When Blackfoot people first began requesting the return of sacred material, they found themselves confronted by the fundamental museum assumption that artifacts must be preserved for humanity’s common good and understanding by keeping them in the specialized conditions of museum institutions. Museum personnel reacted to the requests by asking a number of questions: What constitutes sacred material? Can the original items be replicated for use, with the original remaining in the care of the museum? If sacred material is so important, why was it sold in the first place? What guarantees are there that items, once returned, will not subsequently be sold to private collectors? By asking questions such as these, museum professionals were trying to determine the extent to which their collections would be affected by repatriation. They were also worried that giving up parts of their collections would be perceived
by the public, governments, and various funders as negligence in the performance of their fiduciary responsibility. This responsibility holds that collections are acquired and maintained for the benefit of society as a whole and that items cannot be removed from a collection in any way that privileges an individual or identifiable group. While such questions may have seemed straightforward to the museum community, they were very difficult for the Blackfoot: they seemed to call into question the authority and roles of Blackfoot ceremonial leaders, the nature of their knowledge of sacred material, and their understanding of their own culture and history. These questions also raised the issue of cultural domination and the place of Blackfoot people in Canadian and North American society.

The Blackfoot people who have become involved with repatriation are the ceremonial leaders, teachers, historians, and role models of their nations. They are usually referred to as “Elders” by museums and others in the non-Blackfoot world, but this term does not encompass all that it means to be regarded as a mokaki, a wise person. In order to have the right to speak about a bundle, ceremony, or sacred society, one must be an aawaaahskataksi, a ceremonial grandparent. A person who has kept a bundle and then transferred it to someone else becomes the ceremonial parent to the new keeper. Only after the bundle is transferred once more, however, does one become a ceremonial grandparent and assume a more active role in leading ceremonies, teaching others about the spiritual ways, and keeping the oral traditions related to both sacred and historical knowledge. The knowledge and understanding that has been transferred through the proper protocols and processes should not be challenged through the process of direct questioning that is so predominant Western scientific modes of inquiry. The direct questions posed by museum personnel are sometimes considered impolite within a Blackfoot context and often leave Blackfoot people feeling that they have been criticized without good reason and that their credibility and their integrity have been challenged, in terms of both their personal character and their knowledge. This manner of questioning has impeded communication between the Blackfoot and the museums.

The museums’ questions about the nature of sacred material led the Blackfoot to question whether such questions could even be answered. Blackfoot spiritual concepts can be conveyed accurately only through the Blackfoot language. English lexical categories and grammatical structure differ
so greatly from those of Blackfoot that when an effort is made to translate a concept from one language to another, the idea often becomes meaningless. Even in the rare instances where translation is possible, it may not be appropriate to convey certain sacred information—that is, the knowledge that is ritually transferred from one individual to another through ceremony. A person must be willing to make a personal sacrifice for the ceremony and to commit to following the teaching and protocols that come with the knowledge. Of course, it is just such knowledge that provides the most convincing answers to questions posed by museum personnel. The Blackfoot needed to consider how much information they should make available to the museums and how best to present it.

Blackfoot history includes events that occurred millennia in the past and that are most often regarded by Western scholars as myths that have little to do with actual events. Hallowell, discussing Anishinabe myths, emphasizes that these mythic events are understood as having really occurred:

> The significant thing about these stories is that the characters in them are regarded as living entities who have existed from time immemorial. . . . Whether human or animal in form or name, the major characters in the myth behave like people, though many of their activities are depicted in a spatio-temporal framework of cosmic, rather than mundane, dimensions. . . . It is clear, therefore, that to the Ojibwa, their “talk” about these entities, although expressed in formal narrative, is not about fictitious characters. On the contrary, what we call myth is accepted by them as a true account of events in the past lives of living “persons.” (Hallowell 2010, 542)

These events are remembered as having occurred at specific places in the traditional territory. Sometimes the events define relationships between human and other-than-human beings, including the origin of sacred bundles and ceremonies that express these relationships. In addition, the Blackfoot understanding of more recent events in western Canadian and American history often contradicts the normative version found in popular media and most school textbooks. For decades, Aboriginal peoples had been made to feel subservient to teachers, Indian Agents, and other government officials who imposed on them the dominant society’s values and views of history as they encouraged people to give up
their traditional ways. Now, faced with questions from museums, the Blackfoot needed to make the case for the veracity of their oral traditions. This became especially important when it came to addressing the circumstances under which sacred items had left the reserves. The written accounts of collectors are not always in agreement with the oral traditions, and they almost never take into consideration the social, economic, and political pressures that brought a person to the point of selling a bundle.

Over the years, the Blackfoot have found ways of addressing these questions without revealing that which is sacred and should be kept private. In some cases, these issues were worked out through projects with non-Native researchers who helped reframe both the questions and the answers in ways that were respectful and that led to a greater understanding (see Brown and Peers 2006; Brown et al. 2010; Conaty 2003; Conaty and Carter 2005; Lokensgard 2010). At times, the Blackfoot feared that museums would reject their own understanding of their culture and history and, in so doing, would also reject requests for the return of sacred bundles. This fear was seldom realized. This is a measure both of the sagacity with which the Blackfoot crafted their response and the willingness of most museums to understand the larger implications of repatriation.

What follows is an explanation, from a Blackfoot perspective, of the meaning that sacred objects have for the Blackfoot people as individuals and as a culture. It has been my good fortune over the past twenty years to have worked closely with Blackfoot people who have been involved in repatriation and to have learned how they wish to talk about their culture and their history. The goal here, on the advice of those who have contributed their stories, is twofold. First, they want to provide a resource for younger members of their nations who are interested in the issues surrounding repatriation. Second, they wish to present this information so that those museums that remain reluctant to repatriate sacred bundles can understand the importance of this material.

In following section, I critically review academic resources and acknowledge the importance of oral tradition. My discussion of Blackfoot history extends from ancient times, when bundles were first given to human beings, through to today. This provides the context in which sacred bundles originated, the circumstances that led to their leaving, and the conditions to which they are returning. This is an important contrast to the discussion of museum
origins and growth in the previous chapter and is helpful in understanding the differing points of view held by museums and Blackfoot people. It also provides an important background for understanding the stories of repatriation that follow.

**NIITSITAPI: THE REAL PEOPLE**

In order to understand the culture and history of the Blackfoot and the role that sacred bundles play in their lives, we must begin by understanding the place that Blackfoot people call home. This is the place where their culture originated, and they have strong ties to the physical and spiritual ecology.

The Niitsitapi consist of the Kainai (Blood), Siksika (Blackfoot, Northern Blackfoot), Apatohsipiikani (Piikani, Peigan) and Ammskaapipiikani (Piegan, Blackfeet). Their traditional territory encompassed a large area of the northwestern plains, extending from the North Saskatchewan River southward to the Yellowstone River and from the Rocky Mountains eastward to what is now east-central Saskatchewan (fig. 5). Throughout this region, there are named landscape features that are associated with ancient stories, stories that anthropologists call “myths” but that the Blackfoot know as their history. Ninastako, Chief Mountain, is where Thunder lives and where he gave his pipe to the Niitsitapi as a sign that they would live in peace; Women’s Buffalo Jump is where men and women first agreed to live together; at a place along the Bow River, east of present-day Calgary, Iiniskim, the buffalo stone, made himself known to a woman and taught the people the ceremony for calling bison whenever they needed food; and Ksisskstaki (Beaver) gave the Beaver Bundle to the people at a lake in what is now Waterton Lakes National Park. There are also stone features—some are large circles, others are figures of animals or men—that mark locations of special significance. Medicine wheels such as those at Sundial Hill, Majorville, and Canadian Forces Base Suffield, all in southern Alberta, continue to be important places that connect humans with the spiritual aspect of their surroundings. The ecology of Blackfoot territory includes aspen parkland, fescue prairie, foothills, and subalpine meadows. While their traditional economy was focused on bison hunting, a very broad spectrum of plants and animals were important to the Blackfoot. Some species were important for food; others gave
Figure 5. Traditional Niitsitapi territory. Courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.
different gifts to the people. This landscape has, at once, a sacred and secular meaning, and it is important not to separate the two. In the Blackfoot world, everything is both sacred and secular at the same time.

