One night, when I was about eighteen years old, I was talking with my grandmother.
I had recently been to the Short Medicine Pipe dance in Brocket and was impressed
that the ceremonies were still alive. I suggested that we should have a sweat lodge for
our bundle.

One of the Old Lady’s fears was that somebody from Kainai or Piikani would
come and claim the bundle since it was not being used. She said, “No. You are not going
to sweat it.”

That night, as she got ready for bed, she began to hemorrhage. She called to me,
“Chris, you better call the ambulance.” So I called the ambulance, and they took her to
Calgary. By the next morning, she had lost her sight and she could not even remember
who I was. It was like she wasn’t even all there.
The doctors were saying that she was going to pass away at any time. They advised us to get ready. Every night, I was smudging and praying for my grandmother. That was the first time she had been away, and it was the first time I had really been without her. I began thinking about what I was going to do now that I was going to be by myself and decided I needed to keep her around a little bit longer. So I started praying.

A few days later, I went back to the hospital with one of my relations. My grandmother was sitting up, and, by this time, she was beginning to recognize people and know what was going on. My relations were sitting there, planning my grandmother’s funeral. My grandmother could hear them. When my aunt walked out, I asked the Old Lady, “Do you want me to do something so you can get out of here?” She said, “Yeah, I don’t like it here. They are planning my funeral and they aren’t even in another room. I want you to help me get out of here.”

I went home and I got some old clothes—Leslie McMaster was the one who told me the Sun likes old things. I put moccasins on—it was winter and there was snow on the ground—I walked out from the old house to the trees in our old garden not far from the old house. I walked in the snow. There was a Y-tree in the garden and I took those clothes and I prayed to the Creator: “Help my grandmother get out of the hospital. All the sickness in her body—take it away. Help her to live for a few more years. Do that for me and I’ll take”—in my mind I was thinking I would revive the Iitskinaiksi, but I thought I better not say that. I was only eighteen years old—who is going to follow me? So I thought for a few minutes and said, “If you do that for me, I will take my grandmother’s bundle to Kainai and join the Iitskinaiksi at Kainai.” I put the clothes up there and I walked back home.

A couple of days later, they transferred my grandmother from Calgary to the Strathmore Hospital. They called and said she wanted to see me, so I went to the hospital. She was sitting up. She said, “I had a dream that this woman came to me and told me, ‘I am the head of the Sun Dance. Tell your son to burn sage for four days and you will get better. If he wants that bundle, tell him to go ahead and take it.’” So I did that. Every morning and every night, I went out and I got sage and I prayed for my grandmother. Not long after that, she came out of the hospital.

She lived for ten more years after that. She saw me dance out with the Iitskinaiksi. That is how I came to try really hard to revive the Iitskinaiksi.
In 1996, I was initiated as the leader of the Iitskinaiksi at Siksika, with Herman Yellow Old Woman and Daphne McHugh as my partners. We kept that bundle for eleven years. At the time, the society had not been active for a long time. In fact, we were the first Iitskinaiksi leaders in thirty-one years.

The McHugh family had kept Amopistaan, the Iitskinaiksi Leader’s Bundle, since 1960, when Black Rider had transferred it to my grandfather. It would have left the reserve—many museums had offered a great deal of money for Amopistaan—but my grandfather refused to sell it. Adam Delaney and Mookaakin (Pat Weasel Head), from Kainai, asked to borrow it in the 1970s, but, again, my grandfather didn’t let it go. My family had it all the way up until it was transferred to me.

I had taken care of Amopistaan from the time I was fourteen years old. I had been “painted on it” by Leslie McMaster, which gave me the rights to care for it. When I was about sixteen years old, Henry Sun Walk did a kind of a transfer, but a lot of the Old People didn’t recognize it. I always wondered how I could get properly initiated so that I would be a true bundle keeper.

I wasn’t alone in wondering how to have a bundle properly transferred. In the early 1990s, a number of us whose families had kept the Iitskinaiksi bundles were searching for ways to have rights transferred properly to us so that we could rejuvenate the Iitskinaiksi. At this time, it just so happened that Nat Owl Child was trying to get his Iitskinaiksi bundle, Sinopahsipista’an, back from the Provincial Museum of Alberta, to whom he had sold it in the 1960s. Nat asked Richard Right Hand to help him. Richard used to drive Nat to town all the time, so they would talk about it. Richard told him, “Well, I will help you.”

