

Repatriation and the Future of Indigenous Heritage: Bringing Voice to Silent Witnesses, a Museum Anthropological Analysis

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to examine the Andamanese and Gweagal shields' historical and anthropological significance by following their origins, use, and development from useful objects to museum exhibits. By concentrating on how early anthropologists documented and categorised objects, as well as the ensuing effects on indigenous identity and historical narratives, it explores how colonial collection practices changed indigenous material culture. The study looks at recent debates regarding repatriation and decolonization as well as case studies of both successful and failed attempts to evaluate moral dilemmas in museum anthropology. Additionally, it examines how museums might represent and conserve indigenous heritage, assesses existing curation techniques, and suggests methods for increasing indigenous participation through co-curation. The study's final goal was to provide future cultural policy and heritage protection strategies, such as suggestions for sustainable repatriation laws and an examination of digital repatriation as a workable alternative in cases where physical return is not feasible.

Methodology: The study uses the methodology combines historical research, material analysis, indigenous knowledge, comparative studies, and ethical considerations surrounding museum practices and repatriation, all framed within a decolonization perspective.

Findings: The difficulties faced by the Great Andamanese tribes are examined in this study, along with the function of museum anthropologists in conserving their cultural heritage. Additionally, it compares two significant artefacts: the Aboriginal shield housed in the British Museum and the Buamoh, a Great Andamanese musical instrument. The Aboriginal shield, believed to have been used during the 1770 battle between Cook's expedition and the Gweagals in Australia, has drawn public attention after its display at the National Museum, while the Buamoh, believed to have witnessed the Battle of Aberdeen, is being repatriated because of its changing historical significance. Given Cook's expedition's increased prominence in reconciliation politics, the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council called for a reexamination of their relationship with it. These instances demonstrate the global discussion surrounding the restoration of cultural heritage and the vital significance of repatriation in India.

Implications/Novel Contribution: The findings bring key policy insights to suggest that governments and cultural institutions should adopt policies that better balance development with cultural preservation, ensuring that indigenous rights and heritage are respected in the modern world.

Keywords: Repatriation, Indigenous Heritage, Museum Anthropology, Colonial Collections, Decolonisation, Material Culture, Cultural Survival

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INTRODUCTION

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A Historical and Anthropological Overview

Indigenous communities, colonial ties, and material culture are now all included in academic studies of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This increasing body of scholarship, typically funded by international research institutions, aims to untangle the complicated historical narratives surrounding these islands. Archaeological evidence shows that humans have been present for around 2,200 years. Genetic and cultural research indicate that the indigenous Andamanese may have been separated from other populations since the Middle Palaeolithic period, which ended approximately 30,000 years ago. They have gradually evolved into various language and cultural groups. The Negrito race is surmised to have been the earliest people to inhabit the continent of South Eastern Asia and of this race the Andamanese and the Semangs of the Malay Peninsula represent to-day perhaps the purest type. In the Philippines the Aetas of the same origin but less pure in type, while traces of their race inbred with other tribes are represented in Malaya and are perhaps to be found, in Assam and in the hills of Southern India (M. C. C.

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(1932). Census of India, 1931, Volume-II, The Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, Government of India). By examining the repatriation of indigenous items, with an emphasis on the Andamanese shield (Buamoh), the current study helps address this problem. Using an interdisciplinary approach that blends anthropology, museum studies, and postcolonial philosophy, this study emphasises the significance of material culture in the formation of historical memory and indigenous identity. The significance of ethical issues in artefact repatriation and the wider ramifications of decolonising museum contexts are underscored by this study, which explores the origins of the Buamoh and its present position in museum collections.

They highlight the ways in which their indigenous populations, colonial experiences, and material culture continue to influence modern political, social, and cultural life (Anderson, Mazumdar, & Pandya, 2016; Heidemann & Zehmisch, 2016; Zehmisch, 2018). These investigations, which were primarily supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the German Research Foundation (DFG), looked closely at the historical and anthropological aspects of the area. This study contributes to a body of work by focussing on the Andamanese shield (Buamoh), a significant artefact that symbolises colonial history, indigenous resistance, and museum politics. Portman (1899) earlier work classified the shield as a defensive instrument, but more recent research (Mervart, 1919; Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Maxson, & Powell, 2011) has concentrated on the ritual and cultural significance of such objects. In line with larger discussions on decolonising museum spaces and conserving indigenous heritage, this study examines the moral conundrums of repatriation by tracking the origin of the Buamoh and its presence in museum collections (MacGregor, 2011; Miller, 1998; Hodder, 2004).

