

The Foreign Policy of Cultural Heritage: A Constructivist Analysis of Cambodia's Artefact Repatriation Efforts

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Abstrak

Cambodia's recent wave of cultural-heritage returns has elevated artefact repatriation from a technical heritage issue to a visible arena of international politics. This article examines why repatriation has become a sustained foreign policy priority for Cambodia and how it has been pursued in practice. The study aims to (1) map the main mechanisms of Cambodia's repatriation strategy, (2) explain how repatriation is framed as part of post-conflict national identity, and (3) assess its broader significance for cultural sovereignty and development narratives. Methodologically, the article applies a holistic constructivist framework and uses qualitative document-based research combined with process tracing. It draws on scholarly literature, official releases, legal-diplomatic materials, and reputable investigative reporting to reconstruct the interactional pathways through which norms and identity shape policy choices. The findings show that Cambodia's repatriation agenda is driven less by immediate material gain than by immaterial structures (historical justice, legitimacy, and identity) anchored in a "culture of restoration" centered on Angkor. Cambodia has operationalized this agenda through a hybrid toolkit: mobilizing UNESCO's 1970 Convention, leveraging bilateral agreements, engaging in legal diplomacy, and cooperating with enforcement and museum actors. These dynamics illustrate norm diffusion and localization, where global frameworks are adapted to reinforce domestic meanings of recovery. The article concludes that Cambodia's repatriation campaign functions as heritage diplomacy and soft power, offering practical

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lessons for Global South states and policy implications for museums, provenance governance, and ethical restitution frameworks.

Keywords

Cambodia, artefact repatriation, heritage diplomacy, holistic constructivism, soft power, UNESCO

Introduction

The return of looted Khmer cultural heritage has become one of Cambodia's most visible public-facing achievements in the post-conflict era, marked by both impressive numbers and powerful national symbolism. Between 1996 and mid-2024, Cambodia reported the repatriation of more than 1,098 cultural objects from overseas, including major sculptures from the Angkorian and pre-Angkorian periods. A particularly prominent moment occurred in mid-2024 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York agreed to return sculptures linked to the late antiquities dealer Douglas Latchford, an event framed not merely as a museum transfer but as the recovery of national history and moral dignity (The Met 2024; ICIJ 2024). Official handover ceremonies and public exhibitions in Phnom Penh further reinforced a narrative of "return" as restoration of collective memory rather than the simple relocation of art objects.

These developments are not only heritage events; they are also foreign-policy practice. Repatriation is negotiated through diplomacy, enabled through cooperation among law-enforcement bodies and cultural institutions, and contested through international legal and ethical norms. Cambodia has repeatedly invoked the 1970 UNESCO Convention as a foundation for claims to cultural property removed illicitly, especially during periods of conflict and weak governance (UNESCO 1970). Through bilateral engagements with governments and sustained interaction with museums, investigators, and border agencies, including cooperation with U.S. authorities, Cambodia has expanded the international reach of its restitution agenda (ICE 2022). In this sense, cultural heritage becomes an instrument of statecraft: it helps consolidate legitimacy, communicates moral authority, and signals capacity to defend sovereign rights in the global arena. Framed this way, restitution aligns with a broader understanding of soft power, where attraction, narrative, and credibility can translate into influence without coercion (Winter 2010; Nye 2004).

Scholarly debates relevant to Cambodia's case sit at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, heritage governance, and repatriation ethics. Cultural diplomacy literature emphasizes that states project identity and gain influence through symbolic resources, such as museums, historical narratives, and heritage icons, alongside more conventional economic or security tools. Within this field, "heritage diplomacy" draws attention to how the care, interpretation, and circulation of heritage objects can shape international relationships and domestic cohesion at the same time. Repatriation scholarship, meanwhile, is often organized around a longstanding tension between cultural nationalism and cultural internationalism. Cultural nationalism prioritizes the rights of source nations to reclaim looted heritage as part of sovereignty and historical justice, whereas cultural internationalism argues that universal museums can preserve and interpret world heritage for global publics. Recent work has complicated this binary by showing how returns can generate new forms of collaboration, public accountability, and ethical recalibration within museum practice, rather than constituting a "loss" for global access (Tythacott and Ardiyansyah 2021). Cambodia's experience is particularly instructive here because it demonstrates how restitution claims can be pursued simultaneously as legal redress, identity reconstruction, and international messaging.