In 1992 or 1993, I was part of a meeting at Richard’s house with Phil Stepney, who was then the director of the Provincial Museum of Alberta. The remaining members of the old Iitskinaiksi were there, including my grandmother, Victoria McHugh, along with Henry Sun Walk, Nat Owl Child, and Ed Wolf Child, Sr. We had as many of the past members as we could get. Allan Pard and Jerry Potts from Piikani and Bruce Wolf Child and Frank Weasel Head from Kainai were also present. This was the beginning of a two-year process to get the Iitskinaiksi started again.

Stepney took a very hard stance and didn’t want us to take the bundles back permanently. His position was that Nat could borrow the bundles and take them back to the museum when we had finished the ceremony. The members
of the old Iitskinaiksi had to consider if this would be enough. Would we be content with just borrowing the bundles, or should we try to have the bundles returned permanently? They were trying to figure out exactly what to do.

I can understand, from a non-Native point of view, how the museum was trying to preserve the bundles. But from a spiritual point of view, it is a scary concept to dance with a bundle and then throw it back in a museum. The Old People really didn’t know what to do.

At the same time, Allan, Jerry, Frank, and Bruce Wolf Child were talking in Blackfoot, telling us that we should revive the society. They were laying out all the steps we needed to go through. I asked Old Man Sun Walk if he knew that process, but he said that, in their time, the Iitskinaiksi had already started to change and the Sikhska weren’t doing the ceremonies the same way as the Kainai. So we debated whether or not to ask the Kainai for help. In fact, I think that debate as to whether we would ask Kainai ceremonialists to help us went on right until we transferred.

Those of us who were interested in bringing back the Iitskinaiksi listened to the Old People, and we talked among ourselves for quite a while. I also talked about it with other people. At one point, Fred Breaker went to his mother and a few of the other Iitskinaiksi members and asked, “Well, what do you think if we bring it back up?” All the people who had actually been members of the Iitskinaiksi were really in favour of us starting it again. Other people were not as supportive. There was a group of Elders who had never belonged to any society, as well as a couple of Elders who were considered to be the main “medicine men” at Siksika, who didn’t want us to go ahead. They were doing things that, according to our traditions, they were not qualified to do. If we revived the Iitskinaiksi, it would have been shown to everybody that they weren’t qualified. So they were fighting pretty hard for us not to revive the society.

That is when the negative talk started. At one Elders’ meeting, they had an open argument over whether or not we should revive the Iitskinaiksi. In the end, they couldn’t do anything because my grandmother, Victoria McHugh, had the Leader’s Bundle, and she was, technically, still the head woman of the Iitskinaiksi. No matter what anybody said, the buck stopped with her.

She was very much in favour of reviving the society. She told me at one time, “Well, if you guys can’t get anything going and I have nobody that I can
give this to, then you will have to bury me with it.” There was a lot going on behind the scenes.

We went around to all the children of the people who had the bundles to see how many were interested. The first time around, I think I got eighteen members. We had a meeting and quite a few showed up. That is when we promised to bring it back. We started to look for an Elder, and that is when we really started to learn about the intricate protocols of Iitskinaiksi: who is qualified to do this, who is qualified to do that. The one person who was qualified to do everything was pretty heavily into drinking, and his memory was starting to fail so that he didn’t remember too much of what we had to do. As well, he had a poor reputation among many of the Elders, even though he was the most qualified of all of them.

Another Old Man who could have really helped was very old and also starting to have problems with his memory. We missed out on those two Elders.

We were searching and searching, but we couldn’t figure out which Elders were qualified to help us. Then one day, it just so happened that Herman Yellow Old Woman was at his mother’s house when Adam Delaney, a past leader of Iitskinaiksi at Kainai, stopped by. They talked about our efforts to get Iitskinaiksi started at Siksika. Herman and I discussed what Adam had told him, and we decided to have a meeting and invite Adam to give us advice. That is when he told us everything we would have to do. It was not decided at that time that I would be the leader. Adam just said, “Well, these are the qualifications to be the leader.” When he started to name the qualifications, I didn’t really know whether I was going to be the leader or just a member.

In the end, no one else stepped up to the plate, so I just took it. Then the negative talk began. People began saying things such as, “Ahh, don’t join the Iitskinaiksi, you’re going to die. Don’t join the Iitskinaiksi, bad things are going to happen to you. It’s a dangerous society. Just let it die. It is devil worship.” Quite a few of our members bowed under the pressure and backed out. That meant that we had to visit people again and recruit new members.