Objectives

This study aims to examine the Andamanese and Gweagal shields' historical and anthropological significance by following their origins, use, and development from useful objects to museum exhibits. By concentrating on how early anthropologists documented and categorised objects, as well as the ensuing effects on indigenous identity and historical narratives, it explores how colonial collection practices changed indigenous material culture. The study looks at recent debates regarding repatriation and decolonisation as well as case studies of both successful and failed attempts to evaluate moral dilemmas in museum anthropology. Additionally, it examines how museums might represent and conserve indigenous heritage, assesses existing curation techniques, and suggests methods for increasing indigenous participation through co-curation. The study's final goal is to provide future cultural policy and heritage protection strategies, such as suggestions for sustainable repatriation laws and an examination of digital repatriation as a workable alternative in cases where physical return is not feasible.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A complex picture of colonial documentation and modern ethnographic reassessments is painted by the review of literature on Andamanese artefacts, especially the shield and its varying interpretation. One of the first British colonial administrators to research the Andamanese people was Maurice Vidal Portman (1889). He defined the shield as a hunting and combat weapon. The shield was classified as a practical tool used by islanders for protection in his late nineteenth-century anthropological work.

However, recent studies have reconstructed these artefacts within a more comprehensive cultural and ritualistic framework, guided by the contributions of indigenous communities and contemporary anthropological perspectives. These objects have been reconstructed into a broader cultural and ritualistic context by contemporary research, which is influenced by the contributions of indigenous communities and anthropological viewpoints. Scholars like (Mervart, 1919) questioned the previous militaristic interpretation by studying Andamanese objects for their spiritual significance. Additionally, contemporary studies on museum curation, like those conducted by Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. (2011) (pp. 27–43), examine the moral ramifications of classifying and repatriating artefacts. These pieces emphasise how crucial it is to decolonise the discourse around indigenous products by acknowledging their diverse functions in communication, ritual, and defense.

The Great Andamanese and Their Struggles: Cultural Survival in a Changing World

In Victorian history, the Battle of Aberdeen, fought in 1859 on the Andaman Islands, was largely forgotten. Armed with bows and arrows, the native Jarawa tribe fought back against the overwhelming firepower of British muskets during this battle. An important character in this episode was Doodnath Tiwari, who was the son of

Thakoor Tiwari, a Brahmin. After the 1857 rebellion, Tiwari, a sepoy in the Bengal Army's 14th Infantry, was found guilty of mutiny and desertion.

On April 23, 1858, Dudhnath Tewari, a sepoy who had been found guilty of rebellion and desertion by the British government in India and given a hard labour sentence in transportation, broke free from his guards in the penal colony of the Andaman Islands. When he returned to Port Blair a year later, he alerted the prison's superintendent, J.P. Walker, to an impending Andamanese aborigine attack on the colony. He also shared his year spent with the Aboriginal people with Walker. Walker was able to plan a successful defence at the "Battle of Aberdeen" in May 1859 thanks to the warning (Sen, 2009).

On September 27, 1857, the Commission of Jhelum sentenced him to life in prison; however, he and many other prisoners managed to escape Ross Island on April 6, 1858. The local tribes captured him and eventually accepted him into their fold while his soldiers were killed. Tiwari married two indigenous women and assimilated into their community. On May 17, 1859, he voluntarily returned to the prison station at Aberdeen, Port Blair, after spending a year and twenty-four days in the Andaman woods, to report an imminent tribal attack. The "Battle of Aberdeen" is the name given to this conflict. On April 6, 14, and May 17, 1859, the Tribes carried out three significant raids. The Battle of Aberdeen was the name of the last raid. But by giving the Superintendent of the Penal Settlement information, Doodnath betrayed the tribe. Numerous Andamanese tribes were massacred in a single day, making the war's conclusion appalling.

