

## **International Day Against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property**

By Marsha M. Hall

Each year on November 14, the global community joins forces as a collective to celebrate the *International Day Against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property*. This Day was adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2019, during its fortieth General Conference in Paris, as a significant way of publicising the realities that countries face when crimes of such nature are committed, and how all stakeholders can effectively collaborate to combat these. The Day, according to [unesco.org/commemorations/dayagainstillicit](https://unesco.org/commemorations/dayagainstillicit), “reminds the world that theft, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property takes place in every country, robbing people of their culture, identity and history ... ” In this sense, vital principles that should be transmitted to next generations are included in cultural heritage.

Jamaica is not far removed from global happenings, and the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/ Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB) is sensitive to the nature of the illicit trade in cultural objects. The ACIJ/JMB is home to numerous artefacts that represent Jamaica’s intangible cultural heritage and the work of our traditional communities. From 2008, the Ministry responsible for Culture (then referred to as the Ministry of Information, Culture, Youth & Sport and now the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment & Sport) has engaged with UNESCO “seeking accession to two UNESCO Conventions to prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property” (Jamaica Information Service, March 22, 2018). Following this, in 2021, the government continued to actively participate and work closely with UNESCO on broader sensitisation workshops with cultural and border controls agencies. These workshops focussed on the training of individuals on national and international frameworks; the nature, diversity, and value of cultural property, including the tactics and resources employed by local, national, and worldwide communities to stop these illicit activities.

The removal of artefacts and cultural objects, together with unlawful archaeological digs, undermine the scientific foundation for researching cultural heritage and national identity. In reality, the illicit trafficking in cultural property of antiquities, takes on various forms, such as theft, smuggling, looting of archaeological sites and black market sales of cultural artefacts. Such clandestine and unlawful acts have far-reaching effects beyond just the immediate loss of money. These, in effect, have serious implications for communities and people, particularly those whose livelihood and existence depend on the patronising of visitors to

cultural sites or museums. Additionally, there are numerous risks involved that often endanger citizens' lives as they can be intentionally forced to participate in the illicit trade of cultural goods.

It is therefore necessary for everyone, particularly citizens, to take a proactive stance to protect their country's cultural heritage, not just for the monetary values of the properties, but for historical and sentimental importance in the preservation of world heritage. Cultural heritage includes important values that can be transferred to future generations. The scientific foundation by scholars, archaeologists, historians, cultural practitioners, and professionals engaged in the research of cultural heritage and national identity is also endangered by illicit archaeological digs and the destruction of artefacts and cultural objects. There is also the cost incurred by governments in the retrieval of stolen or looted cultural objects, as they must be able to prove that the artefacts originated from their country. However, the effects of these criminal acts extend beyond cultural heritage as the world is deprived of knowledge to inform about previous civilisations' ways of living - the customs, practices, values and creative expressions.

So, this is not a single effort by any one State or government, but one which requires concerted and legal enforcements to prevent plundering, exporting and illegal trafficking of cultural properties, although this problem is exacerbated more in some regions of the world, particularly those plagued by natural and man-made disasters.

As the international community marks this day, it is incumbent on everyone to educate, inform and promote national and international frameworks in union with other advances in the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural relics and properties.

### **Website Sources:**

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