Once we had a sufficient number of people, we invited Adam back. The first time we had a meeting, he just told us the basics. The next time, we had a meeting at my old house. He said, “Well, you guys have to get the bundles now. I can’t be involved in that because I’m not from Siksika. Those are Siksika’s bundles. I can’t be involved until you guys are actually ready to go.”
So I went to my grandmother and I went to Henry Sun Walk and some other people and asked for their help. Then we telephoned the Glenbow and asked if we could come up and discuss having the bundles returned. We agreed on a date, and a large group of us travelled to Calgary. I tried to bring as many of the new group as possible, as well as all of the members who remained from the old society. We all came into the office areas at the Glenbow, and I can still remember certain parts of the conversation. We were all sitting at a table, and I said we wanted to discuss getting the bundles back. I don’t recall why, but the curator, Gerry Conaty, left for a moment without answering us. We were sitting there thinking, “Well, what are we going to do?” When he walked out of the room, I filled my pipe and put it under my blanket. Then, when he came back, I said, “I’ll give you this pipe if you give us back our bundles.” This is our traditional way of asking for a bundle transfer. But Gerry knows our ways, and he replied, “I’m not the holder of these bundles. I don’t have the traditional rights to transfer to you. But I will help you guys take these back home. I’ll smoke that pipe with you so that we can work together.” We smoked that pipe. And he really did help us, too. Judging from the other repatriations that I have done, that was the fastest that we ever got bundles back.

It wasn’t very long before Gerry called us back again. I came with my grandmother, Edna Stud Horse or Turtle (that was her name), Pius Three Suns and his wife, Irvine Scalplock, and Raymond Crow Chief and his wife. There may have been some others I don’t remember. The plan was that the ladies would pack the bundles and we would take them home. But when we got there, Pius and his wife didn’t want to touch any of them. They were afraid to touch them. The Old Lady and Mrs. Stud Horse started to pack the bundles, but after packing two of them, they became very tired and could not pack anymore. So they painted my face, and I packed the rest of those bundles. I remember packing Moses McGuire’s bundle and I remember packing that Drummer’s Bundle. There were quite a few of them. On that day, we walked out with nine Iitskinaiksi bundles, not including the square bags that go with them to hold personal items. When I asked the curator, Gerry Conaty, “Is this the most bundles that ever came out of here in one day?” he said, “Yes! This is the most bundles that ever came out of the Glenbow Museum in one day.” We took those bundles out and we brought them home. Old Sun College had emptied one room in the museum on the third floor just for the bundles. We put the liners in there

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just like a tipi and hung the bundles just like they would be in a tipi. From that time on, our society held meetings in that room.

When we were at the Glenbow, there were two bundles that were not shown to us. They were misidentified in the museum records as Natoas bundles, but they were really Iitskinaiksi bundles. In fact, they turned out to be two of the most famous Iitskinaiksi bundles at Siksika. Each of those bundles has a long story of how they had saved people who had made vows to them. We went back to the museum, and we brought those bundles home.

Throughout 1995, after we got the bundles from the Glenbow, we were still trying as hard as we could to find the Black Rider’s Bundle. In fact, we couldn’t find either of the Rider’s Bundles. Years later we learnt that that Mrs. Big Tobacco had transferred her Rider’s Bundle to the Kainai.

We tried everything to locate the Black Rider’s Bundle. We even contacted the person who had collected most of our bundles for Glenbow and the Provincial Museum of Alberta and asked him, “Well, where did it go?” He told us, “It’s in Edmonton. I bought it and I know where I put it. It’s in Edmonton.”

We went to the provincial museum but were told that they did not have it. After some discussion, we finally said, “Well, the collector told us that it is here.” The curator then went into the collection storage and brought out something that had been documented as a Rider’s Pipe. But it wasn’t the Rider’s Pipe at all. It was the Black Rider’s Bundle that had been sold. The people who Henry Sun Walk had transferred it to had then sold it.

Once again, the museum wanted us to just borrow the bundle. We discovered that they had Nat Owl Child’s bundle as well. We had many discussions with one of the museum’s senior managers, but he would not change his mind. He just wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t give up any of the bundles. That put us in a difficult position. We needed Adam Delaney’s help to get started, and he kept telling us, “When you guys have the bundles, then we’ll help. Right now we can’t do anything for you. It’s got to come from the Iitsiknaiksi at Siksika.”