The territory that the Blackfoot consider home is considerably larger than that which is described by many historians, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians. This, like differences in the understanding of history, can be problematic for the Blackfoot. When asserting the extent of their territory, Blackfoot people risk being contradicted by academic researchers, and, by implication, this criticism can be extended to all aspects of their oral tradition. Nevertheless, the Blackfoot disagree with many of the suggestions about their traditional territory.

Edward Curtis, the photographer who captured images of so many First Nations people in North America, recorded Tearing Lodge’s account indicating that the people had migrated to the North Saskatchewan River region, in present-day Alberta, from the area to the north, around Lesser Slave Lake:

Our three tribes came southward out of the wooded country to the north of Bow river. We began to make short excursions to the south, and we kept coming farther and farther, and finally gave up altogether our old home. This happened before my grandfather’s time. We call our former home Istssóhti (“in the brush”). The Piegan led this movement and were followed by the Bloods and later the Blackfeet. We all hunted in the plains between Milk river and the Yellowstone, the Piegan finally wintering on the Musselshell or the Upper Missouri, the Bloods on the Belly river, south of the site of Fort MacLeod, the Blackfeet on Bow river, or its tributary, High river. Of course, individual families and small bands of Blackfeet sometime spent the winter among the Piegan.

(Curtis 1970, 4)

Early in the twentieth century, the American naturalist and ethnologist George Bird Grinnell visited among the Ammskaapiipiikani in Montana, at roughly the same time that Curtis was there. He reiterates Curtis’s account, tracing Blackfoot origins to the boreal forest, near Lesser Slave Lake, and relating how they were pushed southwestward to the North Saskatchewan River by the Dene (Grinnell 1962, 177–178). According to Grinnell, they resided there until
they acquired horses and guns in the early eighteenth century, whereupon they expanded their territory southward to Yellowstone River. In the early 1940s, anthropologist John Ewers spent a number of years living on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana as the designer and first curator of the Museum of the Plains Indian, in nearby Browning. This opportunity connected him with many old people, and he suggests that, according to their account, they were “living in the valley of the North Saskatchewan near the Eagle Hills in the early years of the eighteenth century” (Ewers 1958, 8). Dempsey (2001, 604) restricts their traditional territory to an area stretching from the North Saskatchewan River southward to the Milk River, near the US border, and from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the mouth of the Vermillion River in the east. Brian Reeves, in a study conducted for Glacier National Park in Montana, reviewed archaeological, historical, and linguistic resources for evidence that defines traditional Blackfoot territory (Reeves and Peacock 2001). He concluded that the northwestern corner of present-day Montana and the southwestern corner of present-day Alberta were the home of Piikani for thousands of years. Adolf Hungry Wolf recounts an origin story that has the first humans following Napi (the Old Man) from somewhere to the south, northward to a spot beyond which live Cree speakers:

When he awoke from his sleep, he traveled further northward and came to a fine high hill. He climbed to the top of it, and there sat down to rest. He looked over the country below him, and it pleased him. Before him the hill was steep, and he said to himself, “Well this is a fine place for sliding; I will have some fun,” and he began to slide down the hill. The marks where he slid down are to be seen yet, and the place is known to all people as the “Old Man’s Sliding Ground.”

This is as far as the Blackfeet followed Old Man. The Crees know what he did further north. (Hungry Wolf 2006, 12)

Hungry Wolf does not specify where this place might be and is, in fact, equivocal about the credibility he assigns to such accounts: “Neither the origin of the name, nor the tribe itself, can be proven beyond any doubt” (14). In this, he joins many anthropologists and historians who seem unwilling to acknowledge the veracity of oral traditions. Paul Raczka (2011) is more emphatic in declaring that

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the origins of the Blackfoot can be identified. He dismisses the versions of both Grinnell and Curtis (and, by implication, Ewers), instead referring to an alternative story, one in which people journeyed from the south and the west, across the mountains, in search of food. This story locates early Blackfoot territory closer to the present-day town of Choteau, in northwestern Montana, and is substantiated by the pictographs and boulder figures that the Blackfoot people created as demarcations of their territory.

Binnema (2001) questions the entire model that attaches ethnic groups to specific territories that were defended from intruders, arguing instead that extended interactions among First Nations on the northwestern plains are better understood as networks of extended family groups who travelled over great areas and interacted with one another in complex and nuanced ways. He contends that too much emphasis has been placed on ethnicity and tribal identification and that these categories are often the result of colonial interactions. In essence, people would not have identified themselves first and foremost as Blackfoot and held all others with antagonistic disregard. Rather, extended families would have met, cooperated, or fought depending upon many different factors, including the availability of food resources and past histories among these groups. It would seem to follow that determining geographical “territories” for First Nations is moot because First Nations themselves held no such concept.

Defining “Blackfoot territory” is, however, more than an arcane discussion among historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. Discussions of traditional territory can sometimes be the first stumbling block in repatriation negotiations. By rejecting the boundaries that have been defined by anthropologists and archaeologists, the Blackfoot are challenging everything that has been written about them (but not with them), including historical accounts that non-Native researchers have produced. Museum professionals, who may rely on the published academic research, have sometimes considered the Blackfoot understanding of their own history as revisionist and, by extension, have viewed claims regarding sacred material as motivated more by political than by spiritual concerns.

Identifying traditional Blackfoot territory is also important because of the significance of “place” in the culture. The Blackfoot understanding of themselves as a “people” and of their relationship with the rest of earthly Creation—and even the universe—emanates from their connection to their traditional landscapes and especially to particular locations within that geography. As
How Niitsitapi Lived in Their World

Within the traditional world of the Blackfoot-speaking people, everything has a spirit and is considered to be animate. This is very unlike the Western world view, in which there is a well-defined dichotomy between humans, as reasoning beings who are capable of abstract thought, and everything else. A. Irving Hallowell, writing in the mid-twentieth century about the Ojibwa (Anishinabe) in northern Manitoba, defined “persons” as all classes of beings with whom the “self” interacts in culturally prescribed ways. He goes on to note that “persons” need not be confined to human beings and that Western “objective” analysis is not always adequate in helping us to understand cultures in which the category of “persons” is extended to other-than-human beings:

The more deeply we penetrate the world view of the Ojibwa the more apparent it is that “social relations” between human beings (änícinábek) and other-than-human “persons” are of cardinal significance. These relations are correlative with their more comprehensive categorization of “persons.” Recognitions must be given to the culturally constituted meaning of “social” and “social relations” if we are to understand the nature of this Ojibwa world and the living entities in it. (Hallowell 2010, 538)

The Blackfoot, similarly, recognize the importance of social relationships among human beings and other-than-human beings. An understanding and acceptance of this world view is a necessary prerequisite for appreciating the nature of sacred material, as well as the meaning and importance that this material has for the Blackfoot people. Yet this perspective is so different from a Eurocentric world view that many museum professionals have had difficulty

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accepting it and, consequently, have failed to fully appreciate the significance of sacred bundles. The following is an introduction to the world as it is understood by the Blackfoot.