His statement was recorded by Dr. J.P. Walker in the Ross Island Superintendent's Court between May 26 and June 4, 1859, following the battle. A monument honouring the valiant Andamanese aborigines who fought in May 1859 at the Battle of Aberdeen was erected in Port Blair. It is obvious that the battle would never have taken place if Tiwari had been successful in educating the Indians about the benefits of weapons over bows and arrows. On May 17th, however, islanders honour these native fighters who, armed with rudimentary weapons, resisted one of the most powerful empires in history.

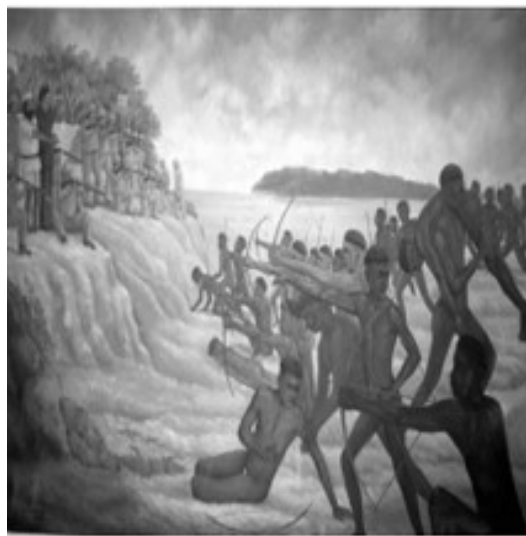


Figure 1. A rare picture of 1890 showing Buamoh, the shield kept near the temporary huts of Great Andamanese. Source: Portman, M. V. 1899. *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese*, Volume I. Calcutta: Government Press

Museums as Storytellers: Artifacts as Witnesses to History

From the standpoint of a museum, objects are more than just artefacts; they are silent witnesses to human experience, culture, and history. Every item has a story to tell about the people, places, and things it has experienced. In contrast to written documents, which are subject to interpretation and viewpoint, artefacts offer tangible evidence of the past, enabling us to piece together stories based on their content, craftsmanship, and purpose. A spear, shield, or other weapon with battle scars, for instance, is more than just a weapon in a museum; it is a testament to the struggles fought, the hands that handled it, and the destinies of civilisations. The ideas and knowledge of the departed are preserved for future generations in a centuries-old manuscript. Similar to this, an indigenous

artefact represents the customs and tenacity of a community, acting as a cultural remembrance that can withstand colonisation and modernisation. These artefacts are curated by museums to foster a deeper connection between visitors and history. Through the use of labels, exhibits, and narrative, museums transform artefacts into active participants in the dissemination of information, enabling visitors to interact with history in a contemplative and immersive manner. As witnesses, objects serve an important role in documenting and sharing history in ways that words cannot.

METHODOLOGY

Studying the Andamanese and Gweagal shields as a museum anthropologist requires a thorough approach that incorporates historical investigation, material analysis, indigenous participation, and decolonisation tactics. To ascertain the history and significance of the shields, provenance research involves examining colonial records, museum acquisition logs, and expedition journals, including those from Captain Cook's expedition and British military chronicles of the Battle of Aberdeen. Their use in combat and long-distance communication networks can be better understood through material and scientific analysis, such as wood species identification and damage assessment.

In order to collect oral histories and honour cultural viewpoints on ownership and symbolism, it is essential to interact with indigenous communities, such as Australian Aboriginal groups and Andamanese representatives. By contrasting the shields with comparable indigenous artefacts from around the globe, they can be positioned within the broader context of colonial and resistance histories. An evaluation of museum representation and repatriation ethics is also essential to overcoming biases in display, ownership, and interpretation. Digital repatriation and co-curation strategies are encouraged where appropriate. This strategy ultimately ensures that these shields will not only be seen as static relics but also as living artefacts that continue to represent histories of indigenous resistance, colonial aggression, and cultural survival.

Study Area

The British Museum, one of the most famous museums in the world, has a huge collection of artefacts from all over the world, including important indigenous treasures that were acquired during the colonial era. These are silent reminders of indigenous resistance to European encroachment, such as the Andamanese tribal shield and the Gweagal shield. The museum's colonial-era collections make it an ideal place to conduct research on the relationships between history, anthropology, and museum ethics.