Then, one day we were watching a video titled Blackfoot—100 Years, made by Ralph Klein when he was a journalist. In one scene, Nat Owl Child was praying for Klein. It occurred to us that we should ask Nat for help. He and Klein were very good friends. My grandmother also remembered how Klein often visited her place. “Now that Ralph is premier,” she said, “you should ask if he will help us get the bundles.”
Richard Right Hand called the premier’s office and made an appointment for us to meet with Klein. Five of us—myself, Richard, Leo Pretty Young Man, Adam Delaney, and Nat Owl Child—met with him and explained our dilemma. Ralph Klein was fully supportive of giving the bundles back and told us, “I’m going to give them all back. Rent a truck and just come up and take them all and bring them home.” As I remember it, the original agreement, they were just going to give them up.

It turned out to be more political than that and not very straightforward at all. Nevertheless, we did end up with all the bundles we needed to start the Iitskinaiksi.

Now that we had all the bundles and everything was ready to start again, many of our members began getting scared again. Some of the Old People thought we were just going to play around with the bundles. Many people had built up a fantasy of the old Iitskinaiksi—that they were flawless people. My grandmother was the past leader of the Iitskinaiksi and she, more than anyone else, will tell you they were not flawless people. They had problems in their society, just as we have problems today. They’ve always had problems. The Iitskinaiksi is a way for people to become better people.

But we were faced with an insurmountable vision that people had of the old Iitskinaiksi, and they didn’t want us to revive the society. In fact, it seemed that a lot of people made it their job to try and stop us. Many of us became scared, and even the most devoted ones among us who were ready to go into the Iitskinaiksi began to think about backing out.

I sat with group and told them, “How about this. I’ll go and sleep. I’ll go for a vision. Let’s see what the Creator says.” And I did that on two separate occasions. The first time was when the society was just about falling apart. I asked Les McMaster to watch over me and went to where they used to have the old Aako’ka’tssin. There’s an open area inside the trees. I slept there for four days and four nights. On the third night, a man dressed in black came to me. He said, “What’s wrong with you guys? I made everything so easy for you to take all the bundles back. I made everything for you guys.” He said, “If you guys don’t want it, I’ll give them to somebody else.”

When he said that, I began arguing with him. I said, “We are. We’re trying. We’re trying.” Then a woman with red hair came behind me and said, “Don’t get mad at him, Old Man. They’re trying, they’re trying to do it.” At that time, I didn’t
know enough about our ways to really understand who was talking. Well, in our stories, the man dressed in black is the Sun and the woman with red hair is the Moon. I related that story to the members, and that message the Creator gave us pulled a lot of them through and gave them the courage to revive the Iitskinaiksi.

The second time I went for a vision occurred just as we were about to be initiated. Again, there was a lot of talk about whether we were going about it in the proper way. We were using Kainai Elders, and people would say, “Siksika is really different, the way they do the Iitskinaiksi compared to Kainai. It is really, really different.” And it’s true, there are some differences. But they are not great differences once you really understand our ways. If you really know Iitskinaiksi, the Kainai and the Siksika have just minor differences. As long as you know that, you can make adaptations so that the ceremonies are properly done.

But people were really focusing on the differences. I think it was because Siksika people are very patriotic. Kainai are like that too. So are Piikani. Our people are really known for that. “Nobody is better than Siksika. Why do we have to get these Kainai? Why do we have to have this?” Even today it happens. We still battle with that all the time. “It’s not real if Kainai run it. When Siksika run it, then it will be real.”

But we needed somebody who could run the ceremony, lead the transfer, for us. So I asked the members, “What do you think we should do?” The Old Lady, my grandmother, was saying, “Well, if I really have to, I’ll paint you myself on it.” But I knew it wasn’t going to be the right way, so I ask the members what they thought we should do.

That’s when I decided to go and sleep. I wanted a real answer. In my dream, I saw my grandfather, who was the past leader of the Iitskinaiksi. He used to be a councillor, and he was buried in the councillor’s blue suit. In my dream, he was standing there in that councillor’s suit, and he said to me, “We could have kept everything going if we’d hired Kainai to help us. But we were too proud to use them. That’s why the Iitskinaiksi went down at Siksika.”