Cambodian case also cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical conditions that made looting both possible and profitable. Overlapping periods of colonial extraction, civil war, and state breakdown turned major sites (Angkor, Koh Ker, Phnom Da, and others) into vulnerable landscapes where the removal of stone sculpture, bronzes, and ritual objects could be normalized within wartime economies. During the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979) and its aftermath, the trade accelerated as artefacts became portable assets in conditions of insecurity, poverty, and fragmented authority. What makes the contemporary restitution campaign distinctive is not only the scale of loss but also the degree to which transnational market networks were implicated. Investigations and reporting have highlighted how dealers and collectors, most notably Douglas Latchford, facilitated the movement and laundering of Khmer antiquities into private collections and prominent institutions (AP News 2021; CBS News 2024). The objects at stake include iconic Hindu and Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas associated with Angkorian temple complexes, as well as high-value gold

jewellery linked to elite court culture, items that carry religious, historical, and affective significance beyond their market price (AP News 2021).

Within this context, Cambodia's recent strategy reflects an evolving "state of the art" in restitution practice: claims are advanced through a hybrid toolkit that combines provenance research, criminal investigation, diplomatic negotiation, and strategic public communication. U.S.-based investigations beginning in 2019, which was supported by Homeland Security Investigations and federal prosecutors, contributed to seizures and forfeiture actions involving Khmer antiquities, intensifying the pressure on museums and private holders to return contested items (ICE 2022). Cambodia has also pursued preventive diplomacy through formal bilateral instruments, including an agreement with the United States signed in August 2023 aimed at strengthening import controls and discouraging the circulation of undocumented Cambodian cultural property. Returns have occurred through multiple channels, such as voluntary surrender, negotiated agreements, and law-enforcement-driven restitution, and were publicly consolidated in 2024 when more than 70 objects, including 14 sculptures from The Met, were ceremonially welcomed home by Prime Minister Hun Manet as part of the broader tally of 1,098 returns since 1996 (The Independent 2024; The Met 2024).

Despite growing attention to Cambodia's restitution successes, a key research gap remains: most discussions either treat repatriation primarily as a legal-ethical dispute (focused on ownership, museum responsibilities, and provenance) or celebrate returns as cultural milestones without fully explaining how the restitution agenda is operationalized as foreign policy. Less examined is the way Cambodia integrates international law, bilateral diplomacy, enforcement cooperation, and domestic nation-building narratives into a coherent strategy, and what measurable effects this strategy produces. In particular, the linkage between restitution and national development is frequently asserted but rarely evaluated with conceptual precision: how do returns translate into strengthened cultural identity, social cohesion, institutional capacity, and economic benefits such as heritage tourism and museum revitalization? Cambodia's case invites a more explicitly foreign-policy-oriented analysis that can account for both external bargaining dynamics and internal political-cultural consolidation.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following research problem: how and to what extent has Cambodia transformed artefact repatriation

from a reactive heritage claim into a proactive instrument of foreign policy and post-conflict state legitimacy? The study has three objectives. First, it maps the core mechanisms of Cambodia's restitution strategy (legal framing especially the 1970 UNESCO Convention, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, and cooperation with enforcement and museum actors) showing how these mechanisms interact in practice (UNESCO 1970; ICE 2022). Second, it analyses how the Cambodian state narrates repatriation domestically and internationally, including the symbolic politics of ceremonies and museum display, to consolidate identity and credibility (ICIJ 2024). Third, it evaluates the impacts of repatriation on national development, with particular attention to cultural revitalization and the heritage economy, including tourism and museum sector strengthening. In line with these objectives, the article advances a working expectation: the more Cambodia can align legal evidence, diplomatic negotiation, and public narrative, the more repatriation functions as a form of soft power that enhances both international standing and domestic cohesion (Winter 2010; Nye 2004).