Within the Blackfoot world, Ihtsipaitapiyopa is the Essence of All Life. More abstract and ethereal than the Christian concept of God, Ihtsipaitapiyopa is the source of everything, and, therefore, everything shares a connection and a relationship. For the Blackfoot, these connections extend well beyond the earth. Sspommitapiiksi, the Above People, live in the sky. The Blackfoot know them as Naatosi (the Sun, our father), Ko’komiki’somm (the Moon, our mother), Iipisowaahs (Morning Star, their son), Ksiistsikomm (Thunder), who share the sky with the other beings who dwell there, such as high-flying including birds and what we in the West call the stars and planets. Ksaahkommitapiiksi, the Earth People, include plants, animals, and rocks. Many of these were once important sources of food and material for clothing and shelter; others, such as wolves, helped human beings learn how to hunt and taught them the importance of living together in clans and of helping one another. Soyiitapiiksi are the Water People. Some live in the water and others, such as Aimmoniisi (Otter) and Ksisskstaki (Beaver), move easily between the land and the water.

Long ago, Sspommitapiiksi, Ksaahkommitapiiksi, and Soyiitapiiksi helped Niitsitapi (the Real People, or human beings) to live in this part of the world. Ancient stories tell of times when people were starving, were threatened, or had encountered other hardships. In each instance, they were helped by an other-than-human being, who left behind a special gift that humans could use to ask for help. These gifts include medicine pipes, iiniskim (buffalo stones), entire collections of skins and other material representing many animals, and the headdresses, rattles, staffs, and regalia of the sacred societies. During annual ceremonies, people use these bundles to call on the other-than-human beings to help them to create change so that their lives will be revitalized. Sometimes, an individual who needs special help will vow to dance with part of a bundle or even assume the responsibility of caring for one.

So far, I have used the words “sacred object” and “bundle” to describe the physical objects that are used in ceremonies. Indeed, both Alberta’s First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCORA) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), in the United States, focus on the word “object” when defining those things that are subject
to repatriation. Yet the terms “object” and “bundle” are insufficient: they fail to capture the true essence of these “items.” By emphasizing the materiality of the sacred, such words lead to the objectification of these materials and, ultimately, to their commodification in a Western context. Considering sacred materials only, or even primarily, as objects facilitates an analysis that can ensure their redefinition outside of the sacred Blackfoot context and within the realm of global capitalism. This redefinition, in turn, allows us to understand the commodification as merely another phase in their life cycles (Godelier 1999; Kopytoff 1986) and so lets us deal with sacred materials as we would any object in our collections. This mode of analysis privileges a Western perspective, rather than Blackfoot traditional knowledge, and has sometimes become a source of tension during repatriation negotiations.

When I first began learning about Blackfoot sacred “objects,” I was always instructed to regard them as powerful living beings. I was told to care for them as one does for a child, carrying them with care and speaking to them kindly. They are powerful, I was told, and this power could manifest itself in either good or malevolent ways. I was advised that if I always approached them respectfully, they would do no harm and might even help me. Over the years, it has not been uncommon for Blackfoot people visiting the Glenbow’s collections to say that they can hear the bundles crying to go home. I do not believe that this is a clever metaphor; people really do hear them crying. It is an extraordinary experience.

A suitable analogy for the sacred beings that are kept in museums may be that of the First Nations children who were removed from their homes and confined to residential schools. They were no longer exposed to their Native languages and were, in fact, forbidden to speak anything other than English. Their world could now only be framed in terms that reflected a Western world view. In addition, the children were isolated from their families and from the people who would reinforce their identity as Aboriginal people. Instead, school staff tried to instill Western values, a Western world view, and a Christian belief system. This policy of assimilation had mixed results. Some children retained a strong Aboriginal cultural identity, while others followed the new ways. Most, unfortunately, ended up without a firm place in either culture.

The sacred beings that are kept in museums have faced similar efforts to transform them. Regarded as “objects,” many of them have been studied by academics who have had little knowledge or regard for the protocols associated
with handling them. The manner in which they have been stored has reinforced their objectification and has usually denied their status as living beings. But just as residential school failed to assimilate all of the students, museums have not succeeded in transforming bundles from living beings into objects and commodities. While residing in museums, they may become dormant, but they do not lose their energy or become inert. An understanding of this is fundamental to the recognition of Blackfoot (and other First Nations) rights to cultural autonomy. So far, the museum understanding of bundles as objects, whose status can change in accordance with circumstances, has prevailed. Consequently, Blackfoot people who become involved with repatriation once more find that they must follow the prerogatives that have been developed for objects and that may not be appropriate for the care of living beings. For many, this is an uncomfortable compromise, one that reinforces their neocolonial relationship with society’s bureaucracies. Nevertheless, it is a compromise that they feel they must make in order to bring the bundles home.

Changes and Challenges

The Niitsitapi have faced innumerable changes to their political, social, economic, and spiritual life over the past three centuries. Some of these changes were slow and incremental; others were like a tsunami. Some changes were beneficial; others destroyed individuals and families and threatened the entire culture. Among these changes were shifts in the traditional treaty-making processes and protocols and, indeed, in the very meaning of treaty itself. These agreements became ways of negotiating for territory rather than ways of agreeing to live together in harmony. Alcohol and disease changed both the social structure and the economic focus of Blackfoot society. Some people may have lost their belief in the importance of maintaining the special relationship with the other-than-human beings that had characterized Niitsitapi culture and beliefs. The education system that was imposed by government and administered by religious organizations attacked the identity of people as First Nations and tried to destroy the traditional understanding of the place of human beings in the world. A more detailed look at each of these will illustrate how these processes contributed to the alienation of sacred bundles from their homes.
Trade. At first, the Niitsitapi controlled access to their homeland and ensured that encounters with other people adhered to Blackfoot protocol. Over time, this authority was eroded, and Euro-Canadians took control of the land and resources. While the Niitsitapi were staunch defenders of their territory, they did not live in complete isolation from neighbouring nations. For thousands of years, they traded with their neighbours. For example, obsidian, a volcanic glass used to make sharp-edged tools, came from the Yellowstone area of present-day Wyoming. The source of Knife River flint—another type of stone used to make knives, scrapers, and projectile points—lies close to old Numakiki, Sahnish, and Minitari villages in present-day North Dakota. Dentalium shells from the Pacific coast and unsmelted copper from the Lake Superior region were made into personal ornaments. None of these was necessary, nor were any of the myriad of other materials that were traded. Suitable stone occurs locally, and ornaments can be regarded more as a status symbol than a necessity. Instead, each trading episode represented a ceremonial treaty making between the Blackfoot and people from other nations that involved smoking a pipe together and exchanging gifts. The shared smoke brought the Creator as witness to the vows of cooperation and goodwill. Materials were exchanged, not as commodities, but as gifts that signified that the individuals regarded each other as relatives who would avoid conflicts and who would help one another in times of hardship.

The non-Natives who arrived to trade recognized that treaty making was a vital prerequisite of concluding any business:

One way the [Hudson’s Bay] company’s traders fulfilled the orders of the governor and committee to use the religion or custom of the country for the company’s advantage was by participating in the First Nations diplomatic customs. All Indian nations had well-developed diplomatic/political traditions for reaching peace and other accords with outsiders. It was a widespread practice in the territory of present-day Canada to cement treaties with the smoking of the calumet, an exchange of gifts that symbolized goodwill, and through arranged marriages. The latter served to extend kinship bonds and the mutual obligations associated therewith to strangers. Bringing outsiders into the fold in this way was especially important when First Nations wanted to establish long-term relations with each other. . . .
In short, the HBC acknowledged Aboriginal peoples’ possession of the territory of Rupertsland and the need to obtain their consent to occupy trading sites within it. Likewise, the company appreciated the need to obtain this consent by taking part in Aboriginal diplomatic and religious ceremonial practices. (Ray et al. 2000, 5)

During the gift exchange, important leaders from each side were often given special articles of clothing. For example, when the Hudson’s Bay Company governor George Simpson met the Blackfoot at Fort Edmonton in 1841, he was given five hide shirts. Four were ceremonial, decorated with human hair, painted figures, and special motifs of porcupine quillwork (Brown et al. 2010). Shirts such as these were usually transferred through ceremony from one Blackfoot man to another. The British traders did not record why these were given to them or whether there was a ceremonial transfer. Unfortunately, there is no Blackfoot oral tradition about the exchange that might help us understand the circumstances under which it took place. Clearly, the Blackfoot who presented these gifts were intent on establishing a very special relationship with Simpson, albeit one that seems to have been neither understood nor appreciated by the visitor. But this was not an isolated instance. Artists such as George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and Paul Kane collected items, both as purchases and as gifts, that they used as reference specimens in their studios in eastern North America and Europe. When the Earl of Southesk travelled through western North America, he, too, was given articles of clothing by Niitsitapi people, which he seems to have regarded as souvenirs. Again, there are no Blackfoot oral traditions that recall why these gifts were offered, and Southesk’s own account lacks the understanding of Blackfoot culture that would provide us with much insight.