Right there, I said, “Okay. Well, I got my answer. Just use them.” That is how it started. That is pretty much how we made it to our transfer. The Iitskinaiksi was started all over again. And that’s pretty much the beginnings of our repatriations.

Now that we had brought those bundles back and were confident about using Kainai as Elders, we met once again with Adam Delaney. In fact, we had quite a few meetings with him, right up to the summer of 1996. Once Adam saw
that the bundles were in place, he said, “Okay. The first thing that I have to do is ask your grandmother for permission to work with you. Because she is still the leader and I’m not from Siksika. I can’t just come here and work.” He was using a couple of the Iitskinaiksi at Kainai for advice, and they had told him, “You have to ask for permission to work up there. Because you’ve never owned a bundle in Siksika, so you have to ask for permission.” So he asked her and she gave her permission to help us to get started.

Then, he started telling us what we were going to do. He said, “Okay. The old Iitskinaiksi are going to dance two days. Then you guys are going to dance. That’s the way we’ll do it.” I went back and told the Old Lady, “Adam said the proper way is that you guys are going to dance for two days and then you transfer to us and we’re going to dance.” And the Old Lady—she was in constant pain by then—replied, “Good God! I can’t even hardly walk. How do you expect me to dance?” She said, “No. You guys just do everything. I’ll give you everything.”

I went back to Adam and told him what the Old Lady had said. He gave me a hard look and was quiet for a while. Finally, he said, “Okay. But first you have to go through that maaatoopsa’psi to smoke that pipe.” He said, “But I can’t be involved right there because that’s the changeover from the old society to the new. You will have to get somebody from here to give your grandmother the pipe.”

I asked Old Man Sun Walk to be the go-between. I sat outside and the Old Lady stayed in her house, and I sent my pipe to her through the Old Man. She smoked it and she filled the pipe and then I smoked outside. That’s when she said, “Okay. I’ll give you all of the Iitskinaiksi bundles. I’ll give you everything.”

Next we attended the Elders’ Retreat planning meeting and told them of our plan, “Okay, this is what’s going to happen. The Iitskinaiksi are going to transfer. The old Iitskinaiksi are going to transfer to the new society.” At first, we really had a rough time. A lot of people in the Culture Department were making money from the Elders’ Retreat, and they really didn’t like it when we took it over. Others were supportive and said, “Okay. When is the spiritual week going to begin?” They called it an Elder’s Retreat rather than the Aako’ka’atssin. We used the dates that they had already set for the camp rather than setting our own. We picked up Old Man Sun Walk and went down to Blackfoot Crossing to mark out the camp. There are certain protocols and procedures that we use to mark where we will camp for the Aako’ka’atssin. The way that Sun Walk marked out the camp and the procedures that he told us to use are exactly the same as we use today.
After we marked out the place, we started setting up our camps. We put up the centre tipi where the Iitskinaiksi would hold their ceremonies. Adam Delaney arrived with Roger Prairie Chicken and several other Kainai. I can’t remember who all came. Adam asked the Old Lady “Are you going to run the transfer?” And she replied, “No. I can’t sit there. I’m too old. Ask somebody if they will just transfer it for me.” Roger Prairie Chicken acted as the proxy for the Old Lady and transferred the Leader’s Bundle to me. That is how the Iitskinaiksi started again at Siksika. It was 1996.

**Further Repatriations**

Herman got a call from Medicine Hat Museum. He told me, “Chris, there’s a couple of bundles over at Medicine Hat. Come with me and let’s just go take a look.” So we went over there and took a look at them. They turned out to be three Maoto’kiiksi bundles. We sat there and explained to the lady, “This is what those bundles are. We are trying to revive our Aako’ka’tssin. Can we have them back?” The lady was very hesitant. But when we explained to them what the Glenbow was doing, they became more than willing to let us have the bundles. I think the Glenbow kind of set the stage for repatriation in other Alberta museums. I always give the credit to the Glenbow Museum on that one. I honestly do believe that they did set the stage for us repatriating our bundles, because as soon as we told Medicine Hat that the Glenbow was doing permanent loans, they turned around right away. We started to explain to them what they had and the importance of it; then they turned around right away. We just made one more visit back and we signed the papers and we took them out.