The contribution of this study is threefold. Empirically, it synthesizes Cambodia's repatriation trajectory from 1996 to mid-2024, situating headline returns, such as those connected to Latchford and major U.S. museums, within a longer policy arc rather than isolated events (The Met 2024; The Independent 2024). Conceptually, it bridges repatriation debates with foreign policy analysis by treating restitution not only as cultural justice but also as strategic diplomacy shaped by law, institutional cooperation, and narrative power. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for Global South states confronting colonial-era extraction and conflict-era looting: Cambodia's experience suggests that restitution outcomes are most likely when moral claims are paired with rigorous evidence, credible enforcement partnerships, and a sustained diplomatic agenda capable of translating heritage recovery into broader sovereignty and development gains.

Method

This study adopts a constructivist approach. In international relations (IR), constructivism differs from the mainstream traditions of realism and liberalism by emphasizing immaterial factors, such as norms, beliefs, and identities, rather than material capabilities alone. From a constructivist

perspective, political action is shaped by these shared meanings and social structures (Reus-Smit 2022). This lens is particularly useful for explaining foreign policy choices that may appear “irrational” when assessed only through material cost–benefit calculations. Cambodia’s prioritization of cultural-heritage repatriation, for example, cannot be fully understood as a materially driven policy, yet it remains a sustained objective of Cambodian diplomacy.

Constructivism also holds that norms and identities do not arise spontaneously. They are produced and reproduced through processes of interaction among actors (Fierke 2013, 189). Actors engage one another while carrying distinct historical experiences, cultural narratives, and political interests. Accordingly, this study examines not only the values that inform Cambodia’s repatriation policy, but also the interactive processes through which those values are formed, stabilized, and mobilized in foreign policy.

To analyse Cambodia’s foreign policy in depth, the study employs a holistic constructivist orientation. Holistic foreign policy analysis does not treat domestic and international drivers as separate domains; instead, it examines how they mutually constitute the social realities that shape state interests. In this view, an actor is influenced by value structures from outside as well as from within (Reus-Smit 2022). International and local values interact dynamically, producing patterns of acceptance, rejection, and adaptation. Holistic constructivism further suggests that responses to external norms are conditioned by existing practices: values perceived as entirely unfamiliar are more likely to be resisted, while those that resonate with established local practices are more likely to be adopted. Where partial overlap exists, values may be selectively revised to fit local contexts. This active process of borrowing and reshaping norms is often described as “diffusion” (Acharya 2004, 269). This study therefore seeks to identify key points of diffusion that help explain why and how repatriation has become a priority in Cambodia’s foreign policy.

Methodologically, the study uses qualitative research. Qualitative methods involve the collection and interpretation of non-numerical data and are well suited to constructivist analysis because they enable close attention to meaning, narrative, and interpretation (Lamont 2021). Data were collected through archive-based and document-based research, drawing on secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, mass

media reports, and official statements from relevant governments and institutions. These materials were accessed primarily online. Secondary sources were selected for their accessibility and for the breadth of evidence they provide across diplomatic, legal, and cultural domains.

Data analysis is conducted through process tracing, defined as “tracking the causal mechanisms at work in a situation” (Checkel 2008, 116). Here, the “causal mechanism” refers to the theoretical framework of holistic constructivism, particularly the formation and diffusion of values and norms, while the “situation” refers to Cambodia’s foreign policy on the repatriation of cultural-heritage objects. Process tracing is used to assess how value structures and interactional dynamics plausibly shape foreign policy choices, and to examine whether the empirical record supports the proposed constructivist explanation.

Results

The Loss of Cambodian Cultural Heritage Artifacts

The loss of Cambodian cultural heritage is rooted in overlapping histories of colonization, armed conflict, and domestic political instability. From the French and Japanese colonial periods through the Khmer Rouge era, insecurity and weak state oversight left major archaeological landscapes, such as Angkor, Koh Ker, and Phnom Da, highly vulnerable to looting. Artefacts were removed from their original contexts by soldiers, militias, and commercial intermediaries, including traders and smugglers who exploited wartime conditions and limited enforcement capacity. During Khmer Rouge rule (1975–1979), looting intensified as cultural objects became both economically valuable commodities and survival resources for communities living amid violence and breakdown. In later decades, transnational trafficking networks further accelerated the extraction and circulation of Khmer antiquities; investigations have highlighted the role of figures such as Douglas Latchford in facilitating complex illicit supply chains linking Cambodia to Western and regional art markets (CBS News 2024; ICIJ 2021).