The British Museum is the subject of this study due to its controversial position in the ongoing discussions surrounding decolonisation, cultural heritage, and repatriation. The museum serves as a platform for global narratives, but it is also facing mounting criticism for its improper ownership and return of culturally significant artefacts to Indigenous communities. This study looks at the British Museum's role in preserving and exhibiting these artefacts in order to investigate the future of indigenous heritage preservation, ethical stewardship, and the broader implications of repatriation. The Zonal Anthropological Museum of the Andaman and Nicobar Regional Centre is a specialised repository for the rich ethnographic and cultural legacy of the South Andaman District, located in Port Blair. Only the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are shown, and a variety of artefacts from Karen, Burmese, Moplah, Bhanu, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu settler groups as well as the Jarawa, Sentinelese, Onge, Great Andamanese, Nicobarese, and Shompen are on display. Because it provides valuable insights into the customs and way of life of these communities, the museum is a popular destination for academics, scholars, and tourists alike. Over the years, it has attracted a large number of visitors who are curious about the diverse and distinctive tribal cultures of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Anyone who wants to learn more about the indigenous heritage of the region should visit the Anthropological Survey of India's Zonal Anthropological Museum in Port Blair. The Buamoh was purchased by a few anthropologists from the Anthropological Survey of India for the Zonal Museum of Andaman, where it is presently on exhibit. The instrument was regenerated by a Great Andamanese man on Straight Island using an in-situ workshop, and it is currently kept at ZAM after the Anthropological Survey of India realised how crucial it is to preserve this group as well as their indigenous craftsmanship. This object is currently fighting for survival in India, much like its communal population. The remaining items have been sent to museums all over the world, with only two remaining at the Zonal Anthropological Museum in Port Blair. It is now essential

to restore the Shield cum musical board.

Objects as Storytellers and Witnesses to History

Items often outlive written records or oral traditions, lasting far longer than the people who made or used them, according to MacGregor (2012), the former Director of the British Museum in London. Their composition, form, and purpose serve as durable evidence of human activity and provide information about earlier civilisations. One clay tablet, for example, can provide information about the administrative systems, business transactions, and literacy rates of early communities. According to MacGregor, artefacts frequently outlive written records or oral traditions, outliving their creators or users by a significant margin. Their composition, form, and purpose serve as durable evidence of human activity and provide information about earlier civilisations. One clay tablet, for example, might show early communities' literacy rates, institutional arrangements, and historical trade transactions.

The use of two artefacts from Aboriginal communities on the Indian and Austral islands as case studies to illustrate how the shields, believed to have belonged to two warrior communities, might have been used in a conflict between the Aboriginal people and British settlers on their islands at different times has bolstered MacGregor's claims. The hole in the shield, which shows the bloody first meeting between British explorers and Native Americans, is thought by some to be proof of a musket shot. The shields also bring up more general issues regarding colonial history, museum collections, and the morality of artefact ownership. As essential ties to their history, many Indigenous people support the return of such culturally significant artefacts. The shields, which are kept in the British Museum, continue to be a contentious issue in relation to Indigenous rights and repatriation. The object is more than just a physical defensive weapon; it represents the turmoil caused by European invasion. For Aboriginal people, the shields stand for survival, loss, and resistance in the face of irrevocable changes to their land, culture, and way of life.

Buamoh: The Forgotten Revitalising Indigenous Artefacts

Objects are not just passive items but active participants in shaping social relationships and histories (Miller, 1998; Hodder, 2004). Now here the major role was played by an object as a witness among the Telling history through things is what museums are for. Buamoh, a shield (written in the British Museum collection, M V Portman's collection), and a musical drum (mentioned as musical drum in the collection of Zonal Anthropological Museum, Anthropological Survey of India, Andaman & Nicobar Regional Centre, Port Blair) in a broader sense, the shield signifies the cultural and traditional practices of the Andamanese tribes. It demonstrates the tribe's resourcefulness and tenacity, demonstrating how indigenous people harnessed their surroundings to develop protective equipment. It also represents opposition to colonial forces. Like the warriors who wielded it, the shield symbolises their fight for autonomy, survival, and the protection of their land and way of life. By serving as a quiet observer of colonial contacts, the shield also aids in the preservation of oral histories. Even while many indigenous civilisations, like the Andaman tribes, lack written records, oral traditions have been used for millennia to transmit their stories. As a symbol of previous battles and a link between the fighters and the occasions that shaped their past, the shield becomes a part of this narrative.