I also repatriated the Ben Calf Robe Beaver Bundle from the Glenbow (fig. 28). It was very strange how that happened. One night, I had a dream that Herman Yellow Old Woman put this beaver around my neck. It was a gigantic beaver. And it was a necklace but it was on my back. I woke up and thought, “What was that about?” I had already kept a Beaver Bundle that I had repatriated from the Smithsonian Institution—the Head Carrier Beaver Bundle. I transferred that bundle to Leonard Bastien around 2001. So I was a past Beaver Bundle holder. Quite often, I had thought about that Ben Calf Robe Bundle—ever since seeing it when we were bringing out the Iitskinaiksi bundles.
Figure 28. Ben Calf Robe (Siksika), 1952. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA-5345-1).
As a child, I remember reading Ben Calf Robe’s book and thinking, “Beaver Bundles—I wonder if they will ever come back.”

For a long time, I thought, “No, it can never come back.” Then, when I heard that Mike Swims Under and others were transferring Beaver Bundles, I thought, “Maybe I should try and get this bundle back.” But I didn’t pursue it until I had that dream.

That bundle had been sitting in the museum for a long time. Quite a few people had looked at it, but nobody had made a real commitment to get it. I met with Herman Yellow Old Woman, who was a Siksika representative on the government’s repatriation advisory committee, and asked him, “How would it be if I wrote you a letter to repatriate that Ben Calf Robe Bundle?” He said, “Yeah, go for it. Go ahead and just get it. Get that bundle.” I wrote a letter and gave it to him. And there again the Glenbow has always been so good about the bundles, about the ceremonial items. Not even two weeks later, I walked out with that bundle. And this spring coming up [2012], we’ll be having our first tobacco dance in many decades. That will be attributed to the Glenbow Museum.

The only other Alberta repatriation that I was involved with was when I put up O’kaan with Allan Pard’s daughter and we repatriated a Natoas bundle from the Glenbow. That was another time when the Glenbow was very good to me. I didn’t even make any calls myself. Allan did the talking. We came in, looked at it, and took it home. And she still holds it today.

Of all the museums, I think the Glenbow is probably the most proactive in helping the Blackfoot people to retain a living culture. That is one of the things that museums don’t preserve. If we don’t have the bundles, then we can’t get the transfers to make anything that looks like the bundles. So I guess in that way, the Glenbow really helped with the revival of our culture. And they still are today. I would be so bold as to say better than any museum in Alberta.

C A R I N G F O R B U N D L E S

I brought home the Little Light Beaver Bundle and the Raw Eater Beaver Bundle from the Royal Ontario Museum, but they were very difficult to work with. They treat it as though they own the bundle, as if the bundles are possessions that belong to the museum. They would rather save the object than the actual
ceremony that goes with the object. They can’t really see that the ceremony is far more important than the physical object itself.

Most curators don’t see the importance that these bundles have in the community. They think we can just make a replica if one has left the community. They don’t realize that it’s a really big thing to make a bundle. It’s a big time thing. And that’s why, today, most people won’t even think about making a new bundle. It takes a special kind of training to make a bundle. And I’m not just talking about knowledge in our ways. There is more to it.

What a lot of people don’t realize is that in our culture, you have to have a spiritual connection. The first kind of “medicine man” is just a bundle holder. His whole job is just to smudge. The second kind of “medicine man” is someone who can help other people, but he can’t help himself. And that’s where a lot of people are today, at that point. The third kind has what is called naatosi. That kind of medicine man can help other people, and he can also be his own medicine man. Those are the only people who can legitimately make a bundle. But there are very, very few of those.

That’s a little known fact about Blackfoot culture. Just because somebody kept a bundle and they transferred it, that doesn’t qualify them to make a bundle. A person has to have that naatosi. He has to have the power of the thing to be his own medicine man. Only then does he have the power to make a new bundle.

I’ve had a few curators tell me, “Well, you guys don’t know how to take care of these anymore.” In fact, people at the provincial museum told me, “You guys don’t know how to take care of these” while the Black Rider’s Bundle was right in front of me with mould and in disarray. I turned to them with the best answer I could give them: “My grandmother has the Iitskinaiksi Leader’s Bundle at home. It’s never been in a museum and it’s in way better shape than that. So I don’t know who takes care of these bundles better.”

In our culture, we look after the bundles. We smudge them every day. We are very careful with them. Children are taught never to touch them, to be careful with ceremonial objects. So I don’t know why museums think that we don’t care for them.