The bartering that characterized the exchange of pelts, hides, and provisions for trade goods was driven on the European side by profit, a motivation that had been missing from First Nations exchanges. Animals that had once been regarded as gifts for survival now became commodities in a mercantile exchange system. How did the Niitsitapi recognize or understand this commodification? Certainly, the European traders had a Western perspective on the use of animals that was quite different from that of Aboriginal peoples. But perhaps the Niitsitapi felt that the gifts of the other-than-human beings had been made to sustain life, and the presence of Euro-Canadian traders meant that the
ways of making a livelihood had changed. Some scholars, speculating about the
effects of the commercial fur trade on relationships between human and other-
than-human beings, emphasize the complexity of these connections and the
far-reaching implications of the fur trade (Brightman 2002; Martin 1978). They
also reveal how difficult it is to understand, or even discuss, these relationships
outside of the Aboriginal cultural context and language. It is clear, however, that
the Niitsitapi world began to change with the arrival of the fur trade.

Many of the new items brought by the traders enhanced the lives of the
Niitsitapi. Steel blades made butchering and hide scraping much easier. Metal
pots meant that food could be boiled as well as roasted or dried. Metal arrow-
heads were thinner than ones made of stone and penetrated animals more
easily. Firearms made hunting easier and provided a great advantage over more
meagrely armed opponents. Wool and cotton cloth, glass beads, and commer-
cial paint enhanced the Niitsitapi artistic palette, adding vibrant colours and
enabling artists to explore new designs (fig. 6).

Initially, alcohol was introduced to First Nations by European traders as
part of an exchange of gifts between Aboriginal leaders and fur trade officials.
The reports of Hudson’s Bay Company officials to the company governors and
politicians in Great Britain emphasize the controlled distribution of spirits and
the great effort that was made to ensure that the substance was not abused. The
more informal diaries, however, often record drunkenness in the Aboriginal
camps and a prevailing fear on the part of HBC employees of being attacked
when people became inebriated and obstreperous. By the late 1860s, the
Blackfoot had shifted their trade from the Hudson’s Bay Company on the North
Saskatchewan River to the American traders who travelled overland from the
Missouri River in present-day Montana. The focus of the trade moved from
pelts to bison robes and hides. Since it was illegal to sell alcohol to First Nations
in the United States, it was freighted north and became such an important
part of the trade that the venture became known as the “whisky trade.” The
raw alcohol was frequently doctored with everything from gunpowder, chilis,
pepper, and other spices to strychnine. Those who did not die from poisoning
became addicted. The traditional spiritual protocols, decision-making pro-
cesses, and ways of peacekeeping and peacemaking that required everyone to
care for each other began to fail. Blackfoot society became more fractious as
intratribal and even intrafamilial violence grew.
Figure 6. Naomi Little Walker (Siksika), with glass beads, harness leather, and metal tacks enhancing the artistry of her attire. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA-1773-28).
Disease. The disastrous effects of alcohol compounded relentless epidemics of smallpox, measles, whooping cough, and other diseases introduced by Europeans. While we do not know for certain when the first outbreak reached the northwestern plains, Blackfoot winter counts give us a good picture of the frequency with which the diseases swept through the population. Winter counts are collections of pictographic signs representing the important events of each year. Keepers of the Beaver Bundle kept track of the days, months, moons, stars, and so on for spiritual and practical purposes. This led to the winter counts that record the long-term history. In the early years of the twentieth century, Bull Plume, a Piikani, transcribed one such record into an accounting ledger provided by the Indian Agent (Raczka 1979). Disease is a recurrent theme in this winter count (fig. 7), with a significant epidemic recorded about every twenty to thirty years.

Research on epidemics indicates that these waves of disease do not impact all members of a population in the same way (Thornton et al. 1991; see table 1). The highest mortality rate, unsurprisingly, is found in the oldest segment of the population, those over fifty years of age. While we might expect the high death rate (40 percent) among the very young, it is notable that the death rates among those in their thirties and forties were at least as high (40 percent and 50 percent, respectively). The potential for population growth would be reduced by the loss of the youngest age group, while the death rate among the oldest took away the teachers and the keepers of the oral traditions. The significant death rate among those in their twenties and thirties may have further narrowed the knowledge base by reducing the number of people who would be learning from the Elders and becoming ceremonial bundle keepers in their own right.

Comparisons of Blackfoot age-grade societies recorded by various European and American visitors (table 2), as well as those specific to the Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika (table 3), indicate that not every society was present in each group all of the time. While this may reflect cultural differences, it may also reflect population loss that precipitated adjustments to the composition of sacred societies. In some cases, a society became extinct. In other instances, the bundles from two or more societies were brought together so that there would be a critical number of people who had the right kinds of bundles in their care to enable the ceremonies of the societies to be carried on.
The timing of epidemics is also a crucial factor in determining the survival rates for all age categories. The longer the periods between contact with a disease, the more severe will be the impact. Those generations who were not exposed to the virus in their youth may have grown to middle and old age, at which time they would have been particularly vulnerable to new disease vectors. Thornton et al. (1991) suggest that two smallpox epidemics that occur thirty years apart can reduce a population by half. Bull Plume’s winter count reveals that some diseases were spaced at just such a crucial interval, making their impact even more disastrous (Raczka 1979; see table 4). In addition, the variety of diseases that swept through Niitsitapi camps struck a population whose resistance was already weakened.
Table 1. Mortality rate from smallpox.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Mortality rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–4 years</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9 years</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–14 years</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19 years</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29 years</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39 years</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49 years</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+ years</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from Thornton et al. (1991)

Table 2. Blackfoot age-grade societies recorded by various early non-Native visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maximilian</th>
<th>Uhlenbeck</th>
<th>Grinnell</th>
<th>Curtis</th>
<th>McClintock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>Little Birds</td>
<td></td>
<td>Doves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Doves</td>
<td>Pigeons</td>
<td>Doves</td>
<td>Doves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit Foxes</td>
<td>Flies</td>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
<td>Flies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
<td>Braves</td>
<td>Braves</td>
<td>Braves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin-Horned Buffalo</td>
<td>Brave/ Crazy Dogs</td>
<td>All Crazy Dogs</td>
<td>All Brave Dogs</td>
<td>Mad Dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers</td>
<td>Tails</td>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
<td>Tails</td>
<td>Brave Dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crow Carriers</td>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Tails</td>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Bulls</td>
<td>Bulls (extinct)</td>
<td>Horns (Kainai)</td>
<td>Kit Foxes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catcher (Soldiers) (extinct)</td>
<td>Kit Foxes (Piikani)</td>
<td>Catchers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kit Foxes (extinct)</td>
<td>Catchers, Soldiers, Bulls</td>
<td>Bulls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: For Maximilian, see Witte and Gallagher (2010, 437–438); Uhlenbeck (1912); Grinnell (1892); Curtis (1970 [1911]); McClintock (1999 [1910]). The German explorer, ethnologist, and naturalist Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian of Wied travelled in North America in 1832–34.
TABLE 3. Niitsitapi age-grade societies (1912)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piikani</th>
<th>Kainai</th>
<th>Sikiska</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pigeons</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
<td>Mosquitoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>Bees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>Prairie-chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>Crows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braves</td>
<td>All Brave Dogs</td>
<td>All Brave Dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>Bad Horns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Brave Dogs</td>
<td>Braves</td>
<td>Black Soldiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Tails</td>
<td>Black Soldiers</td>
<td>Braves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
<td>Raven Bearers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit Foxes</td>
<td>Horns</td>
<td>Horns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catchers</td>
<td>Catchers</td>
<td>Catchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulls</td>
<td>Bulls</td>
<td>Bulls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>no equivalent</td>
<td>Kit Foxes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data from Wissler (1912).

