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Museums and restorative justice: heritage, repatriation and cultural education

by Moira Simpson

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Heritage preservation and interpretation are central functions of museums and constitute the most public dimensions of museum practice. However, indigenous people frequently refer to the limitations of museum display as a means of expressing and preserving culture, emphasizing that culture is a living process that incorporates both continuity and change. As Kalpana Nand, Education Officer of Fiji Museum, states: 'Culture is a living, dynamic, ever-changing and yet ever-constant thing – it is a story, a song, a dance performance, never a 'dead thing' to be represented in the form of an artefact to be looked at through glass.'[1]

In recent decades indigenous peoples' voices and interests have contributed to broader understandings of how heritage is defined and its importance for the maintenance of cultural identity, as reflected in the content of a number of

recent UNESCO conventions designed to promote recognition and protection of cultural diversity, intangible heritage and the rights of indigenous peoples. As a result, contemporary museology has undergone a significant shift, from practices and purposes based on ideas of heritage as evidence of the past – valued for its historical research potential and as the basis for a thriving heritage industry – to recognition of the contemporary value of heritage for living cultures. In this article I briefly explore the links between heritage and health and well-being that become evident as indigenous peoples seek to restore cultural values and identity and renew the spiritual dimension of their cultures, as a means of dealing with life in the twenty-first century. This process often involves the restoration of key items of cultural and spiritual heritage to living indigenous cultures, and it is these types of objects that are most frequently the subject of repatriation requests. These sacred and ceremonial artefacts have immense contemporary value as resources for cultural renewal for indigenous peoples that have lost most of their heritage materials during the colonial era and are now seeking to recover from the effects of post-colonial trauma.

Repatriation and the revival of ceremonial life

Miriam Clavir's comparative study of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to the conservation of First Nations cultural materials has highlighted the importance that many First Nations communities place on the use of cultural objects.[2] The enactment of cultural activities for which these objects were intended reinforces the knowledge and rights associated with ceremonial objects and maintains their spiritual integrity. Cultural preservation is therefore achieved in the form of cultural maintenance or perpetuation of beliefs, values and activities associated with these objects.

In practical terms the emphasis on preservation of the context and associated activities, not just the object itself, involves the re-socialization of objects: their return to the place of origin where the intangible aspects of heritage provide meaning and where the objects themselves may stimulate renewed activities of the intangible aspects of culture. This perspective emphasizes the importance of ceremonial objects for intergenerational knowledge transmission within indigenous communities and for preserving and renewing the intangible aspects of heritage. As a result, museum conservation has been changing to include practices designed to preserve the integrity of an object's meaning and purpose as well as the material of its construction. In addition, indigenous peoples are utilizing a combination of Western conservation practices and traditional approaches within community social contexts and community museums that involve preservation of intangible dimensions of objects and the perpetuation or renewal of cultural practices such as ceremonies. This is often linked to broader community initiatives to perpetuate and renew cultural knowledge and practices as part of contemporary cultural revitalization processes and the affirmation of cultural identity within twenty-first-century societies. For some communities the repatriation of ceremonial materials from museums may be an important part of this process and linked to strategies to aid recovery from post-colonial trauma, and, as such, it has the capacity to contribute to indigenous health and well-being.

Michael Dodson, a former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and now Professor of Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, states that: 'As indigenous peoples, we are acutely aware that our survival as peoples depends on the vitality of our cultures. The deepest wound that colonization has inflicted has come from a process of stripping us of our distinct identities and cultures.'[3]

The social and cultural disadvantages that many indigenous people experience in colonized nations are reflected in statistics that clearly demonstrate far higher rates of child mortality and lower rates of life-expectancy. For example, in Canada the life-expectancy rate for Aboriginal populations is five to eight years lower than for the non-Aboriginal population, while in Australia the life-expectancy of indigenous Australians is seventeen to eighteen years lower than that of non-indigenous people.[4] The reasons for this are diverse and include poor diet and living conditions, leading to chronic heart disease, diabetes and other diseases. However, there is also increasing evidence that the psychological effects of post-colonial life and the effects of acculturation have a significant role to play, and this creates a direct link between cultural heritage and indigenous health and well-being. Historical factors and their contemporary legacy have been identified by commissions of inquiry as primary causes of social ills and health problems faced by Aboriginal people in both Canada and Australia.[5] In *Bringing Them Home*, the report of the Australian National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, it was stated that 'An entrenched pattern of disadvantage and dispossession continues to wreak havoc and destruction in indigenous families and communities'.[6]