The types of missing objects span both the Angkorian (ninth to fifteenth centuries) and pre-Angkorian periods. They include major Hindu and Buddhist figures and ritual materials such as Avalokiteshvara and other bodhisattva statues, linga-yoni, temple reliefs, and sculptures

from Angkor Wat and Koh Ker. The loss also extends to portable high-value objects, including pre-Angkorian gold jewellery, such as crowns, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, often associated with courtly or elite culture. Latchford's identified holdings alone reportedly included at least 77 pieces of gold jewellery, underscoring that these objects are not merely aesthetic collectibles but are tied to Khmer memory, spirituality, and historical identity (AP News 2021). High-profile sculptures such as *Skanda on a Peacock* and a tenth-century Ganesha from Koh Ker exemplify the broader pattern of removal from sacred and archaeological settings into private and institutional collections abroad (ICE 2022).

These artefacts remain widely dispersed. Many entered major museum collections in the United States including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Denver Art Museum as well as institutions in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and Australia. Beyond museums, significant numbers have circulated through private collectors and commercial galleries. Reporting on the Latchford case has also drawn attention to the presence of Angkorian stone and bronze objects in prominent institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia, where provenance questions have been raised on the basis of field evidence and acquisition histories (The Guardian 2023). Other objects reportedly passed through smaller galleries and private residences, and in some instances were obscured through offshore arrangements, including trusts, before being linked to Cambodian cultural-property claims (ComsureGroup 2024).

In response to the scale of loss, Cambodia initiated more systematic recovery efforts. A major turning point was the launch of coordinated investigations involving U.S. law-enforcement bodies, particularly Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, beginning in 2019. These investigations contributed to the Latchford case and supported museum seizures and court-ordered forfeiture actions involving Khmer antiquities (ICE 2022). Cambodia also drew on local knowledge to strengthen provenance claims. Former looters and illicit diggers, including individuals known publicly as Toek Tik and "Blue Tiger", assisted in identifying original findspots and reconstructing removal pathways, thereby helping to substantiate requests for return (CBS News 2022; InsideHook 2021). Such field-based testimony and site data became important evidentiary foundations for

diplomatic engagement and legal action against institutions or individuals holding objects without Cambodian state consent.

Cambodia's recovery strategy has also been supported by preventive and cooperative measures. The government has pursued bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding, including an August 2023 agreement with the United States, aimed at strengthening import controls and reducing opportunities for undocumented Cambodian artefacts to enter foreign markets. At the international level, the 1970 UNESCO Convention continues to provide a central legal and normative framework for asserting the rights of source countries and strengthening Cambodia's diplomatic position. Cambodia has further engaged with Interpol and related international mechanisms to register, verify, and pursue the return of objects identified as illicitly removed, drawing on evolving global standards in heritage law and museum ethics.

These combined efforts have produced tangible results through multiple pathways: voluntary returns by museums, investigative seizures, negotiated legal settlements (including forfeiture agreements), and formal diplomatic requests. During July–August 2024, more than 70 artefacts, including 14 sculptures from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were returned and publicly received in a state ceremony led by Prime Minister Hun Manet. This event was presented as part of a broader total of 1,098 objects repatriated since 1996, with 571 reportedly recovered from private collectors and 527 from foreign institutions (ICIJ 2024; The Independent 2024). Earlier returns also carried strong symbolic weight, including the February 2021 return of gold jewellery linked to the Latchford family, which Cambodian authorities framed as a recovery of historical dignity and post-conflict identity (AP News 2021).

Following repatriation, returned objects were displayed in national institutions such as the National Museum in Phnom Penh and specialized venues including the Angkor National Museum. These exhibitions were accompanied by renewed emphasis on archaeological research, public education, and cultural tourism, reinforcing official claims that the objects represent collective identity and historical continuity rather than movable art commodities. Internationally, Cambodia has also used high-profile returns to elevate public awareness of cultural justice, contributing to broader Global South arguments for restitution and ethical rebalancing in heritage governance.

Overall, the findings show that Cambodia's repatriation agenda has evolved into a multi-layered policy that links legal strategy, diplomatic negotiation, local participation, and international cooperation. Rather than functioning solely as heritage management, this approach positions restitution as a form of cultural diplomacy, one that other developing states can study when seeking to combine moral claims with legal instruments in reclaiming cultural sovereignty.