Figure 2. Buamoh, musical board of Great Andamanese, Source: Zonal Anthropological Museum, Port Blair, 1953 collection.

During the war, the Andamanese tribe may have used this item to commemorate the British clash. When employed against British forces, the shield physically stood between the colonisers and the tribe's way of life, symbolising direct resistance (as depicted in old Buamoh drawings as shield cum melodic drum). Its inclusion in

museum collections (typically as a result of colonial expeditions or anthropological research) cements its status as an artefact of a larger historical context, one including colonisation, resistance, and the erasure or preservation of cultural identities. In this sense, the shield is much more than a weapon; it is an object that encapsulates the memory of the great battle, with the potential to tell stories of courage, survival, and the ongoing struggle of indigenous communities. Through its preservation and exhibition in museums, it continues to bear witness to those defining moments of history.

Buamoh: A shield or musical/sound board?



Figure 3. Buamoh, musical board of Great Andamanese, Source: Zonal Anthropological Museum,Port Blair, 1953 collection

The historical artwork shows Andaman Islanders with their tools, canoe, and different utensils. According to Maurice Vidal Portman (M.V. Portman), a British colonial administrator and ethnographer who extensively studied the Andamanese people, the device seen on the boat was characterised as a shield, most likely used for protection during fights or hunting. However, the museum's contemporary description refers to the same device as a musical board, implying a different interpretation by modern curators. Portman's description is consistent with its placement among tools and weaponry, implying a defensive or hunting role, although the museum's perspective implies a ritual or musical purpose, potentially based on current ethnographic study. This discrepancy may stem from differing colonial and indigenous perspectives, where Portman, as a colonial officer, viewed artifacts primarily through a lens of survival and warfare, whereas modern studies may emphasize their cultural and ritual significance. Additionally, ethnographic reassessment and oral traditions from the Andamanese people may have contributed to the reinterpretation. It is also possible that the object served dual functions both as a shield for protection and as a resonating board for music or communication highlighting the contextual ambiguity in historical artifact classification.



Figure 4. Buamoh, illustrated as weapon implement Source:An old illustration book



Figure 5. Source: The archival collection website of British Museum, London where it is mentioned as Shield.

The item is clearly identified in the British Museum archive as a wooden shield that Maurice Vidal Portman donated in 1888 after purchasing it from the Andaman Islands. Its apparent surface damage raises the possibility that it was used in combat, confirming Portman's initial classification as a protective tool. Scientific methods like radiocarbon dating (to ascertain its age) and microscopic inspection (to detect impact marks, cuts, or residues from weapons) could be used to further confirm its historical use and authenticity. Furthermore, studies of the material composition could shed light on how it was constructed and verify whether its primary purpose was warfare or if it served other purposes over time.

Repatriation and Decolonisation: The Moral Discussion Around Indigenous Artefacts

The tribe's shield is a significant artefact in museum studies, symbolic and performance anthropology, and postcolonial anthropology. While indigenous resistance, like that which took place at the Battle of Aberdeen, was not only a physical struggle but also a struggle for cultural survival, colonial forces appropriated indigenous artefacts, like shields, to control and redefine native cultures, depriving them of their original meanings, according to Edward Said and Frantz Fanon.

