

NOTES ON NEW BOOKS

Editorial note

Cultural Diplomacy and the Heritage of Empire: Negotiating Post-colonial Returns Cynthia Scott

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After the Second World War a wave of decolonization began transforming Imperial diplomatic traditions previously based on late 19th- and early 20th-century ideas of European internationalism. In addition to sovereignty, emerging leaders of newly independent States embraced culture as an important component of their countries' national identities. Their calls for cultural sovereignty – to include the return of cultural, artistic, and historical objects from European museums – further complicated bilateral relationships with former colonizers. At the same time, the United Nations became a center of post-war multi-lateral diplomacy, giving rise to UNESCO, the agency charged with promoting science, education, and intercultural dialogue as a way to peaceful international integration. In the wider context of decolonization, UN-centered deliberations also increased challenges to bilateral negotiations over the legacies of empire, and the issue of post-colonial cultural property return became a topic of heated debate in the 1960s and 1970s. While negotiators dropped measures to address historical appropriations – drawing a line at 1970 with the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property – bilateral negotiations remained an avenue for States seeking historical justice for earlier exploitation. As a result, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) assigned UNESCO the mission of advocating

for Member States to negotiate, of publicizing any such efforts, and of highlighting cases of “successful” returns. In one instance, reports emerged about an agreement made in the mid-1970s by the Netherlands and Indonesia that marked the Netherlands as one of a small number of States to have voluntarily returned collections to its former colony. While the Dutch were applauded, their association with the anti-colonial ethics that had emerged in UN circles on the issue of returning cultural property left unanswered the question of why such returns were considered necessary. Nor did it explain the historical processes that had finally made them possible. In this book, Los Angeles-based historian and heritage scholar Dr. Cynthia Scott takes up such questions in order to better understand the political, diplomatic, and cultural changes that led to the atypical returns.

Scott argues that simply crediting officials in the Netherlands with upholding the ethical ideals of post-colonial cultural property return within the UNGA and UNESCO, falls short as an explanation of their motivations. Instead, Scott traces how Dutch officials struggled for decades with the question of returning cultural property and with what its answer would mean to conceptions of the Netherlands’ cultural role going forward. She shows how the linkage Dutch officials made between good cultural relations and an ongoing presence in Indonesia limited their responses to Indonesia’s demands for returns, most dramatically in the 1950s and early 1960s under President Sukarno. It then opened new possibilities, when political changes in the mid-1960s brought President Suharto to power. In addition, Scott argues that both of these changes, and the new Dutch role as international aid donor, helped the Netherlands begin defining cultural relations – and returns – as aid toward the development of Indonesia and its repositories.

Scott’s reconsideration of the cultural diplomacy surrounding the Dutch-Indonesian case, its relationship to debates in the UNGA, UNESCO, the United Kingdom, and France, and to later political changes in the Netherlands, develops over five chapters, plus an Introduction and Conclusion, and includes 57 black-and-white illustrations. In the Introduction, Scott establishes the historical context within which the Netherlands gained a good reputation as a rare success in the history of bilateral negotiations over post-colonial cultural property return. It describes the centuries long Dutch presence in the East Indies and the rise of scholarly learning and collecting that would set the stage for later disputes. It also establishes the basic claims of the book: that the struggles Dutch officials had with the question of returning cultural property to Indonesia were persistently connected with hopes for good post-colonial cultural relations, and an ongoing Dutch role in Indonesia’s cultural life.

Chapters One through Three explore key phases in Dutch-Indonesian cultural diplomacy and how it was affected over time by the question of post-colonial cultural property return. Chapter One begins with the Japanese occupation of the Netherlands East Indies during the Second World War, the fight over Indonesian independence that followed, and the emergence of opposing visions in 1949 for post-colonial redress and reconciliation that were contested for decades to come.

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Chapter Two highlights the period of strained relations with Sukarno's Indonesia between 1950 and 1963, how Dutch officials measured the question of returning cultural property against diplomatic struggles that interfered with the hoped-for cultural cooperation, and how they began the decolonization of colonial-era museums at home. Chapter Three centers on the "opportunities" between 1966 and 1969 for renewing cultural relations that came with the rise of Indonesia's Suharto regime, how Dutch officials began redefining cultural cooperation as development aid, and how this reformulation provided a flattering context for reconsidering the exchange of archives, though not yet the return of objects or collections from Dutch museums.

Chapter Four returns to the period of the mid-1970s and analyzes the motivations behind the returns made to Indonesia by a new progressive Cabinet in the Netherlands including: changing politics at home and anti-colonial activism within the UNGA and UNESCO. Here, Scott offers an alternate explanation besides progressive politics and international pressure by arguing that returns protected the new cultural cooperation with Suharto's Indonesia, and they became celebratory commemorations of Dutch colonial achievements in the past and provided new roles for Dutch institutions and experts in the present.

In Chapter Five, because of the risks the Dutch-Indonesian agreement posed to precedent setting internationally, the book positions the case as an historical lens through which to consider developments in the United Kingdom – over the Parthenon Marbles and the "Benin Bronzes". It highlights how British officials defended museums against making post-colonial returns, and how arguments and events in the United Kingdom have affected debates everywhere. It also touches on recent events in France that illustrate the interplay of unresolved colonial legacies with contemporary diplomatic goals for political, economic, and cultural cooperation with African countries. It ends with an overview of political changes in the Netherlands since the 1980s and the alterations they have brought to earlier agreements made with Indonesia.

With this book Scott demonstrates how the scholarly emphasis on the UNGA and UNESCO has limited understandings of the return debate, while overlooking and simplifying more complex readings of longer-term bilateral negotiations between States. She calls for more depth in the critical historical analysis of important cases to better understand the diplomatic history of negotiations over European possession of cultural property from the colonial past. This requires, Scott concludes, more rigorous assessments of the extent to which compromises struck around development oriented cultural diplomacy favored self-serving post-colonial reconciliation, or whether they accomplished alternative forms of post-colonial redress as often claimed. As such this book will be of interest to scholars, students, and practitioners engaged in the study of cultural property diplomacy and law, museum and heritage studies, modern European history, post-colonial studies, and historical anthropology.