TABLE 4. Epidemics recorded in Bull Plume’s winter count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Disease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1764</td>
<td>big smallpox scare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780</td>
<td>cough disease (measles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>year of smallpox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>smallpox (probably measles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>smallpox (little)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>year of disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>when children died with measles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Disease also had indirect effects on Niitsitapi society. First, the great psychological impact on surviving individuals incurred by the loss of spouses and close family members cannot be underestimated. In addition, as gender ratios became unequal and fertility levels dropped, family associations and clans were reorganized. Some clans disappeared and others merged. When the fur trader and explorer David Thompson wintered among the Piikani in southwestern Alberta in 1787–1788, he spent many hours with the Elder Saukamappee, who had probably been born in the early 1700s. The old man recounted much about tribal history and culture, including how the Piikani reacted to the demographic changes brought about by the epidemics:

A War Tent was made and the Chiefs and Warriors assembled; the red pipes were filled with Tobacco, but before being lighted an old Chief arose, and beckoning to the Man who had the fire to keep back, addressed us, saying, “I am an old man, my hair is white and have seen much: formerly we were healthy and strong and many of us, now we are few to what we were, and the great sickness may come again. . . . Now we must revenge the death of our people and make the Snake Indians feel the effects of our guns, and other weapons; but the young women must all be saved, and if any has a babe at the breast, it must not be taken from her, nor hurt; all the Boys and Lads that have no weapons must not be killed; but brought to our camps, and be adopted amongst us, to be of our people, and make us more numerous and stronger than we are.” (Thompson 2009, 297)

The social disorganization caused by these epidemics was far-reaching. The deaths of both the hunters and the ceremonial leaders increased the challenge of providing food and protecting the camp. While the young men may have done the actual hunting, it was the prayers of the old people that reminded the other-than-human beings of their connections with the Niitsitapi and that brought success. The general mortality rate may have increased due to food shortages. Once more, Saukamappee describes the situation: “War was no longer thought of, and we had enough to do to hunt and make provisions for our families, for in our sickness we had consumed all our dried provisions; but the Bisons and Red Deer were also gone, we did not see one half of what was before” (quoted in Thompson 2009, 296).
By the late 1800s, Niitsitapi life had changed forever. The impacts of disease and alcohol, compounded by the growing scarcity of game, threatened the social fabric. For some, the spiritual connections with the rest of Creation were beginning to break.

Treaty 7. The pressure of a growing population of Euro-Americans and Euro-Canadians was, perhaps, even more catastrophic for the Niitsitapi than were the impacts of trade goods and disease. The timing and the effects of migrations westward were different in the United States than they were in Canada. While the emphasis in this book is on the Niitsitapi and their sacred bundles in Canada, their history in America has an important bearing on this discussion. Niitsitapi in present-day Alberta are closely related to those in present-day Montana and regard the international border as an artificial barrier that separates families. In addition, the “Indian” policies of the two countries influenced one another. A brief review of American events helps contextualize the processes that occurred north of the border.

In the decade from 1840 to 1849, the number of Euro-American migrants crossing the continent in wagon trains from St. Louis to San Francisco increased tenfold. Many others chose not to complete the trip, and those who settled on the plains displaced the American Indians living there, who, in turn, found themselves moving into the territories of other tribes. The conflicts both among individual tribes and between American Indians and the newcomers were an impediment to the development of local resources (farming, ranching, lumber mills, mining) and the construction of transcontinental railways. One solution, preferred by US Army General Phillip Sheridan, was to “let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo are exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilization to advance” (quoted in Brown 1971, 254). Once this animal that was so vital to the livelihood of Indian peoples was gone, Sheridan reasoned, it would be easy to confine them to reservations, where they would either assimilate into mainstream society or die out.

Along with the bison-extinction initiative, the government negotiated treaties with the American Indian groups on the plains. Most notable for the Niitsitapi was the Lame Bull Treaty of 1855. Named for one of the Niitsitapi leaders, it was made between the Niitsitapi, Flathead, Pend d’Oreilles, and Nimíipuú (Nez Perce) nations and set aside large tracts of territory for each in which they
could continue to pursue their traditional lifestyles. However, the treaty did not stem the tide of settlers, and as more newcomers came west, these territories were reduced, usually through presidential decree and with no meaningful consultation with the American Indian groups who were affected.

North of the 49th parallel, the government had been generally unconcerned about the Indigenous peoples living on the plains. In 1670, King Charles II had granted the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) exclusive trading rights in all of the territory that drained into Hudson Bay. Any disputes among the various trading companies that entered the area, or between the companies and the First Nations, were of little concern to either the British Parliament or the colonial government in Canada. Only after they acquired the territory from the HBC in 1870 did the newly created Dominion of Canada feel some urgency to establish ownership of the region. The rapidly increasing westward migration of American settlers that threatened to spill over into the “unoccupied” territories of western Canada was supported by the US policy of manifest destiny, which supposedly justified the annexation of as much of the continent as possible. While it was clear that Canadian settlement of the region was imperative, the government understood that it needed to acquire legal title to the land as a precursor to the arrival of Euro-Canadian immigrants. Just as the Hudson’s Bay Company had made treaty before constructing trading posts, the government began negotiating treaties with the First Nations of the prairies and parklands.

We have seen how treaty making was an integral part of Niitsitapi culture. Trading exchanges with neighbouring nations was a form of treaty, and fur traders had sought permission to enter Niitsitapi territory through a treaty negotiation. The Niitsitapi had also entered into the Fort Laramie and Lame Bull treaties with the US government. They had experienced the devastation of repeated epidemics and were watching the bison become extinct. Their leaders, who were aware of the large numbers of immigrants who would soon be moving into their territory, believed that the negotiation of treaties was the only possibility to prepare for a new way of life. They came together at the Hand Hills the year before the Canadian treaty party arrived and agreed that they would make treaty but would also make four demands of the government. First, they wanted help in finding a new way of life in a changing world. Second, they wanted medical aid. Third, they wanted efforts made to protect the bison and restore the herds to their former numbers. Fourth, they wanted all other Native
peoples to be removed from Niitsitapi territory so that there once again would be enough resources for their own people (Walter Hildebrandt, pers. comm., 1995; Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council et al. 1996).

When Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney entered into negotiations for Treaty 7, he made it clear that the assistance provided by the government was intended to help the First Nations adjust to a new way of life. Everyone recognized that bison would soon be gone and that a new economic base would have to be found. Accordingly, in setting out the terms of the treaty, Treaty Commissioner David Laird made certain promises, which Hugh Dempsey (1987, 16) summarizes as follows:

When the Indians were settled, the government would provide two cows for every family of five persons or less, three cows for families with five to nine persons, and four cows to families of ten and over, as well as one bull for each chief and councillor. If a family wished to farm besides raising cattle, it would reduce its cattle allotment by one cow and receive instead two hoes, one spade, one scythe, and two hay forks. Three such families could collectively receive also a plough and harrow, with enough potatoes, barley, oats, and wheat to plant the broken land.

In return, the First Nations would “cede, release, surrender and yield up to the Government of Canada” all rights, titles, and privileges to their traditional territories (fig. 8).