Victor Turner's concept of "social drama" depicts the shield as a sign of valour and memory retention in Andamanese narratives, which are reinforced through storytelling and ritual. In museum anthropology, James Clifford's concept of the "museum as a contact zone" raises ethical problems about the shield's display, challenging its lawful ownership and the power dynamics of representation. If you want to tell the history of the whole world, a history that does not unduly privilege one part of humanity, you cannot do it through texts alone, because only some of the world has ever had texts, while most of the world, for most of the time, has not (MacGregor, 2011). The British Museum provides an invaluable foundation for using artefacts to tell the tale of the world's history because of its more than 250 years of collecting artefacts from all around the world. However, the fading history of the Andamanese society raises a crucial question, what about their own stories, slowly disappearing with time? Their society needs a safeguard for its heritage, preserving ancestral weapons that once bore witness to their bravery and resilience. This item allows us to travel back in time and around the globe to see how the Andamanese have shaped and been shaped by their environment over the past million years. The item, which ought to be considered a national treasure, is currently working to secure support for its return to the location where it saw the heroic event. One piece of material culture that represents the experiences of its users is the Andamanese tribal shield. It is a piece of defensive equipment that also upholds indigenous survival and combat skills and acts as a symbol of defiance against British colonial forces.

According to Ian Hodder's contextual archaeology, the shield is more than just an artefact; it must be understood in light of the Andamanese way of life, in which their social identity and cultural continuity depend heavily on handcrafted tools and weapons. As seen in the sketches, Andamanese tribes use shields, bows, and arrows to indicate more than simply practicality; they also stand for tribal authority, identity, and defiance of outside authority. The conflict between competing technical systems is symbolised by the British muskets and Andamanese bows and arrows, which reflect structuralist ideas of binary oppositions (traditional vs contemporary, indigenous against colonial). Lévi-Strauss would claim that this shield represented a resistance system, in which the Andamanese saw their weapons as an extension of their survival and cosmology, whilst the British saw them as primitive. As the argument over decolonisation and repatriation continues, the shield serves as both a historical testimony and a contested cultural artefact, representing the intricacies of colonial encounters, indigenous resilience,

and the preservation of tangible legacy.

Timeline: Colonial Encounters and Artifact Collection

- 1770: Collection of the Gweagal shield by Captain Cook's expedition.
- 1859: Battle of Aberdeen and British acquisition of Andamanese artifacts.
- 1888: Portman's collection of Andamanese artifacts for the British Museum.
- 2000s-Present: Repatriation debates and campaigns.

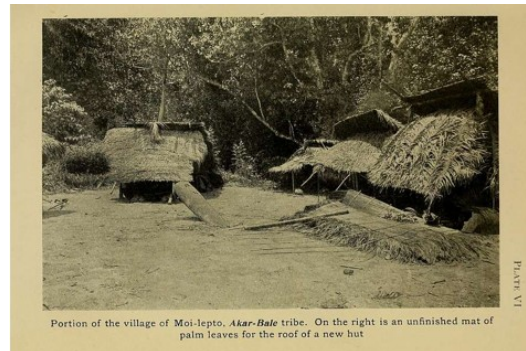


Figure 6. A rare photograph taken by Radcliffe-Brown, 1906, depicting the Buamoh shield prominently placed at the center of an Andamanese habitation, symbolizing bravery and resilience. Source: *The Andaman Islanders: a study in social anthropology* by A.R. Radcliffe Brown, 1922.

The Gweagal Shield and Colonial First Encounters in Australia

The initial encounter between British and Aboriginal Australians at Botany Bay in 1770 is also symbolised by the Bark Shield in the British Museum. Two Gweagal warriors came charging with spears as James Cook and his crew tried to land. A guy was struck by Cook's musket shot, and he probably snatched up a shield for protection. The injured man left the shield on the sand and backed away. In the Pacific, early encounters were often violent and heated. Visual and documentary evidence have shown that Captain Cook collected a bark shield at the British Museum during his first journey to Australia in 1770. These shields were highly prized by Australian Aboriginal clans and were often traded over great distances. Although this specific shield was gathered in Kamay Botany Bay, examination of its composition indicates that it is composed of red mangrove, a tropical species that may be found more than 500 kilometres away on the north coast of New South Wales.

This finding demonstrates the vast networks of long-distance trade that were in place in eastern Australia prior to the disruption of these customary systems by European colonisation.