Cambodia–UNESCO Relations

Cambodia's contemporary relationship with UNESCO is often traced to the inscription of Angkor on the World Heritage List in 1992, a landmark that signalled not only international recognition of Khmer civilization, but also the beginning of a sustained partnership in heritage governance and cultural diplomacy. The inscription occurred as Cambodia was emerging from decades of conflict and institutional collapse, when safeguarding Angkor required more than technical conservation: it demanded an international framework capable of mobilizing expertise, coordination, and long-term support. In response, UNESCO helped establish the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor (ICC-Angkor) in October 1993. ICC-Angkor became the central platform for coordinating technical and financial assistance, setting conservation standards, and monitoring the management of Angkor and its surrounding cultural landscape, forming a durable institutional foundation for UNESCO–Cambodia cooperation.

Through ICC-Angkor, donor funding and specialist assistance flowed to Cambodia, particularly from countries such as Japan and France. One early example was the Bayon Temple conservation initiative, developed through collaboration between Japan and Cambodian heritage authorities, which coupled restoration work with technical training for local professionals. This model reinforced UNESCO's role not only as a coordinator of conservation projects but also as a catalyst for building national expertise and institutional capacity. Over time, the UNESCO partnership also contributed to the strengthening of Cambodia's domestic legal framework for heritage protection. Key instruments included the 1994 Royal Decree regulating land use in protected zones and the 1996 Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage, both of which aligned national

policy with UNESCO's recommended standards for zoning, protection, and site management.

As Angkor conservation entered its second and third decades, Cambodia's cooperation with UNESCO and international donors evolved into a more comprehensive approach that connected physical restoration with broader social, economic, and environmental objectives. In practice, this meant linking conservation with sustainable tourism planning, community engagement, and local livelihoods—recognizing that long-term safeguarding depends on the well-being and participation of communities living in and around heritage zones.

Beyond Angkor, Cambodia's engagement with UNESCO is structured through its adoption of major international cultural conventions, which serve both as pillars of national heritage policy and as normative resources for culture-based foreign policy. Cambodia ratified the 1972 World Heritage Convention on 28 November 1991, enabling the nomination and inscription of key sites and providing access to technical guidance, international monitoring, and, when needed, financial support through UNESCO mechanisms. Under this framework, Cambodia has secured World Heritage inscriptions for Angkor (1992), Preah Vihear (2008), Sambor Prei Kuk (2017), and Koh Ker (2023). These inscriptions have carried practical benefits, including conservation assistance, technology transfer, professional training, and stronger international visibility for Cambodia as a steward of global heritage.

A second cornerstone is the 1970 UNESCO Convention on prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property, which Cambodia ratified on 26 September 1972. This convention provides the principal legal and normative basis for Cambodia's international efforts to seek the return of looted artefacts and to cooperate with partner states—often through bilateral arrangements such as memoranda of understanding—to restrict illicit trafficking and strengthen import controls. In diplomatic terms, the convention enhances Cambodia's legitimacy by anchoring restitution demands in widely recognized international standards and museum ethics.

Cambodia has also drawn on the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, ratified on 4 April 1962, and the 1999 Second Protocol (ratified in 2013), which further

strengthens protective obligations and accountability mechanisms during conflict. For Cambodia—given the destruction and looting experienced during civil war and the Khmer Rouge period—these instruments are especially salient as references for crisis-time cultural protection policies and post-conflict recovery strategies.

UNESCO's normative influence extends to living heritage as well. Cambodia ratified the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, supporting the inventorying and transmission of practices such as Apsara dance, traditional music, rituals, and crafts that are central to Khmer identity. The convention has also opened access to UNESCO-supported programming in documentation, education, and cultural promotion. Cambodia further ratified the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2007, signalling commitment to cultural pluralism and the development of cultural and creative industries. This framework supports policies aimed at strengthening local cultural production, protecting artistic ecosystems, and linking cultural development to broader sustainable-development goals, including within ASEAN and global cultural diplomacy.