Reserves. When Treaty 7 was made on 22 September 1877, it was easy to imagine a smooth, gradual transition from a reliance on bison and a mobile lifestyle to a settled agricultural means of existence. But by 1879, there were no bison left on the Canadian prairies, and the government was encouraging Siksika to travel to the Judith Basin in central Montana, where one last herd remained. That summer, First Nations from across the northwestern plains converged on the area in a desperate search for food. Sheridan’s policy had borne fruit: by the time autumn arrived, the First Nations had returned, starving, to the reserves and reservations that had been set aside for them in the treaties. There, they were expected to adjust to a new economic, political, and social order. Guiding these changes were the policies of the Canadian and American governments.
Figure 8. Niitsitapi reserves and reservations following treaties with Canada and the United States, 1855 to 1910. Courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.

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The following discussion focuses on the developing relationship between the Government of Canada and the Kainai, Siksika, and Apatohsipiikani nations, with less emphasis on Ammskaapipiikani, for two reasons. First, although Ammskaapipiikani are regarded by Niitsitapi in Canada as close relatives who have been separated by an artificial and arbitrary border, that boundary made a significant difference in recent historical developments. While the United States and Canada did not formally coordinate their “Indian” policies, they did have the common goal of eliminating the expense of maintaining First Nations people and, ultimately, of assimilating the Aboriginal population into the dominant society. Moreover, as Samek (1987) recounts, the two governments had joint discussions about the “Indian problem” and often borrowed ideas from each other as they developed and refined their policies. Even so, the comprehensive examinations of Ammskaapipiikani in Montana offered by Farr (1984), Samek (1987), and Rosier (2001) highlight how some American policies—concerning land allotment, the political organization of the reservation, and even the fundamental relationship of the federal government to Aboriginal peoples (see Thomas [2000] for a more general discussion of these issues)—created a very different social, political, and economic situation south of the border. This environment, in turn, affected the circumstances under which bundles were sold to museums and private collectors and the reasons underlying their sale. Second, the stories recounted in this book concern sacred bundles that have returned to southern Alberta. In order to understand why they left in the first place, it is necessary to examine the particular circumstances of reserve life in southern Alberta throughout much of the twentieth century.

Neither the Niitsitapi nor the government were satisfied with the way events unfolded in the years after the making of the treaty. The Niitsitapi were undergoing extensive culture shock as they struggled to exist and find a new way of life. Their freedoms were rapidly curtailed as the government began to control all aspects of their lives. Indian Agents were appointed to oversee all of their affairs, while other officials looked after the distribution of rations, instruction in farming and ranching techniques, management of land and animals, medical aid, education, and law enforcement. After 1885, Aboriginal people could not even leave the reserve without a pass issued by the Agent. These passes were usually valid for only three days. By 1905,
legislation was passed that prohibited Aboriginal people from buying or selling livestock—and, eventually, anything—without written permission of the Indian Agent. They could not even slaughter their own animals for food without his permission. Failure to comply with the new rules led to punitive treatment by the Agent: rations could be reduced, tools withheld, or jail sentences imposed.

Although the government had committed, through treaty, to supply provisions to the First Nations, the expense of providing food quickly became a focus of bureaucratic and political complaints. At the same time, these rations became the only means of survival for Niitsitapi (fig. 9), although the quantity was usually inadequate and the meat and flour was often so rotten and disease ridden that people died after consuming it. Despite the terms of the treaties, the government seems not to have been expecting to assume the responsibility for providing food for the First Nations. Annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs contained in the Sessional Papers of the House of Commons (especially for the period from 1909 to 1921) lament the cost of supplying food to the people on reserves, and bureaucrats continually promised to reduce the expenditures.

In 1901, J. A. Markle, the Indian Agent at Siksika, explained to James Wilson, the Blood Tribe Indian Agent, that according to department regulations, people who raised cattle were ineligible for rations. Markle recognized that this contradicted First Nations’ understanding of the treaty: “I don’t know how to get over the Treaty obligations, the Indians claim them as their own also, and you know the trouble this is sure to make. Possibly the return of cattle that go into the ration house can be construed to ‘cover treaty obligations.’” Still, the government could unilaterally reduce rations, since “that’s law too, and the kind your Mr. Indian won’t like” (Markle 1901). This opinion was reinforced in 1903, when James McKenna, the assistant Indian commissioner, wrote to Wilson that “there is no obligation on the Government of Canada to feed them” and that the government “does not purpose [sic] continuing indefinitely to feed Indians who are quite able to provide for themselves after they have been given reasonable assistance” (McKenna 1903). Officials believed that it was imperative for First Nations to learn agricultural techniques and to become self-sufficient farmers and ranchers. To the Blackfoot, this was more than a question of learning new skills. It meant
developing a new kind of relationship with everything around them—with Sspomitapiiksi, the Above People; Ksahkomitapiiksi, the Earth People; and Sooyiitapiiksi, the Water People.

Government officials did not understand the magnitude of the change they were demanding and continually expressed frustration at the length of time it was taking for these people to change their way of life from hunters to farmers. The government believed that education was the only solution: not only would it teach people agricultural techniques, but it would also be an avenue
for assimilation, resulting in a reduction in the expense needed to support the
people (fig. 10). Government officials saw farming, ranching, and a Christian
world view working hand-in-hand to undermine traditional knowledge and
spiritual practices, in which they found no moral value. Traditional spiritual
practices were, moreover, often lengthy and usually involved an investment of
wealth, as food was prepared for all who attended ceremonies and gifts were
distributed to honour guests.

The annual summer gathering, or Aako’ka’tssin (fig. 11), was especially
troubling. Traditionally, at this time of year, all of the people, groups of whom
had wintered elsewhere, reassembled in a large camp to socialize and to
participate in the ceremonies of the sacred societies. The ceremonies of each
society lasted for four days and followed a specific sequence. There could also
be several days between the ceremonies during which little seemed to happen.
When an honourable woman made a vow to be the Holy Woman, another
four-day ceremony, called an O’kaan, would occur. Government officials saw
these ceremonies not only as a waste of material resources but as a diversion
from more productive economic activities. After all, Aako’ka’tssin could draw

Figure 10. Piikani men harvesting hay near Brocket, Alberta, ca. 1892. Courtesy of the
Glenbow Archives (NA-4461-4).
large numbers of people together for several weeks in the middle of summer—a time when the men should be cutting hay, managing their crops, or tending cattle. Overt and covert pressure was applied to stop the ceremonies. Those who kept to their traditions frequently found that their food rations were reduced and that they were denied permission to sell or slaughter their livestock to feed their families. Opportunities for employment with neighbouring ranchers were most often given to those who had abandoned their traditional beliefs.

