Moving Forward

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This whole process that we’ve been involved in—the collaborative process between the Blackfoot people and museums and governments—stems from our need to restore the cultural confidence of our people. — Allan Pard

The acculturation efforts by the Canadian government and religious organizations have not created a better way of life for Canada’s First Peoples. When the treaties were made, the promise of education offered the hope that First Nations people would be provided with “tools” that would help them adjust to the changing way of life brought by newcomers. The Canadian treaty negotiators also offered to help people learn how to become farmers and ranchers and to provide food, clothing, and other assistance in times of economic difficulty.

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Instead, Aboriginal children were confined to residential schools, where they were punished for practicing their culture or speaking their Native language and, generally, were made to feel inferior to non-Native people. Rather than assisting people as they adapted to a new way of life, many Indian Agents used their authority to undermine economic development on reserves. After being marginalized for many generations, First Nations people are looking for ways to reassert their identity and establish themselves in Canadian society.

The repatriation of sacred material to the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai is a story of hope and perseverance by the individuals involved and the communities they represent. When the bundles come home, they bring a renewed sense of pride and self-confidence to the families that keep them and, by extension, to the community. These feelings stem, in part, from the achievement of finding a lost part of the culture and overcoming obstacles to bring it home. The bundles bring with them these feelings of strength and well-being. As the bundles, sacred societies, and ceremonies are renewed, the strength of the cultural traditions is manifested and the determination of the people to ensure that their culture survives and thrives is highlighted.

This strength builds throughout the community in many ways. Frank Weasel Head connects the return home of bundles to important initiatives in education, health care, child welfare, and the justice system at Kainai. Similar experiences occur in other communities. These programs are all developed by local people in ways that work for the communities. This is a significant change from the past, when non-Native governments prescribed solutions that had been developed with little or no community consultation.

CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH MUSEUMS

There nonetheless remain challenges to the ongoing effort to bring bundles home. Some of these arise inside the communities, while others originate beyond the boundaries of reserves and are even global in nature. Some of these challenges have been faced by generations of Niitsitapi who have chosen to follow their traditional culture and beliefs rather than embrace the ways of non-Native society, while others are the product of an increasingly globalized world with its tendency toward cultural homogenization.
Although repatriation is usually phrased in terms of First Nations and museums, as the chapters in this book have shown, the negotiations are really between individuals. Granted, legislation has been an important step in assuring the repatriation of sacred material. In the absence of such legislation, Niitsitapi found themselves at the mercy of the personalities of curators and senior museum administrators. If those individuals were sympathetic to requests for bundles, then repatriation was possible and, in some cases, expeditiously achieved. When museum staff members resisted the idea of repatriation, the bundles remained inaccessible. These instances have become fewer over the years, and even North American museums that are not accountable to legislation have generally adopted repatriation policies that reduce, to some extent, the impact of institutional idiosyncrasies. However, policies and legislation are, in the final result, products of the dominant society and are based on the liberal democratic principle that all citizens are equal and that no person or group should be shown special favour. As a result, repatriation can involve bureaucratic procedures that seem disrespectful of the items in questions and require that traditional processes and protocols be subordinated. Whereas the Blackfoot approached the discussions from a spiritual perspective, they were often confronted with museum personnel who, they said, maintained a scientific stance that seemed to have little regard for spirituality. They felt that they were being looked down upon for their beliefs and were made to feel inferior, whether or not this was the intention of the institution’s staff. At the same time, the compromises that the Blackfoot were required to make in response to bureaucratic demands brought criticism from their communities and compounded the already stressful process of bringing a bundle home and reinitiating it into ceremonial life.

Niitsitapi have faced these challenges in the course of negotiating the return of bundles from public institutions in North America. However, European explorers and fur traders were present in western North America long before museums in the New World began their collecting programs. As a result, many important cultural items made their way into European collections during the nineteenth century. In 1995, the Austrian ethnologist and ethnohistorian Christian Feest expressed astonishment that museums would consider giving back artifacts. He also questioned the sincerity of many First Nations people who appealed for items and wondered how a museum in Europe could
distinguish between legitimate delegations and charlatans (Feest 1995). Nearly two decades later, these concerns are still expressed by European museums. Where repatriation has succeeded, it has deepened relationships, as each side has demonstrated a willingness to listen to and seek to understand the other. Not all museums have shown this willingness, but those that have are responsible for making a difference in Blackfoot lives.

The first step in recovering sacred items from European institutions is to determine what is in the collections. Thus far, institutions in the United Kingdom have generously shared their databases. (Few museums in other parts of Europe have been approached.) Once a list of sacred material has been provided, it is important that knowledgeable people examine the pieces first-hand to determine whether they were used in ceremonies. Other items in the collection should also be viewed in case sacred material has been misidentified. But visiting museums is an expensive undertaking. The Pitt Rivers Museum, at the University of Oxford, recently undertook a project that brought knowledgeable people to England to examine five traditional Blackfoot shirts that were given to Sir George Simpson by Niitsitapi leaders in the mid-1800s (Peers and Brown 2015). The shirts subsequently travelled to southern Alberta, where they were the focus of workshops and exhibits. Discussions are ongoing between museum personnel and Niitsitapi to determine when, or if, the shirts will return to Alberta. Although the project received very generous funding from the British Council in 2008, the deteriorating economic climate has led to a significant reduction in funding for museums in the United Kingdom. Such projects may therefore not be feasible in the foreseeable future.

