

## Why the World Needs a Museum of British Colonialism

Calls for a new museum that deals with Britain's heritage of slavery have intensified in the past week. Strong foundations for such a museum already exist, not least in Liverpool's excellent International Slavery Museum, and the slavery gallery at the Museum of London Docklands. The desire for more museums like this speaks to the longstanding need to integrate the history of slavery into our national heritage narrative.

Confronting Britain's heritage of slavery is only the start of an important but uncomfortable national reckoning with the bloody legacy of British Imperialism. A post-Brexit Britain needs to understand its place in a world shaped by centuries of colonial pillage, murder, enslavement, and environmental destruction. But is a nation that burned and concealed colonial archives to hide its brutal crimes ready to come to terms with a history that shames us?

In trying to answer this question, the Museum of British Colonialism was created by activists in Kenya and the UK in 2018, to study and raise awareness of these forgotten histories. Our work to date has focused primarily on the Mau Mau insurgency in 1950s Kenya, one of the many brutal conflicts that Britain fought to cling to the remains of Empire in the years after World War Two. It is this very insurgency that Britain worked so hard to try and bury through the ironically named "Operation Legacy". For the past two years, we have therefore been gathering oral histories, making films, carrying out archaeological fieldwork and creating digital exhibitions about Britain's colonial past, and figuring out ways of working with this uncomfortable heritage.

It is no wonder protestors topple statues of men who grew rich by kidnapping and murdering thousands upon thousands of African men, women and children. These crimes endured for centuries, stole tens of millions of lives, and the resulting profits flowed into Europe creating global inequalities that endure to this day. To confront the legacy of the British Empire is to strike at the heart of a historical evil, and to puncture a carefully curated set of lies and erasures that run like a poison through British culture and society.

Laying the foundation stones of a Museum of British Colonialism is a daunting task. How do you tell a story four centuries long, that touches upon nearly every modern nation on earth? This is a story that shaped the histories of seafaring, industrial capitalism, art, food, drugs, religion, music, war, sex, gardening, and even the English language.

This history is almost impossible to contain in one space and as the Museum of British Colonialism we aim to demonstrate an alternative approach. As the perpetrator nation, Britain should carry the weight of Imperial history and pay the costs, but the stories are not primarily ours to tell. The story of British colonialism belongs to its victims and those who struggled for freedom. It belongs to their descendants, in nations that Britain robbed and actively impoverished from India and Kenya to Nigeria and Jamaica. It belongs to those still under colonial occupation from Australia to Canada and Northern Ireland. We need to ask and to listen, to work

with historians and storytellers and scholars in these nations, and we must prepare ourselves for the discomfort that these stories will bring us.

Some voices have suggested that the toppled statues should be sent to museums. But museums are not storehouses for a nation's unwanted junk, nor are they analgesic spaces where controversial histories can be rendered safe and printed on souvenir tea-towels. Museums – at their best – are spaces for learning, discovery, and the bringing together not only of objects, but also of people and stories.

The very idea of museums, from their roots in Renaissance cabinets of curiosity to the genocide-minded skull-collectors of the nineteenth century, is rooted in colonialism. Too many contemporary museums are dusty relics of empire itself, from their vapid architecture to their blood-stained collections. Those that lament the pulling down of statues as “destroying history” have a similarly outdated and simplistic understanding of heritage. To build a Museum of British Colonialism we need to discard all of this heritage and imagine a museum without walls, curators, collections, or gift shops.

The Museum of British Colonialism could therefore never be a museum in the traditional sense. To date, much of our work has focused on the infamous network of internment camps where hundreds of thousands of Mau Mau suspects were held without trial by British colonial forces in Kenya. To share our work with new audiences we have held exhibitions and public events in both Kenya and the UK. Colonialism was not a one-way process, and a truly honest Museum of British Colonialism cannot solely be located in Britain.

Britain is a nation that powerfully denies its history, clinging stubbornly to a fantasy of a benevolent colonial power beloved by native peoples and bestowing only benefits, from railways to Christianity. Meanwhile successive governments and an acquiescent media have embedded this fraudulent history into school curricula and popular culture.

We need to have uncomfortable conversations about the British Empire, campaigns and projects that build enduring links between nations and communities. We need to educate, to lobby, to campaign, to protect, to unearth, and to hold accountable. The Germans have a word for this: they call it *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a nation's grappling with its shameful past. But even Germany, where the heritage of the Holocaust is confronted loudly and clearly, has consistently failed to acknowledge the genocidal violence of its own African colonies.

As we celebrate falling statues and the growing awareness of Britain's slave heritage, we are taking the first step on a long road to the acknowledgement of the British Empire as one of the most diabolical enterprises in human history. We hope that the Museum of British Colonialism's work in Kenya can provide a model for future approaches that recognise the limits of the contemporary museum and look to build meaningful collaborations and conversations about shared painful pasts.