Officials considered the land that was not being grazed or cultivated to be a wasted economic resource whose sale would create substantial trust funds to offset the reserves’ expenses. The Kainai successfully resisted the pressure to sell their land, but, in 1912, a substantial part of the Siksika Reserve was sold:

During the month of June, last, the Indians surrendered about 125,000 acres of their reserve. This area has since been subdivided and action taken to place it on the market for sale at public auction on the 14th of next month. The Indians agreed to the surrender referred to on the condition that $400,000 of the proceeds of the sale is to be expended for their use and benefits and the remainder of the proceeds of the sale is to be funded and the interested accruing thereon also be expended for their benefit and for the advantage of their successors. The outcome of this deal will be, I think, that these Indians and their successors will soon have a sufficient income of their own to meet all their wants and that they will then be no longer an expense on the government outside of what is guaranteed to them by the treaty, i.e., a cash annual annuity of $5 per head. (Markle 1912, 187)

This land sale was not without controversy (Hanks and Hanks 1950). Land could not legally be alienated without the approval of all adults through a vote. After the Siksika rejected the initial referendum on the proposed sale, Markle arranged for a number of subsequent votes to be held, until a majority agreed to the sale. Oral tradition, passed down from people who were alive at the time of the voting to Siksika who are currently living, indicates that the voting procedures may have been irregular and that the final result did not reflect the sentiment of the majority of Siksika.
Figure 11. An Aako’ka’tsin, or midsummer gathering, held by Ammskaapiiikani near Browning, Montana, 1900. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA-1700-11).
By 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, could report:

Nearly half a century ago the aboriginal title to the vast areas east of the Rocky mountains was extinguished by treaties; annual gifts of cash, special reserved lands, assistance in agriculture and education were promised by the Government. For a time the plains Indians had to be fed, owing to the disappearance of the buffalo, but gradually stock-raising and agriculture were introduced, and now hardly a pound of gratuitous food is issued. (Scott 1921, 9)

If, as seemed the case, it was difficult to persuade adults to give up their traditional beliefs, then attention would have to be focused on the children. Schools were established on the reserves to provide the rudiments of literacy, housekeeping, and trades skills (fig. 12). Run by missionaries, they also became a place where Christianity was inculcated, often accompanied by the physical and psychological abuse of any students who resisted conversion. These changes and pressures resulted in reserves that were complex communities of people with diverse economic status, spiritual beliefs, and levels of education, who also differed in the degree to which they had assimilated aspects of the dominant society. In documenting early-twentieth-century developments among Ammskaapipiikani, Rosier (2001) illustrates the mosaic-like nature of the reservations that developed in the United States and the political tensions that ensued. Some of the people held on to traditional beliefs and resisted new economic measures. Others integrated the two, and still others rejected everything that could be called “traditional.” In his biography of James Gladstone, Dempsey (1986) demonstrates how similar patterns emerged in Canada, where some successful farmers and ranchers often supported sacred societies at Aako’ka’tssin without actually becoming members. He also observes that some of the men who became successful ranchers and farmers were careful to retain the cultural values that emphasized the importance of sharing with those who were less fortunate.

Two cultural changes, in particular, proved to be especially important, in that they contributed directly to an atmosphere in which the sale of sacred items became acceptable to at least some individuals. First, attitudes toward
property changed as people were pressured initially to grow their own food and raise cattle for their own use and then to harvest a surplus for commercial sale. Traditional attitudes that placed value on communal sharing were replaced by an acceptance of the private ownership of resources. Ultimately, resources that had once been regarded as animate—as beings who had been given to all of the Blackfoot people but were cared for by individual families—were commoditized. For many, the sacred bundles that connect humans with other-than-human beings no longer held meaning, except as commodities. This process was exacerbated by the dire economic and political circumstances that kept families isolated on their plots of land, where they could not meet together to reinforce their traditional ways. In some instances, the shortage of food meant that selling a bundle was the only way to survive.

Figure 12. Boys at the Anglican mission on the Siksika Reserve, ca. 1890s. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA-3322-7).
In the early twentieth century, it was the hope of the government bureaucracy that Niitsitapi culture would disappear forever. In light of this possibility, a second change emerged that resulted in the removal of sacred items from their Aboriginal context: the undertaking of “salvage ethnography” by anthropologists such as Clark Wissler, from the American Museum of Natural History, and the Dutch linguist C. C. Uhlenbeck. Others who were interested in Niitsitapi culture—such as Walter McClintock, the naturalist George Bird Grinnell, the photographer Edward Curtis, and James Willard Schultz, who had married a Niitsitapi woman—also spent time on the reserves recording traditional stories and practices as described by old men and women who had witnessed the changes of the past fifty years. At the same time, Charles M. Russell and other artists were creating works that depicted an imagined West that had largely disappeared.

These were very difficult years for the Niitsitapi as they struggled with the authority of the government agents and tried to adjust to a new way of life. Some of the White visitors did write letters to the authorities and to the public, asking that help be sent to the Niitsitapi (see, for example, McClintock 1930; Schultz 1921). The conditions described in these petitions stand in stark contrast to the photographs, paintings, sculptures, and writings that these same men created. In addition, even as they portrayed Niitsitapi ceremonies, they made no comment on government efforts to suppress these practices.

During this period of salvage ethnography, many items of material culture were collected. Everything from hide clothing to sacred bundles was gathered up for museum collections, where these items could be preserved for posterity. The artists collected specimens for their studios. In addition, people who dealt in antiquities appeared on reserves with the intent of purchasing items that commemorated a vanishing way of life. Euro-Americans have always harboured contradictory attitudes toward First Nations. On the one hand, they have been eager to acquire their land, suppress their traditional culture, and encourage them to assimilate into mainstream society. On the other hand, First Nations were, and are, an integral part of society’s nostalgia for a romanticized past. The sacred material, clothing, and other items that were purchased from Niitsitapi and then sold to other individuals served to reinforce this nostalgia. Some of this material eventually found its way to museums, where it contributed to a romantic image of the nation’s past, one that further marginalized First Nations within contemporary society. The money paid for these items helped Niitsitapi...
to buy food and clothing for their families. Meanwhile, Blackfoot material was dispersed across North America and Europe.

In Canada, the Niitsitapi remained under strict government control as wards and non-citizens for nearly one hundred years. In 1965, they were allowed to vote in federal elections for the first time. In 1966, they were allowed to purchase alcohol like any other Canadian of legal age. While alcohol had always been available surreptitiously, it was no longer illegal merely to possess it. Before long, however, it became a significant social problem, in many ways achieving what proselytizing had not. Some people who were still following their traditional beliefs began to conclude that a new social order was emerging, one in which traditional values and protocols had no place. As practitioners of the traditional ceremonies became fewer in number, some Niitsitapi felt that it would be better if their bundles were sent to museums, where they could be kept safe until interest in the traditional practices revived. Others felt that their bundles had lost their life, their usefulness, as ceremonies became less frequent. Anything they sold to a museum would at least provide some money for food and clothing. Sometimes, sacred items were taken illicitly and sold, thefts that were rarely reported to the officials. The long-standing negative attitude of the Indian Agent, the police, missionaries, and others had taught people the futility of asking for assistance. Today, when people find family items in museum collections, it is not uncommon for them to recall individuals who were known to steal things from aged relatives and sell them to collectors. These comments are nonjudgmental and are made without acrimony, but they do call into question the right of museums to hold such material.

REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

In many respects, Blackfoot traditional spiritual practices reached a low point during the late 1960s. Fewer people were joining the sacred societies or attending ceremonies, and sacred bundles were continuing to be sold to museums and private collectors. The 1966 Aako’ka’tssin at Siksika was the last one held there until the Iitskinaiksi (Horn Society) and Maoto’kiiksi (Buffalo Women’s Society) were revived in the 1990s. The Apatohsipikani had not held an O’kaan for many decades, and their sacred societies were not active. Only one Thunder Medicine
Pipe Bundle remained on the reserve. The Kainai still held an Aako’ka’tssin each summer, but litskinaiks bundles had not transferred for decades, and the aging members of the society watched as interest in the ceremonies declined. This situation began to change in the early 1970s, first with the transfer of a litskinaiks bundle at Kainai in 1972 and then with an O’kaan at Apatohsipiikani in 1979. Both of these involved repatriation requests to the provincial government. It is tempting to link these to the Aboriginal political activism and cultural awareness that developed in reaction to Canadian federal policies or by the American Indian Movement occupations of Alcatraz (1969–1971) and Wounded Knee (1973). In fact, the leaders at Kainai and Piikani were concerned only for the survival of the ceremonies that defined them as a people and that helped them as individuals. These initiatives were met with distrust on the part of provincial officials.