Cambodia's participation in UNESCO is not limited to conventions. It also engages with UNESCO declarations, resolutions, and international forums, including recent initiatives that emphasize restitution and cultural justice. Such participation reinforces Cambodia's positioning within a wider global movement to address the legacies of colonial extraction, conflict-era looting, and illicit trade, while also providing diplomatic space to build coalitions and share policy experiences.

UNESCO's contribution to Cambodia spans conservation, institution-building, and post-conflict cultural recovery. In the Angkor region, UNESCO, through ICC-Angkor and its network of partners, has coordinated technical assistance for major temples and complexes, including architectural assessment, structural stabilization, stone conservation, and long-term monitoring. This work has involved multiple donor countries, with UNESCO playing a convening role to ensure alignment between international conservation standards and local priorities.

Institutionally, UNESCO supported Cambodia's efforts to create durable governance structures for site management, including assistance associated with the development and strengthening of the APSARA

National Authority (established in 1995). Capacity-building has included professional training, support for heritage documentation systems (including GIS-based mapping), and the development of management guidelines that incorporate community needs and zoning requirements. Scholarships, exchanges, and professional networks have also enabled Cambodian specialists to develop conservation and heritage-management expertise, gradually reducing reliance on external technical leadership.

UNESCO has additionally served as a normative and diplomatic resource in Cambodia's campaign for artefact repatriation. As the principal multilateral framework underpinning anti-trafficking and restitution norms, UNESCO provides legal reference points, institutional platforms for dialogue, and moral legitimacy that Cambodia can mobilize when engaging foreign governments, museums, and private holders. Cambodia has used UNESCO-related forums to highlight repatriation cases and to build broader support for cultural justice, particularly by sharing lessons relevant to other Global South countries facing similar histories of loss.

Finally, UNESCO has played a role in Cambodia's wider post-conflict cultural reconstruction. Emergency and recovery programs contributed to rehabilitating cultural and educational institutions, revitalizing traditional arts training, and integrating heritage into educational curricula—measures intended not only to preserve artefacts and sites, but also to rebuild social cohesion and national pride after political violence. In the realm of intangible heritage, UNESCO-backed initiatives have supported documentation, revitalization, and international promotion of living cultural practices, linking cultural preservation to sustainable tourism and community-based creative economies. Across these domains, UNESCO's engagement has helped embed heritage protection in Cambodia's broader development trajectory, positioning culture as both a national foundation and a diplomatic asset. Top of Form

Discussion

The Centrality of Angkor and a Culture of Restoration

This study's results show that Cambodia's contemporary heritage diplomacy, especially its pursuit of artefact repatriation, cannot be explained convincingly as a narrow legal campaign or as a purely economic strategy. Rather, repatriation is best understood as an extension of a longer "culture

of restoration” anchored in Angkor’s exceptional symbolic status. In holistic constructivist terms, Angkor operates as a durable value structure: it shapes national meaning and identity, which in turn informs policy priorities and state action. The repatriation agenda is therefore not an isolated foreign policy initiative, but part of a broader project of recovering what is perceived as lost materially, historically, and morally.

This interpretation is consistent with earlier scholarship that emphasizes Angkor’s central role in Cambodian national life. Winter (2004) describes Cambodia’s long-standing practice of “monumentalizing” Angkor, where the site functions not only as a physical inheritance but also as a condensed symbol of Khmer civilization and nationhood. The results here support Winter’s argument that Angkor’s significance transcends heritage management: it provides a national narrative of endurance and recovery that remains politically available across regimes and ideological shifts. Likewise, Trigger’s (1990) observation that monumental architecture consolidates social and political power helps explain why Angkor remains a uniquely potent national referent. In Cambodia, however, the logic of monumentalism is not only about the past; it is continuously reactivated through modern practices of restoration, international recognition, and public ritual.

The historical construction of Angkor as a “lost civilization” also matters for understanding the emotional and political force behind contemporary recovery efforts. Winter (2004) shows how colonial-era representations, which were popularized through French exploration narratives, helped frame Angkor as simultaneously glorious and endangered. The findings here align with that insight: the discursive pairing of “loss” and “recovery” has endured well beyond colonialism and has been re-embedded in post-independence identity politics. Needham and Quintiliani’s (2019) discussion of *Prolung Khmer* (Khmer Soul) further supports this point by illustrating how restoration can operate as a cultural idiom for recovering lost ideals and repairing historical rupture, an idiom that resonates within Cambodia and among its diaspora.

