollutants can tarnish metals or decay paper. Additionally, due to the fragile nature of artifacts, transporting them to their origin country can be incredibly risky. This can be a major issue, especially for developing nations that often do not have the highly specialized climate-controlled transportation that is needed.

Moreover, these security concerns can also leave artifacts vulnerable to modern-day looting and destruction. “Every year, thousands of artifacts disappear from museums, churches, private collections, public institutions, or archaeological sites.” While the illicit trafficking of cultural items has existed for centuries, over the past few decades it has become a problem of epidemic proportions. Estimates of the size and generated profitability of “black markets in looted, stolen, and smuggled works of art and antiquities are notoriously unreliable, but specialists agree that [it] is one of the world’s biggest illegal enterprises” (Fannon, 2016). The market’s potential for financial gain has also attracted militant and terrorist groups, such as ISIS and the Taliban. Between 2014 and 2017, ISIS forces



Comparison of the Temple of Bel in Syria before and after its destruction.

destroyed archaeological remains of the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud in Iraq and sold artifacts from the ancient Semitic city of Palmyra on the black market to fund military operations. UNESCO has formally condemned this cultural destruction and looting as a war crime; however, many of these artifacts continue to remain lost or destroyed.

The Rise of Digital Repatriation

As digital access has become widespread, new technologies involving digital repatriation have emerged as an innovative way to reconnect communities with ancestral heritage that has been displaced. The utilizations of “photographs, audio recordings, 3D scans, virtual reality experiences, and online databases” (Mohammed, 2025) are known as “digital repatriation” and refer to the return of cultural heritage in digital form. Through digital access, source communities have the capability to have renewed access to their material culture. In 2022, a platform called Digital Benin encouraged broader participation in digital repatriation by larger cultural institutions worldwide. The online software consists of more than 5000 images and documentation of the Benin Bronzes. As well as, it has become a crucial resource in building a global-scale database that connects objects in all institutions around the world. However, the concept has also been hit with profound ethical, legal, and political criticisms. Some proponents argue that digital repatriation may reinforce colonial hierarchies under the veneer of technological progress. While digital versions of artifacts may allow more accessibility, they do not return the physical items and allow institutions to retain control over the original artifacts, potentially perpetuating structural inequalities. In addition, the digital divide, the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not, still remains a prevalent issue in many regions. Many communities continue to face barriers related to technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and accessibility.



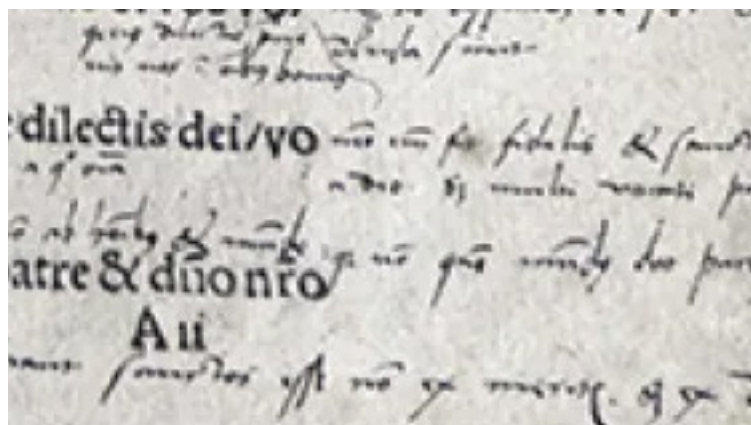
Benin Bronze brass relief plaque.

Case Study

Disputed Berlinka Collection

Beginning in 1941, the most valuable books, manuscripts, and artwork were removed from the Prussian State Library in Berlin to protect them from worsening conditions brought on by the Second World War. The collection was moved further east and placed in Fürstenstein Castle for safekeeping. However, by the end of the war much of what had been stored in the castle had disappeared. When the lower eastern territory of Germany came under the administrative sovereignty of Poland after the war, the Polish government claimed the collection as war reparations. Consequently, the collection containing works of Mozart, Martin Luther, the Brothers Grimm, and Beethoven was transferred to the Jagiellonina Library. The location of the Berlinka collection remained secret until 1977. Since then the legal status of the artifacts has remained an ongoing debate.