Figure 7. Cooman and another Gweagal warriors confronting Lt James Cook. (William MacLeod 1899)

Again, the description of this shield conceals a history of genocide and heroic resistance. What is commonly referred to as a "moment of first contact" was, in fact, a violent and racist invasion of the world's oldest surviving civilisation, an invasion that continues today. When Cook landed, Aboriginal Australians had occupied their territory for 60,000 years without interruption. They now account for only 3% of Australia's population, with many

living in extreme poverty that non-Aboriginal Australians cannot imagine. Their life expectancy is 10 years shorter on average, and they are disproportionately incarcerated, with their children being subjected to cruel treatment in prison. The Gweagal shield, displayed in a secluded section of the British Museum with a vague caption and no explanation, remains obscured as the brutal history of violence and resistance it embodies.



Figure 8. Gweagal shield, an Aboriginal Australian shield, photo courtesy: British Museum

Silent Testimonies: The Andamanese and Gweagal Shields in the British Museum

The Gweagal shield from Australia and the Andamanese shield from India, both displayed in the British Museum, serve as mute witnesses to violent clashes between indigenous populations and European colonial troops. These shields share a history of colonial conquest, indigenous resistance, and historical erasure while coming from different islands and civilisations. It is believed that Aboriginal warriors utilised the Gweagal shield against Captain James Cook's expedition at Kamay (Botany Bay) in 1770. It displays evidence of a gunshot hole, signifying the force of first contact. In Australia, this marked the start of British colonisation, which resulted in the erasure of Aboriginal customs, their subjugation, and their eviction. Aboriginal activists have demanded the return of the shield, which is now housed in the British Museum, as a representation of perseverance and survival.

Both shields are tangible reminders of the indigenous people's struggle for survival because they were made in different traditions and used in battles about a century apart. They reflect the effects of colonialism around the world, where indigenous peoples, whether in Australia or the Andaman Islands, suffered from systematic marginalisation, forced assimilation, and brutality. The Andamanese shield also depicts the Great Andamanese tribes' resistance to British forces during the Battle of Aberdeen in 1859, when the Andamanese fought heavily armed British forces with bows and shields to defend their territory and independence. Their location in a museum in Europe, far from the nations in which they have historically been significant, brings to light ongoing debates concerning cultural heritage, repatriation, and museum decolonisation. More than just artefacts, these shields serve as reminders of histories that have been all but forgotten but still merit acknowledgement.

Table 1: Comparative Table: Andamanese and Gweagal Shields

Feature	Andamanese Shield (Buamoh)	Gweagal Shield
Origin	Andaman Islands, India	Australia (Botany Bay)
Material	Wood/Bamboo	Bark/Red Mangrove
Function	Protection	Music & Defence Against Muskets
Collector	M.V. Portman (1888)	Captain Cook (1770)
Current Location	British Museum, London	British Museum, London
Repatriation Status	Under debate	Advocacy ongoing

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rodney Kelly's campaign for the Gweagal shield serves as an example of the struggle for the repatriation of indigenous artefacts, which highlights the greater challenges that indigenous groups encounter in recovering their cultural heritage. After years of pressure, the British Museum has only agreed to temporary loans rather than permanent repatriation, indicating that the organisation is reluctant to return antiquities, even when there are recognised familial rights. Aboriginal Australians, who have successfully reclaimed the Gweagal shield

through a strong advocacy network, international support, and legal channels, face an even greater challenge than the Andamanese, who are among the most marginalised indigenous groups and have little political clout. Historically, the Andamanese, particularly tribes such as the Great Andamanese, Jarawa, and Onge, have been unable to demand the return of their cultural artefacts through formal advocacy venues or legal processes. In contrast to Aboriginal Australians, who can express their concerns on global forums through people like Rodney Kelly, the Andamanese are not directly represented in these discussions. Furthermore, the lack of documented claims from indigenous people themselves, government prohibitions on external interactions, and their history of isolation all work against them. Without an indigenous-led campaign or substantial institutional support from Indian authorities or international heritage bodies, these relics are largely at the mercy of museum regulations and colonial-era preservation arguments. This discrepancy highlights the pressing need for moral adjustments to museum operations worldwide. If even communities with active legal and diplomatic efforts struggle to reclaim their heritage, it raises serious concerns about the future of repatriation for indigenous groups like the Andamanese, who are often excluded from discussions such as these. Do you want to investigate potential tactics to increase advocacy for Andamanese artefacts?

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