

## Should a Benin Artifact Be Returned?

### Core Competency: Social Responsibility and Ethics

In 1897, several British citizens were killed during an expedition to Benin. These men had wanted to meet with the king when he was in the midst of honoring ancestors. They had been told not to enter the city, but they persisted. Even though there was no evidence that the *oba* had any involvement in the killings, the British retaliated, storming the palace and city. British troops sent the king into exile and plundered over two thousand artifacts, including numerous sacred objects from seventeen ancestral shrines. They gave many of these objects to the British Museum and sold others around the world.

Recently, ethical concerns have been raised about keeping these artifacts. Many people feel that seizing art robs a country of its cultural heritage and sacred artifacts. In addition, when art is displayed outside of its cultural context, it loses meaning. These people suggest that the artifacts should be returned, especially as the king's son was allowed to return from exile in 1914 to restore the monarchy and rebuild his palace. Today,

there is only one ancestral shrine in the palace, honoring all past kings.

Other people argue that keeping the Benin art in international museums is warranted as they are better able to care for the artifacts. They also suggest that having the artifacts in numerous locations allows people from around the world greater access to experience the art of different cultures. They claim the artifacts should be kept where they are.

Your local museum has a Benin artifact on display. The newspaper has written an editorial suggesting that the artifact be returned to the Benin people. Write a letter to the editor in support of or in opposition to the editorial. Your letter must take a stance on whether the artifact should be returned and must give valid reasons to support your view. Be sure to take into consideration what you know about Benin artifacts (discussed in Chapter 16), other art that is in dispute such as the Parthenon sculptures (discussed in Chapter 13), art education and looting (discussed in Chapter 1), and approaching difficult art (discussed in Chapter 2).