Other museums may resist discussions of repatriation on philosophical rather than economic grounds. In 2002, the International Group of Organizers of Large-Scale Exhibitions (also called the Bizot Group) published the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. This collective of the world’s major museums and art galleries reaffirmed their role as custodians of art and objects on behalf of humankind. They decried the illegal traffic in archaeological, artistic, and ethnic objects. They also asserted the right of museums to retain collections, even when source communities request their return. The argument is that museums, through their encyclopaedic collections, facilitate a comparison of cultures and the contemplation of human achievement. Critics have pointed out that access to these museums is not, in
fact, universal (see Curtis 2008; Murphy 2008; Opoku 2008; Sandis 2008; see also Weasel Head, this volume). The collections are housed in very few places, and it is not always possible for people from source communities to visit their patrimony. Moreover, the decontextualization of the items obscures important aspects of their meaning. Nevertheless, adherents to the principles of the universal museum declaration resolutely refuse to consider repatriation.

On a recent visit to Great Britain, a group of Blackfoot were taken to the British Museum, where they viewed the exhibit of their cultural material. Allan Pard was struck by the small area devoted to First Peoples of North America and the even smaller space dedicated to his culture. “It is as if we really are not important in the general scheme of things,” he commented. “I felt that the British Museum was repeating the same message we heard from the Indian agents and at residential school: we are not important; our culture is not important; we should give up and assimilate into the dominant society. If our cultural items are not important to the British Museum, they should return them to a place where they will be respected and valued.”

CHALLENGES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Even when bundles are repatriated, there are challenges to keeping them and the ceremonies associated with them alive and vibrant. Many of the concepts that are implicit in the rituals are exceptionally difficult to express other than in the Blackfoot language. The processes of colonization and assimilation mounted a forceful assault on the language, as residential school students were forbidden to speak their own language and made to feel ashamed for knowing Blackfoot and frightened to use it, as doing so was cause for punishment. Many subsequently chose not to teach the language to their own children and grandchildren to save subsequent generations from such punishment and feelings of inadequacy. Today, the language is valued once again, and there are school programs directed at preserving it. However, the language is not used consistently in everyday life, and very few media (radio, television, print journalism) delivered content in Blackfoot. But a symbiotic support system exists between language and ceremony. It is notable, as Frank Weasel Head observed, that people who become involved in ceremonies often become more fluent speakers.
of the language. If either is to survive, more people will have to become involved with language development and traditional ceremonial practices. This is especially true of the growing numbers of Kainai, Siksika, and Piikani who live off-reserve and are less likely to encounter the Blackfoot language in everyday circumstances.

The traditional knowledge that is bound up in the bundles, societies, and ceremonies is passed along through a lifetime of conversation, storytelling, and visiting. It would seem that this process is threatened by an increasingly fast-paced society that leaves little time for a slower style of teaching and learning. This trend is compounded by the growing population of Niitsitapi who live in urban areas and may visit their relatives on the reserve only occasionally. There is no “short course” on traditional knowledge that can be accessed through the Internet or only on weekends. The contributors to this book continually emphasize that keeping a bundle or belonging to a sacred society is a way of life that continues after the bundle has been transferred to another keeper. Balancing these traditions with the realities of contemporary life is not easy; it is a challenge both to the young people who wish to become involved and learn and to the older people who are looking to the next generation to carry on.

As we move further into a technology-driven world, the nuclear family is replacing the extended family, in which people continually visited one another, as the focus of Blackfoot life. The result is a loss of the constant, and necessary, building of relationships that permeated traditional lifestyles. If people can’t or won’t talk with one another, they soon lose the ability to support one another. Clans, societies, ceremonies were based on mutual support. This decay of relationships and support is a significant loss for the culture.

While traditional Niitsitapi mokaki (knowledgeable persons) may resist new technology as an appropriate teaching tool, other Native traditions have embraced it. As a result, non-Blackfoot traditions have spread and become popular in many communities. In addition, Native people have at times borrowed aspects of ritual and belief from a variety of other First Nations cultures—and, on occasion, from non-Native Christian and New Age practices as well—and amalgamated them to create “new” traditions, a process that is sometimes described as “pan-Indianism.” For many people, these new practices are valuable ways of coping with the challenges that life has put in their path. However, more conservative bundle keepers and ceremonial leaders might see
this process as an erosion of traditional Blackfoot beliefs—and therefore of traditional culture and identity. Having suffered the effects of Christian proselytizing themselves, they usually have no desire to claim that there is only one way for people to follow. They are, however, concerned that these “new” ways not encroach on ancient traditions or cause people to abandon aspects of their culture that are uniquely Blackfoot.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF REPATRIATION**

These challenges are unlikely to be resolved any time soon. They are part of the ongoing efforts of Indigenous people worldwide to maintain their traditions, culture, and identity in the face of globalization, industrialization, and urbanization. It is important to us all that these efforts succeed. As Robert Janes points out in the preceding chapter (see also Janes 2009), diversity is a crucial component of resilience, and resilience is vital for the survival of any ecosystem, including human society. We need many ways of understanding the world to help us cope with the social, political, economic, and environmental changes that confront us. The continuation of Niitsitapi traditional culture adds an important component to that understanding, and the return of sacred objects is key to this continuation. Repatriation of sacred objects is therefore of concern to us all.

Adam Delaney, whose powerful personality stood behind many of the repatriation initiatives, often said, “When the White people came, they just shook us dramatically. It’s up to us, in our healing process as a people, to know who we are and where we came from. We need to understand that there is nothing wrong with being who we are.” Once people come to this conclusion, a lot of self-healing happens as they regain the self-esteem and self-confidence to take on the challenges of the world. Sacred material was initially given to the Blackfoot to help them overcome difficult situations. They are still important for that reason.

**NOTE**

1 For a critical assessment of these arguments, see Tom Flynn, “The Universal Museum: A Valid Model for the 21st Century?” (2004; available through Lulu.)

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