

Into Africa: British Museum's reply to ownership debate

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A circumcision mask from western Kenya and a headdress made from human hair from Uganda are among 140 artefacts from the British Museum that have gone on show in Nairobi - the first time the museum has lent objects to Africa. But the exhibition has sparked debate about whether such objects should be returned to their home countries for good. "We feel this is going to be the central theme [of debate]: why are these objects, which come from here, kept in Britain?" said Idle Omar Farah, director-general of the National Museums of Kenya.

But Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, said: "Repatriation is yesterday's question. Questions of ownership depend on the thought that an object can only be in one place. That's no longer true."

The British Museum is making available objects from its 7m-strong stores to institutions around the world. Mr MacGregor hoped this would make arguments about who owns what irrelevant. "The British Museum was set up in order that the collection be studied by the world and advance knowledge worldwide," he said. "With recent advances in packing and transport we can make a reality of that ideal of the Enlightenment. This is the first time a show has been put on in Africa from the collection of a European museum curated by an African for an African public."

The exhibition, called *Hazina: Traditions, Trade and Transitions in Eastern Africa*, has been funded by £177,000 from a £500,000 British government grant made in 2003 for the museum to forge stronger links with Africa.

It is a test for both sides. Dr Farah hopes that by proving he can provide adequate security and environmental conditions for the artefacts he will secure longer-term loans for the National Museum's Nairobi base, which is being refurbished. "In a year-and-a-half we will have 4,500 square metres. Space will not be a constraint. The question is, can we have objects on a more long-term basis?" he said.

The show is unique. Kenyan ethnographer Kiprof Lagat, its curator, spent six months at the British Museum, "going through the East African collection, 12,000 objects, piece by piece. It dawned on me that there were many more cultural links between East African peoples than I had imagined: I expanded my horizons of the region."

According to Mr MacGregor: "He has told the story of the region, the links between cultures over centuries and the things that tie those cultures together. No

one has ever looked at East African culture like this in one exhibition before."

The star of the show comes from the National Museum of Kenya: a siwa, or side-blown horn, carved from ivory in the 17th century by the coastal Swahili people.

British and Kenyan museum staff have been working together on the show. But controversy is expected. According to Kimani wa Wanjiru, of the Nairobi-based Standard newspaper: "I don't buy into the argument that if an object can travel its ownership becomes irrelevant. Most of these objects were taken during the colonial period. We have to ask, what were the circumstances under which they were taken? How were the objects used? What 'knowledge' was extracted from them?"