There is growing evidence from a number of sources that greater self-governance, self-determination and cultural renewal have a positive effect on the lives of indigenous peoples who have been enduring the effects of historic or post-colonial trauma.[7] Michael Chandler and Christopher Lalonde of the University of British Columbia have identified cultural discontinuity as a primary factor in suicide among both young people and adults in First Nations communities in British Columbia; this, they believe, is the reason why 'some communities show rates 800 times the national average, while in others suicide is relatively unknown'.[8] They claim that 'just as the loss of personal continuity puts individual young persons at risk, the loss of cultural continuity puts whole cultural groups at risk'.[9] Their research suggests that 'collective efforts to preserve cultural continuity' are linked to improved health and well-being and lower suicide rates in First Nations communities.[10]

After decades of suppression and social injustice many colonized indigenous peoples are seeking to revive traditional values and cultural practices as part of a process of renewal intended to strengthen cultural identity, heal personal and community ills and provide a stimulus for new creativity. Cultural heritage in its tangible and intangible forms is integrally linked to social structure, ceremonial life and cultural identity. Indigenous activities regarding heritage preservation are therefore often part of cultural

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21. Ancient Near Eastern Galleries in the Richelieu Wing of the Département des Antiquités Orientales in the Musée du Louvre.

maintenance or renewal strategies and tied to community concerns in many other aspects of community life, including indigenous education, sovereignty, language renewal, intellectual property rights, land rights, economic development and health and well-being. Spiritual and religious practices are being revived as indigenous people seek ways to maintain their cultural identity and forge a successful path through contemporary society. Cultural camps are being organized in a number of indigenous communities in Canada and Australia to immerse young people in cultural experiences and ceremonial practices that link them to the values, knowledge and skills of past generations and instil in them a sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

The revitalization of traditional practices is not a return to outdated ways of life that have no relevance in the modern world. The protection and preservation of cultural heritage are often closely tied to efforts to maintain cultural and spiritual independence but involve renewal of cultural identity and pride and the utilization of indigenous approaches to communicating, teaching, governing and healing. Many indigenous people believe that the strengthening or renewal of traditional cultural and spiritual values can help to alleviate some of the problems that effect health and well-being. To quote a member of the Mnjikaning First Nation in Ontario: ‘the term “healing” can also be called “reviving”, “rebuilding” or “recreating”.’[11]

Community healing in Canadian Aboriginal communities is increasingly being recognized in government policies in the arenas of health, social security and social justice. In the 1996 report of the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), the commissioners say that 'Healing, in Aboriginal terms, refers to personal and societal recovery from the lasting effects of oppression and systematic racism experienced over generations'.[12] Spiritual renewal has become an accepted part of Aboriginal justice initiatives in Canada, and Health Canada recognizes that 'Aboriginal approaches to "wellness" … encompass physical, social, emotional and spiritual spheres'.[13]

At an individual level healing may involve 'overcoming personal problems that are debilitating to community life'. This can include alcohol or other forms of substance abuse as well as 'negative emotions and behaviour such as jealousy or anger'. The revival of cultural and ceremonial practices can provide opportunities for individuals to reconnect with meaningful aspects of traditional culture and contribute to the process of personal healing. As Wayne Warry notes: 'personal healing journeys are lifelong struggles to grapple with the intergenerational effects of various forms of abuse, neglect or loss of identity'.[14]

The return of ceremonial materials has assisted some communities in their efforts to renew cultural values and practices and contributed to efforts to revive traditional ceremonial practices as a component of contemporary life. For example, the Blackfoot community of Southern Alberta in Canada has been active in seeking the repatriation of ceremonial objects, in this case sacred medicine bundles that traditionally played an important role in maintaining health and well-being in the community and provided a focus for establishing personal and community discipline and responsibilities. As Blackfoot elders and ceremonialists Reg Crowshoe and Geoff Crow Eagle explain:

> Once or twice a year, that bundle will be opened, and somebody will make a vow to that bundle, to a certain holy object that's contained within; for example, they may vow to the Creator to dance with a certain relic in that bundle, so that someone who is very sick will be healed. And payments are made, as you make that vow to the custodian.[15]

During the late nineteenth century the arrival of Europeans led to the almost complete extermination of the buffalo, the primary source of food and other resources for the Blackfoot, and they faced starvation. The Blackfoot entered into a treaty with the British Crown and were resettled on reserves where they learned farming practices. Further cultural changes were imposed by Christian missionaries and the residential school system. As a result, many Blackfoot abandoned traditional ceremonial ways. While Blackfoot ceremonial life persisted in a reduced form, disruption to Blackfoot cultural practices and knowledge transmission has seen a decline in the numbers of those participating in more traditional forms of ceremonialism.

With the arrival of Western collectors medicine bundles were attributed with new meanings, as ethnographic museum specimens. They became objects of curiosity for collectors

and then valuable commodities on the Indian art market. In this context circulation and transfer depended not on the spiritual power of the bundle and the authority of the owner but on the commercial and ethnographic value of the bundle. Their commodification within the secular world provided a source of income for some bundle keepers forced into extreme measures in order to survive in times of great hardship. As George Kipp, a Piikuni cultural leader from the Blackfoot Reserve in Montana in the United States points out: 'At some point in time, when you are in an area where you're suffering from 90 to 95 per cent unemployment and looking for the necessary food for the next meal and you have something of value, instead of letting your children starve you will sell that item.'[16] As a result, many bundles ended up in private collections and in museums in Canada, the United States and elsewhere. This in turn further impacted on ceremonial life by removing the mechanisms for transmitting and perpetuating knowledge of and authority for the bundles and the ceremonies. The removal of the bundles from the normal cycle of transfer led to a reduction in the number of ceremonialists and a decrease in traditional knowledge as older ceremonialists passed on and fewer followed the traditional pathways of learning and acquiring the authority and responsibilities associated with bundle keeping. As Blackfoot writer, Beverly Hungry Wolf, notes: 'The holders of our tribal medicine bundles were mostly old, and when they died the bundles were frequently sold to museums or private collectors … With each bundle that disappeared there was one less ceremony.'[17]

The removal of bundles to museums and their retention in collections has impacted adversely on ceremonial life and contributed to the dissolution of some of the ceremonial societies that managed and cared for the bundles and to the loss of associated knowledge. In the Blackfoot communities of Southern Alberta cultural and spiritual beliefs and values are being incorporated into cultural renewal strategies, knowledge transmission and museum planning, and the repatriation of sacred bundles is a central part of these efforts. According to customary teaching methods, it is through the processes of learning and teaching knowledge associated with the ceremonial transfer of bundles from one bundle-keeper to another that Blackfoot world-views and values are passed on. It is not, therefore, just the sacred bundles as objects that are being returned but the means to transfer and perpetuate knowledge.

Repatriation efforts by the Blackfoot have led to the return of a number of bundles and the renewal of ceremonies not practised for many decades; they have also resulted in the introduction of legislation in Alberta to facilitate the process of repatriation of bundles from major museums in the province. The reconnection of Blackfoot people with their spiritual knowledge and ceremonial activities is a key component of contemporary Blackfoot cultural renewal strategies manifested in existing and proposed community museums and cultural centres that serve both intra- and intercultural educational functions. Blackfoot spiritual beliefs and ceremonial activities are the customary methods of transmitting and preserving cultural knowledge, and these are being renewed by Blackfoot ceremonialists in partnership with conventional museological methods of storing and

archiving heritage materials. The cultural renewal projects of the Peigan Blackfoot community in Brocket currently involve the existing Oldman Cultural Centre on the Peigan reserve, which is operated by Peigan ceremonialists. There are also plans to establish a Peigan Medicine Lodge Museum and Cultural Renewal Centre based on the structure of a traditional camp with tipis or lodges arranged around a central medicine lodge. The Medicine Lodge Museum will provide a ceremonial space for community activities involving the transmission of ceremonial knowledge, as well as interpretive spaces and tourism activities for intercultural interpretation of Blackfoot culture.