Cambodian domestic politics has repeatedly drawn on Angkor as a symbolic resource, reinforcing its role as a shared national anchor. Peou (2000) identifies multiple modes of Angkor appropriation from presenting leaders as guardians of national heritage to invoking Angkor as a template for national revival and state authority. The results of this

study are consistent with Peou's analysis: even where political projects diverge, Angkor remains a broadly accepted reference point through which legitimacy and national purpose can be narrated. This helps explain why heritage recovery, including repatriation, can be elevated to a foreign policy priority without appearing marginal or technocratic. It speaks directly to widely recognizable narratives of national continuity, dignity, and rightful ownership.

Restoration, Tourism, and the Ambivalence of Heritage-Led Development

The evidence also indicates that Cambodia's restoration culture has been intertwined with post-conflict development, particularly through tourism. Prior research broadly supports the claim that heritage tourism can contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. Jasparro (2003) argues that archaeology and heritage-based tourism can support rehabilitation, reconciliation, and national unity; similarly, Causevic and Lynch (2011) emphasize that post-conflict tourism can create space for collective memory and public acknowledgement rather than enforced silence. The trajectory of Cambodia's tourism sector, rapid growth from the 1990s to the pre-pandemic peak, corresponds with this literature, suggesting that Angkor's restoration has contributed to economic recovery and international re-engagement (Cambodia Ministry of Tourism 2024; Shirley, Wylie, and Friesen 2018).

At the same time, the Cambodian case also substantiates a critical strand of scholarship that highlights the "burdens" of heritage commodification. Becker (2016) and Winter (2008) stress that Angkor-centred tourism can generate severe distortions: dependence on a single heritage brand, unequal distribution of benefits, pressures on local communities, environmental strain, and risks of overtourism that may ultimately threaten the site itself. The discussion here therefore synthesizes both sets of arguments: Angkor has functioned as a powerful post-conflict asset and a platform for national recovery, while simultaneously producing vulnerabilities associated with commercialization, governance challenges, and concentrated political-economic gains. This ambivalence is not a side issue; it directly shapes the policy environment in which repatriation is pursued. When cultural heritage becomes central to national recovery and international reputation, the symbolic stakes of recovering looted objects rise, but so do the governance demands for ethical stewardship and equitable benefit-sharing.

The results also resonate with broader comparative work on heritage in societies undergoing major disruption. Lixinski and Williams (2024) argue that cultural heritage can support recovery and strengthen community confidence after conflict or disaster. Cambodia fits this pattern in that Angkor provided a stable symbol during decades of upheaval and then became a focal point for rebuilding national narratives after war. However, Cambodia's experience also complicates overly optimistic readings: heritage can support recovery while simultaneously generating new tensions, including displacement pressures, social inequalities, and conservation risks linked to mass visitation and rapid development.

From Angkor to Repatriation: Constructivist Interpretation and Diffusion

The study's central analytical contribution is to connect this domestic "restoration culture" to Cambodia's international repatriation diplomacy. Under holistic constructivism, the findings suggest three mutually reinforcing dynamics (Reus-Smit 2022). First, Angkor-centred restoration functions as a value structure that produces meaning and identity: Cambodia's post-conflict self-understanding is tied to recovering cultural loss and reclaiming historical dignity. Second, that identity helps define national interests and policy priorities: repatriation becomes legible as a state objective not because it is immediately material, but because it expresses national recovery, moral authority, and rightful ownership. Third, values are formed and stabilized through interaction: Cambodia's heritage practices have been shaped through sustained engagement with UNESCO regimes, donor states, museums, and law-enforcement partners, which then feed back into domestic understandings of what heritage protection should entail.

This interactional account aligns with constructivist expectations that norms and identities emerge through social processes rather than appearing fully formed (Fierke 2013). It also supports the study's diffusion-oriented claim: Cambodia has not simply "adopted" international heritage norms; it has localized them in ways that align with existing national practices of restoration and identity reconstruction. In Acharya's (2004) terms, international norms are accepted when they resonate with local practice, resisted when they do not, and modified when partial overlap exists. Cambodia's engagement with UNESCO frameworks and restitution ethics

thus appears less like passive compliance and more like strategic norm-use: international standards provide legal and moral vocabulary for claims, while domestic restoration narratives supply the political meaning that sustains those claims over time.