Poland has argued that it should retain ownership of the collection as “compensation for Polish cultural assets destroyed or looted by Germans during the Second World War” (“Berlinka (Art Collection),” 2026). Nazi Germany carried out one of the largest state-organized art thefts in history, acquiring more than 2 million pieces through looting and forced sales. Many of these artifacts were either destroyed or transported to Germany as part of plans to establish the country as Europe’s greatest center for art and culture. It is estimated that the total value of Polish cultural heritage destroyed by Nazi Germany exceeds \$20 billion. In 2000, the foreign minister of Poland proposed establishing a joint foundation between Poland and Germany to take possession of the disputed collection; however, the German government rejected the proposal, insisting on the unconditional return of the items. After negotiations stalled, in 2007, Poland stated the return of the Berlinka collection would not be repatriated. Nevertheless, in 2014, Germany returned to Poland a painting by Francesco Guardi that had been looted in 1939 in an effort to restart the negotiations over the Berlinka collection.



Manuscript featuring Martin Luther's "Epistola beati Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos"

Like many disputed cultural objects, the Berlinka collection sits in a legal gray zone. Germany claims lawful ownership based on pre-war records, while Poland argues that the items constitute legitimate war reparations; thus, both claims represent different interpretations of legal ownership and historical justice. The Berlinka

collection also demonstrates how conflict, shifting national borders, and wartime reparation can disrupt provenance, making ownership difficult to determine decades later.

Ethiopian Tabots

In 2023, the British Museum returned one out of the eleven sacred tabots seized by British troops at the 1868 battle of Maqdala, in Ethiopia. Made from wood and stone, the tabots represent the Ark of the Covenant, holding profound significance within the Orthodox Church. The tabots are regarded as highly sacred objects and are traditionally not allowed to be on public display. In addition to the tabots, the British Museum currently holds more than 90 objects, including crowns, crosses, manuscripts, royal clothing, and shields, from the northern Ethiopian site of Maqdala.

For decades, Ethiopia has requested the return of items taken during the Battle of Maqdala, arguing that their presence in Western museums violates religious protocols and causes ongoing spiritual harm. However, the British Museum Act of 1963 has prevented the museum from permanently returning many objects in its collection, including the Tabots. Likewise, other museums in the United Kingdom are also restricted by the National Heritage Act of 1983. While these laws were originally intended to protect works from short-term political decisions and arbitrary disposal, the frameworks have now been used to deny any artifact repatriation requests even for those disputed.

Organizations such as the Association for the Return of the Maqdala Ethiopian Treasures (AFROMET) have maintained campaigning for the repatriation of Maqdala objects, showing long-term international pressure. AFROMET “was formed to lobby systematically for the repatriation of the objects, using legal means and public pressure” (“Association For the Return of the Magdala Ethiopian Treasures,” 2026). Despite these efforts, many proposed solutions have not equaled unconditional



Ethiopian priests carry tabots during the Timket festival of Epiphany, celebrating the baptism of Christ.

return. Institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum have offered only long-term loans for certain Maqdala items as a less complex compromise. Long-term loans have frequently been proposed by major museums because they allow institutions to retain legal ownership while increasing access for source countries. However, this practice poses significant concerns, as lending

institutions are able to dictate the terms of access, potentially bypass ethical mandates, and may conflict with Indigenous or local traditions regarding how ancestral items should be handled, displayed, or used in community ceremonies.

Directives / QARMAs

As delegates part of this UN specialized agency, it is critical to take into account how international cooperation in education, science, culture, and communication intersect in addressing the repatriation of cultural artifacts. Some questions to consider:

Should artifact ownership be decided on based on cultural origin or the ability to care for them?

How can the oversight of the black market for art, antiquities, and cultural objects be improved?

Should global audiences have access to cultural objects if that access violates the traditions or spiritual protocols of the source community?

Do laws like the British Museum Act still apply, and should they be able to be overridden by the cultural and religious rights of source communities?

What should museums prioritize: conservation, public access, or cultural repatriation when dealing with sacred objects?

When 3D scans, virtual models, and digital reconstructions exist, how do we define authenticity, ownership, and cultural authority?

When written records are missing, can oral histories, community testimony, or ritual knowledge serve as valid forms of provenance?

Should objects taken during colonial rule be evaluated under contemporary ethical standards rather than the laws of the time?

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