The repatriation of ancestral remains as a stimulus for cultural renewal

In some indigenous communities the repatriation of human remains has also contributed to cultural renewal processes and stimulated the creation of new forms of contemporary cultural practices based on traditional values, ceremonies and art forms, thereby reinforcing cultural identity in the modern world. For example, in the 1990s members of the Haida First Nation of British Columbia in Canada discovered that the remains of ancestors had been removed from gravesites in old Haida villages abandoned in the nineteenth century following a smallpox epidemic that killed 90 per cent of the population. The Haida communities of Old Masset and Skidegate formed a repatriation committee and sought the return of ancestral remains from a number of museums in Canada and the US. Over a period of six years the remains of over 466 ancestors were located and returned.

The process of organizing the collection, return and reburial of the ancestors proved to be an emotional journey for members of the Haida community, but one that has stimulated the renewal of cultural knowledge and activities and contributed to the process of community healing. In order to bury the ancestors with respect, members of the Haida Repatriation Committee talked with elders and researched traditional burial practices, using this information to devise reburial ceremonies informed by traditional values and methods. This involved the weaving of cedar bark mats for wrapping the remains, the construction of steamed bentwood boxes to carry the remains of each individual, and the stitching of blankets, decorated with clan crests outlined in mother-of-pearl buttons, which were used to cover each box during repatriation and reburial ceremonies. Haida artists re-learned bentwood box-making processes and taught Haida teenagers about this form of their heritage. The process also stimulated the development of new songs and dances, evidence of the vitality of contemporary Haida culture.

Nika Collison, curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum and a member of the Haida Repatriation Committee, explains further:

> In order to really, really do things respectfully, we really had to call on our ancient teachings and knowledge and traditions because these ancestors don't know anything but the old ways, of course, they lived … hundreds of years ago. So that made a larger portion of our community relearn our old ways, and that's brought more people to learn our songs and dances, and to learn about our ceremonies, and to

> relearn ancient burial techniques and traditions that may not have otherwise been used any longer, and it brings our whole community together.[18]

Nika and Vincent Collison, who are both active members of the Haida Repatriation Committee, have observed that 'After each ceremony, one can feel that the air has been cleared, that spirits are resting, that our ancestors are at peace, and that healing is visible on the faces of the Haida community'.[19] Through the process of repatriating their ancestors the Haida also discovered a number of important cultural objects in the collections of museums they visited. Arrangements with some of these museums have led to several ceremonial objects being returned on long-term loan to the museum in Haida Gwaii. Emphasis is then placed on reuniting the objects with community members who are descendants of the last-known owner and who hold inherited rights to use such objects. Items such as a speaker's staff and masks have been returned and are now available for use on ceremonial occasions. The Haida have built a new museum and heritage centre, which includes a feast hall where potlatch ceremonies will be held, thereby inextricably linking the life of the community and the work of the museum.[20]

Museums as supporting actors in communities

Museum collections contain cultural materials from all over the world and provide an invaluable educational resource through which people can learn about the values, practices, beliefs and traditions of their own and other cultures. However, the ethnographic collections of modern museums were largely collected during times of colonial occupation, when salvage collecting was deemed necessary to preserve evidence of cultures that appeared to be disappearing. The challenge that museums face today is to facilitate the preservation of objects within the context of their broader social and cultural significance and develop strategies that offer the best protection and utilization of these resources to the benefit of all humankind.