Implications

These findings carry practical implications for both heritage governance and foreign policy strategy. For Cambodia, the repatriation agenda gains durability when it is linked to credible stewardship: transparent conservation, accountable museum governance, and community-sensitive tourism development. High-profile returns can strengthen national identity and international standing, but they also create expectations: recovered objects should be protected, contextualized, and made publicly meaningful in ways that benefit society broadly rather than reinforcing elite capture.

More broadly, the Cambodian case offers lessons for other Global South states: successful repatriation strategies often combine (1) strong evidentiary work and site-based knowledge, (2) diplomatic engagement with international institutions and partner governments, and (3) public narratives that frame restitution as historical justice and cultural repair rather than a purely legal dispute.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary sources (official releases, media reports, and published scholarship), which may reflect institutional incentives and selective disclosure, especially regarding sensitive negotiations with museums, collectors, and foreign governments. Second, the analysis cannot fully capture behind-the-scenes bargaining dynamics, internal state deliberations, or the perspectives of all affected communities because it does not draw on original interviews or ethnographic fieldwork. Third, while tourism and economic indicators provide important context, the study does not establish a causal estimate of repatriation's economic effects distinct from broader heritage and tourism dynamics. Finally, the Cambodian case is analytically rich but may not be directly generalizable: states vary widely in legal capacity, diplomatic leverage, museum relationships, and the symbolic centrality of specific heritage sites.

Future research could strengthen the evidence base by conducting interviews with Cambodian officials, museum professionals, community stakeholders, and investigators. It could also deepen the analysis through systematic comparison with other restitution cases in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Conclusion

This study shows that Cambodia's repatriation agenda operates as a deliberate instrument of foreign policy rather than a narrow preservation initiative. Cambodia has advanced its claims through a coordinated toolkit that combines international legal norms, especially the 1970 UNESCO Convention, bilateral diplomacy, cooperation with foreign law enforcement, and evidence-building practices that draw on both institutional research and local knowledge. These mechanisms have enabled Cambodia to secure substantial returns over time, while simultaneously expanding diplomatic engagement and strengthening its moral standing in international debates on cultural justice.

The study also finds that repatriation is sustained by immaterial drivers (identity, historical justice, and normative legitimacy) rooted in Cambodia's long-standing "culture of restoration." Angkor's central place in Cambodian socio-political life has produced a durable value structure in which loss and recovery are not only historical experiences but ongoing political meanings. In this context, repatriation becomes a foreign policy priority because it is interpreted domestically as repairing a rupture in collective memory and spiritual identity. The findings further illustrate a process of diffusion: Cambodia does not merely adopt international heritage norms, but actively mobilizes and adapts them to reinforce local meanings of restoration and sovereignty. Practically, repatriated objects, especially when publicly displayed, serve dual functions: they consolidate identity at home and project cultural sovereignty abroad, strengthening Cambodia's soft power and partnerships.

At the same time, the study's ability to assess "impact" is constrained by important limitations. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources (official documents, media reporting, and existing scholarship), which may not capture confidential negotiations, internal policy deliberations, or contesting perspectives among affected communities and

institutions. Second, while tourism and heritage-sector indicators provide useful context, this study does not isolate the causal economic effects of repatriation from broader drivers such as Angkor-centred tourism growth, post-pandemic recovery, and wider development policy. Third, Cambodia's case is distinctive given Angkor's symbolic weight and Cambodia's particular institutional partnerships so the findings should be generalized cautiously.

Future research can address these limitations in three ways. First, interview-based work with Cambodian officials, museum professionals, investigators, and community stakeholders would provide deeper insight into negotiation dynamics, evidentiary practices, and domestic debates over stewardship and benefit-sharing. Second, comparative studies across Southeast Asia and other post-conflict contexts could test whether the "restoration-to-repatriation" pathway identified here holds under different political, legal, and cultural conditions. Third, mixed-method evaluations could examine how repatriation affects museum visitation, heritage-sector employment, education, and community perceptions over time, helping to clarify when symbolic recovery translates into measurable development outcomes.

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