After the litskinaiks society was revived at Kainai in 1972, the new members, with the leadership of Adam Delaney, brought a renewed vitality to the society. Adam wanted to begin bringing sacred material back home from what was then the Provincial Museum of Alberta. Unfortunately, events that had occurred just prior to this created an atmosphere of distrust among provincial officials. Adolf Hungry Wolf (1977, 363–364) relates how this episode developed:

Several summers ago the [Long Time Medicine Pipe] Bundle was brought to the Sun Dance Encampment [Aako’ka’tssin] and ceremonially opened. . . . Many Grey Horses came and brought his drums, which had originally belonged to the Bundle. He himself was one of the drummers for the ceremony. At the end of it he surprised everyone by announcing that he was taking the Bundle back to his own home and that he would shortly have it transferred to himself and his wife. . . . When [the provincial museum] learned of the affair they rushed down to see Many Grey Horses and used threats of law and order to frighten him into returning it. They told him that he would be allowed to have it for the annual ceremony, provided he sign many complicated legal papers first.

The following winter I had a vivid dream in which I saw the Long-Time Pipe being brought back home for good. I went to see Many Grey Horses and his wife, and told them about the dream. They offered to accept the dream and follow its directions. Accordingly, Siksikaki
and I joined the elderly couple for a trip to the Provincial Museum in Edmonton the following spring.

At the museum we were treated courteously. Permission was granted for Many Grey Horses and his wife to pray with the Bundle and to give thanks for the return of Thunder. . . . Dressed in moccasins and blankets, we made a colorful procession outdoors, where we could pray directly to the Spirits of Nature. We went around the museum building, stopping at each of the Four Sacred Directions to pray. . . . After the fourth stop Many Grey Horses and his wife took their Bundle directly to our car. We explained our purpose to the amazed museum officials, who made no effort to stop us. Shortly we were headed south, joyfully bringing the ancient Bundle back home.

As a result of this incident, during which the bundle was given some much-needed fresh air, the members of the Iitskinaiksi society found themselves in a difficult position when they tried to borrow bundles from the museum:

In the previous year Pete [Standing Alone] and some other Horn Society [Iitskinaiksi] members had gone to borrow some Horn Bundles for the Sun Dance. The Museum handed them over, and they were returned in the fall. When they went the next year for the same purpose, they had not heard of the airing incident. The Museum officials were not interested in talking to them because of the recent removal, and the Horns finally had to find the Minister in charge of cultural matters. There was a lengthy argument but finally the Horn Bundles were loaned out. Later, when they were through with them, Pete, as second in command of the Horns, made the decision to keep them, not knowing if they would be able to borrow them again. (Taylor 1989, 152)

It would be many years before the provincial museum began to openly return sacred material.

The Piikani began to revive the Kana’tsomitaiksi (Brave Dog Society), and in 1979, they prepared for their first O’kaan in many years. However, when Joe Crowshoe, who was to lead the O’kaan, asked to borrow sacred material from the museum, he was required to leave his Short Medicine Pipe Bundle as collateral.
for a Natoas bundle (needed for the O’kaan). He complied with this draconian stipulation, and a revitalized interest in other ceremonies at Piikani ensued, with commitment to traditional practices growing throughout the 1980s.

At the end of the decade, both Piikani and Kainai approached the provincial museum with requests for sacred material. A Piikani individual who had vowed to sponsor an O’kaan asked to borrow the Natoas bundle that had been used in 1979. The museum officials were reluctant to have the original one used in a ceremony and suggested that a replica be made and used in its place. After some deliberation, a Piikani ceremonial leader agreed to undertake this task. To the museum, it seemed to be a viable compromise, one that preserved the physical condition of the older piece, which could then be retained within a museum environment and used as a “reference” item. The new, sturdier bundle would reside in the community and be available for ceremonial use. Among the Piikani, however, there was some hesitation about accepting a new bundle that had no history of helping people through ceremonies.

Coincidentally, Dan Weasel Moccasin asked that a Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle be returned to Kainai. Perhaps the incidents that had occurred in the 1970s were still remembered by museum staff. Perhaps they suggested that the bundle could be replicated, something that Dan would have firmly rejected. In any event, the request was denied. Dan then approached the Glenbow Museum, and an agreement was made whereby the bundle could reside with the Weasel Moccasin family for a period of not more than four months in any calendar year. This process, which could be renewed annually for an indefinite period of time, kept the bundle tethered to the museum while enabling the Weasel Moccasin family to take it home in order to prepare for ceremonies. However, within a year, the loan agreement had been amended so that the bundle stayed with the family on a long-term loan.

This arrangement worked well, and before long the Glenbow had loaned a number of sacred items to Kainai and Piikani people. In addition, the Kainai had begun repatriation processes with museums outside of Alberta. In the summer of 1997, the Mookaakin Culture and Heritage Society asked to meet with the Glenbow’s president and the ethnology staff. The Mookaakin Society—a Kainai not-for-profit society formed to preserve and promote traditional culture—appreciated the Glenbow’s work and wanted to formalize a cooperative arrangement. Our first thought was to develop a co-management
agreement whereby we were jointly responsible for the care and interpretation of Kainai material in the museum and archival collections. The Glenbow’s collections, however, are owned by the people of Alberta, and when we notified the provincial government of our pending agreement, we were informed that it was not appropriate to develop a co-management agreement regarding provincial resources. Despite this objection, the Glenbow went ahead, believing that making an agreement with the Mookaakin Society was the right thing to do. The resulting memorandum of understanding (see appendix 2) outlines the Glenbow’s responsibilities, especially regarding repatriation of sacred material and Mookaakin Society’s duty to help with the care and interpretation of Kainai material. This agreement may have been a motivating factor that led provincial government officials to begin to formalize ways of organizing requests for the loan of sacred material. It has also served as a model for agreements with other researchers.

When a group at Siksika began the process of reviving the Iitskinaiksi society in 1996, they looked to the Glenbow and the provincial museums for the sacred bundles that are an integral part of the society’s ceremonies. These had been sold to the museums in the 1960s, at a time when it seemed that these traditions would be lost forever. Arrangements were made by both institutions to loan the bundles, and the first Aako’ka’tssin in over thirty years was held in 1996. These bundles have since been transferred to another group as the society has grown.

By 1998, the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai had, on loan, more than thirty sacred objects from the Glenbow Museum and the Provincial Museum of Alberta. Some of these had been ceremonially transferred several times, spreading knowledge and extending relationships. Glenbow staff had been taught how important these bundles are to entire communities. Earlier fears that the bundles would fall into disuse or be sold had been quelled, and the appropriateness of returning them was no longer challenged. Now the question became, Why should museums continue to be responsible for these bundles that were residing permanently in communities? In chapter 8, Jack Ives relates how the First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act was drafted, and, in chapter 9, Robert Janes details the lengthy process that convinced the Glenbow’s Board of Governors to agree that repatriation was an appropriate course of action.
Today, almost all of the Blackfoot sacred ceremonial materials at the Glenbow and at what is now the Royal Alberta Museum have been returned. Most of those that remain are personal items and would not be of use to other individuals. The bundles still housed in the museums can be transferred: it is simply a question of waiting for someone to come forward and take on the responsibility of caring for them.

NOTES

1 But see Conaty (2004).
2 As the reference to the Bow River suggests, the “Blackfeet” are evidently the Siksika (the Northern Blackfoot), rather than the Ammiskaapipiikani, to whom the term “Blackfeet” today refers. Indeed, in the transcription of Tearing Lodge’s account provided by Paul Raczk (2011), “Blackfeet” is glossed “[Siksikai, ed.].” In addition, the name that Curtis spells “Piegans” (that is, the Ammiskaapipiikani) is consistently spelled “Peigan” (that is, the Apatohsipiikani) in Raczk’s version (which also renders the term Istssóhtsi as Ishtssohatsi).
5 See Wissler (1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1918); Wissler and Duvall (1995); Uhlenbeck (1911, 1912); and Eggermont-Molenaar (2005).
7 Glenbow Indigenous Studies Department source files for Margaret Waterchief indicate that she left several bundles with the museum for safekeeping.

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