In the twenty-first century museums can play a new role in supporting and contributing to processes of cultural renewal. This involves serious consideration of why we preserve things and for whom. It requires museum staff to look beyond the walls of their own institutions and the local community and recognize the values and needs of source communities, and to consider the contribution that museums can make to society as a whole, not just to museum visitors and the academic community. By giving greater consideration to the contemporary cultural, social and economic circumstances that traditional owners face, museums can, through the repatriation process, contribute to indigenous peoples' efforts to renew cultural practices. Museums can thus extend their role to becoming more actively involved in the preservation and development of living heritage and contemporary cultural practices. To ignore, dismiss or reject requests from indigenous peoples who seek the return of cultural objects that they require to assist in the processes of cultural renewal would suggest that museum professionals are more concerned with preserving artefacts than supporting communities in their efforts to perpetuate the distinct cultures, beliefs and practices that led to the creation of the artefacts. If the return of ceremonial objects can assist indigenous peoples in

continuing or renewing the values and practices essential to their cultural and ceremonial life and can contribute to community healing as part of contemporary life, then the act of repatriation is surely the ultimate form of cultural preservation.

NOTES

1. K. Nand (2000) *Fiji Museum in the Post-Colonial Era*. Papers presented at the ICOM-CECA conference 'Culture as Commodity', held in Christchurch, New Zealand.

2. M. Clavir (2002) *Preserving What Is Valued*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

3. M. Dodson, 'Cultural Rights and Educational Responsibilities', The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture, University of New England, 5 September 1994.

4. In Canada 'Aboriginal' includes Indian, Inuit and Métis people. In Australia 'indigenous' refers to Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders (Health Canada, *A Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada for the Year 2000*. Highlights of First Nations Health Statistics. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/pubs/gen/stats_profil_e.html; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Australian Social Trends 2002, p. 76).

5. RCAP: Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Ottawa: Canada Communications Group, 1991. http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sgmm_e.html.

6. Commonwealth of Australia (1997). *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/

7. M. J. Chandler and C. E. Lalonde, 'Cultural Continuity as a Hedge against Suicide in Canada's First Nations', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 35(2), 1998, pp. 193–211; L. Kirmayer, C. Simpson and M. Cargo, 'Healing Traditions: Culture, Community and Mental Health Promotion with Canadian Aboriginal Peoples', *Australasian Psychiatry*, 2003; P. Lane Jr, M. Bopp, J. Bopp and J. Norris (2002) *Mapping The Healing Journey: The Final Report of a First Nation Research Project on Healing in Canadian Aboriginal Communities.* Aboriginal peoples collection APC 21 CA. Lethbridge: Four Directions International and Cochrane: The Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning.

8. Chandler and Lalonde 1998, p. 191.

9. C. E. Lalonde, 'Counting the Costs of Failures of Personal and Cultural Continuity', *Human Development* 46, 2003, pp. 137–44. http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/icomceca2000/papers/Kalpana_Nand.pdf.

10. Chandler and Lalonde 1998; M. J. Chandler, C. E. Lalonde, B. Sokol and D. Hallett, 'Personal Persistence, Identity Development, and Suicide: A Study of Native and Non-Native North American Adolescents', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. 68, No. 2, Serial No. 273, 2003; Lalonde, 2003.

11. Lane et al. 2002, p. 38.

12. RCAP, Vol. 3, 1996, p. 109.

13. Health Canada. *A Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada for the Year 2000*; Health Canada. *First Nations, Inuit and Aboriginal Health: First Nations Comparable Health Indicators*, 2005. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/diseases-maladies/2005-01_health-sante_indicat-eng.php#life_expect.

14. All quotations from W. Warry (1998). *Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 208.

15. R. Crowshoe, and G. Crow Eagle (2006). *Piikani Blackfoot Teaching*. Four Directions Teaching.com. Online at http://fourdirectinsteachings.com/transcripts/blackfoot.html.

16. G. Kipp, quoted in A. Gulliford (2000). *Sacred Objects and Sacred Places: Preserving Tribal Traditions*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, p. 55.

17. B. Hungrywolf (1996) *Daughters of the Buffalo Women: Maintaining the Tribal Faith*, Skookumchuk: Canadian Caboose Press, p. 139.

18. N. Collison, interview, Rabble Radio, Canada, 2006. http://www.rabble.ca/rpn/files/rey/rey-2006-01-02.mp3.

19. V. Collison and N. Collison. 'Haida Case Study 2002'. Unpublished document.

20. The potlatch is a traditional from of ceremony among First Nations communities on the Northwest Coast, involving gift-giving to repay debts and make payments to participants. It is accompanied by feasting, dancing and singing.