That is where repatriation is very, very important. The revival of our culture, even though it has been going on for quite a while, is still young in comparison with the time it was eroding. Siksika Iitskinaiksi has only transferred once since we revived it. Piikani revived their O’kaan and Kana’tsomitaiksi
in the 1970s, and the people who revived it have just now become Elders. Our culture’s still kind of young. Repatriation is so important because we can’t just reproduce the bundle. We can’t do that.

At the same time, a lot of us are lacking the skills. I’m not a craft person. The Old Lady taught me to bead moccasins, but I couldn’t bead any to save my life. A lot of us lack these skills. So that’s where repatriation is so important. If we can get these things back, we can sustain our culture.

**Repatriating from the United States**

Every time that I’ve repatriated from the Smithsonian Institution, people from the museum would meet me in Great Falls, Montana, and I’d drive down and bring the bundles back across the border. Each time that I crossed the border, the Canada Border Services agents would ask me, “Do you have any ceremonial items in the car?” And I’d say, “Yes, we do.” And they’d say, “Go.” We never had any problems with the border. I was required to have a letter from the tribal government in Browning stating that the bundle had been repatriated to them and that they were transferring it to me.

Even though Americans have had repatriation legislation since 1990, it is still a very long process. Right now, I’m running an O’kaan for Browning and I’m still looking for a Natoas bundle. I’m debating whether to borrow one that is not from Browning just to use in this one ceremony. That is not because there are no Natoas bundles in the United States. I’ve visited five different museums and they all agreed to repatriate the ones that they have. But it will take three years before they can be released. The process is very long. I’d like to introduce the Glenbow’s concept of “permanent loan” to the American museums. That, at least, would allow us to bring the bundles home while we worked through the legal paperwork.

**The Impact of Repatriation on the Community**

Siksika is the last of the Blackfoot communities to start repatriating our sacred bundles. We are only now slowly beginning to see the results in the community.
If we had not got the bundles back from the museums and started the Iitskinaiksi again, I don’t think we would have any Blackfoot culture at Siksika. Now the people are starting to know Iitskinaiksi protocols; the society is starting to come back in a good way. And it is popular with the young people. Our traditional culture has pretty much jumped one whole generation. People who are sixty years old and older want nothing to do with it. They are afraid of it. They still haven’t decided if it’s bad or good. So our culture pretty much jumped that entire generation. We have really old people whose parents were members of the Iitskinaiksi, and we have their grandchildren. That generation is really starting to know a lot about our culture. And the people who are coming to the ceremonies are starting to know more and more. I think we’ll take our culture back once we have outgrown the residential school syndrome. The government apology for the residential schools helped us to revive our culture. The government acknowledged that it was wrong to take these things away from us, to outlaw our culture.

I see the traditions getting stronger and stronger and stronger. If we had not brought these bundles home, I think there would have been no culture or we would have adopted the Cree culture or we would have adopted the Sioux culture. That would have happened. But when we revived the Iitskinaiksi, we were able to stop all that movement toward the pan-Indian practices. To this day, we have very few of these other practices.

It is really making a positive impact. I can honestly say that because of the repatriation and us being able to bring the bundles home, the Blackfoot culture is still the Blackfoot culture.

**Reflections on the Future**

When we had the transfer of Iitskinaiksi, I actually didn't believe it was happening. I thought, “Well, we’re painted now, is that it? This can’t be real.” I was waiting for someone to come and tell me it’s not real. It can’t be real. For a whole year, it wasn’t real. I couldn’t really believe it. For a long, long time, it had seemed so far out of reach. And then, finally, it became a reality. It took a while for it to settle in. Many of the Old People were against us, but when they realized that we were serious, they became some of our strongest followers.
There was a time, when I was leader of the Iitskinaiksi, that I almost brought all the bundles back into use. I didn’t quite get them all. Some families still haven’t brought their bundles into the Iitskinaiksi. They say, “Well, when the Siksika run themselves, then we’ll bring our bundles in.” We’ll see what happens.

I still can’t believe that we did what we did. I was only nineteen or twenty years old at the time. I wasn’t the youngest ever, but I was one of the youngest. But it was scary. Some members were disowned by their families, many of whom had strong Christian beliefs. It was a scary thing, but we did it. We all did it together.

But in the end, it turned out good. And now, when the present members transfer, we will become the Elders and we’ll see how that goes. That is the next step in bringing our culture back.