The Importance of the Blackfoot Shirts Today

To understand these shirts is to understand what has happened to us, you know, that makes us who we are today. And some of it is not good. I am a survivor of residential school. There was a very, very, deliberate effort to destroy that knowledge and you see that. You see that in that we are asking these questions: what are these shirts?

TATSIKIISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD

I have never seen quillwork in my life . . . I’ve never even seen pictures of quillwork.

TREENA TALLOW

Developing relationships so that this project could happen, and could be done respectfully according to cultural protocols, was part of a long process in which Blackfoot people have worked with museums to achieve important goals: to retrieve sacred items and heritage items back to their own communities. One of the larger contexts in which the Blackfoot Shirts Project occurred was the historic removal of such items from First Nations communities, and the post-1970s movement of such objects back to communities through repatriation. At the same time, museums and First Nations have begun working with each other in new ways, and developing relationships based on greater respect and understanding, to guide museums in caring for collections.

When Frank Weasel Head told the elders in his community what he had seen in the Pitt Rivers Museum collections in 2004, they said they had never seen hairlock shirts. This was true: the old hairlock shirts are mostly in museums far from Blackfoot territory, many of them overseas in Britain and mainland Europe. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, following the signing of the treaties, Blackfoot people did not collect scalps, and stopped making hairlock shirts. Men’s ceremonial shirts from this later period often had ermine
A sad story happened when alcohol came. We’ve always had alcohol on the reservation, but when they opened the bars here, the alcoholism went, you know, crazy. And people fell away from their traditional ways. And they didn’t have somebody to transfer to or to ensure that these things happened, so the best place they thought for these things to be would be a museum. Or there would be a private collector, or a doctor, or, you know, an agent or a clerk; somebody they thought would be there forever, and unfortunately they weren’t. And unfortunately these items were traded, sold, and ended up all over the world.

I talked with my friend about why they would give such a sacred item up. For some people it was a matter of survival. Being able to have a meal. And when your children are not eating, you’re going to do whatever it takes to feed them. And some of those items went in that way. So, when it comes to the shirts, or any of the items that we have out there, a lot of those things are way out away from us, and not right here. So the youth don’t have an opportunity to see them; they don’t have an opportunity to be exposed to them.

Maistakki (Crow Woman) / Lea Whitford
and dying way of life, and individuals such as doctors, teachers, and others who lived in Blackfoot communities both purchased and were given objects (and see Farr 2002). Across these decades, Indigenous populations were decreasing rapidly (because of epidemics, tuberculosis, poor food, and inadequate housing) and their cultures were changing (because of assimilation pressures and new opportunities), so it did indeed seem that traditional cultures were dying out.

For First Nations people, the removal of items from their communities coincided with legislation in both Canada and the United States which made it illegal to participate in traditional religious ceremonies (this legislation was enacted in 1883 in the US and in 1885 in Canada: see for example, Pettipas 1994, 93–96; Lokensgard 2010, 122). For Blackfoot people, the removal of sacred bundles happened at about the same time as children were being removed from families and sent to residential schools to be forcibly assimilated. These things all worked together, eroding family relationships and the means of renewing relationships with sacred beings, with identity and its visible symbols, with language and with the way people understood their universe.

Despite the pressures they have faced, Blackfoot people never gave up their traditions. Things were difficult for a long time, however: with many of the sacred items in museums, certain ceremonies could not be held. Many people never had a chance to learn their histories or to see historic objects, and were discouraged from doing so. There was a gap between their lives in the present and their heritage. Many people never had a chance to learn about the history of resistance in their communities. Nor did they have an opportunity to be inspired by the ingenuity and skill of their ancestors, because they had never seen heritage items. Museums were places where the items taken from them were stored. For a long time, Blackfoot people, like other First Nations, had little or no say about how items were cared for or what exhibitions said about their cultures and histories.

This began to change in the 1970s, when First Nations began lobbying to repatriate sacred and heritage items from museums (Phillips 2011, 55). In each of the four Blackfoot communities, very determined individuals who had held on to traditional ways began to work with museums to repatriate items for community use. Kainai and Piikani ceremonial leaders began to retrieve sacred items from museums in Alberta in the 1970s, at first taking them out on loan for ceremonies...
Not only my community; there’s other communities today, don’t have *nothing* in their communities. They lost everything. So they piggy-back off other communities. The Bloods were very fortunate; the Bloods were very fortunate amongst the Blackfoot people. They were fortunate that there was more elders that still tried to maintain their Sun Dance. And one of the things that *really* messed up our people was the residential school. Residential school . . . we can go on and on about what residential school did. Most of all, I always use the word “rape,” rape us of our life. Not just physically, mentally, everything. And only a few survivors came and kept it going.

And these things kept going on and on. Eventually, there was no more transfers. The people that owned bundles started giving them to museums, to collectors. And alcoholism took over. Our kids are taken to the residential school; teaching them to believe that our way was no good. And then the language . . . All these things, there were, a very tough thing that they took away in our community. And so, after a while, we had church people. We had more church people on the reservation than anything else.

*Naa too ts’isi (Holy smoker) / Herman Yellow Old Woman*

When you first uncovered it [the shirt], or asking, first of all, Narcisse to pray, and then uncovering it. I was just like [gestures, places hands over heart], I was just like [hands over heart] connecting with my grandmother, you know? And realizing, you know, that this is something that’s . . . and I was just like, it’s like something that you . . . when you reconnect with something it’s like this space of comfort, this space of connection and this space of familiarity. Because I remember thinking, when I was growing up I remember thinking about being raised with Catholicism, and at a young age realizing that there’s something not quite right with this picture. How come we don’t speak the language but my mother speaks it? How come she’s not speaking to us, and teaching us, but she’ll speak with the adults? And I used to always wonder why, only to find out later it was because of their experience in residential school that they didn't. They thought that we would experience the same thing and they didn’t want us to go through the ordeal and the abuse that they went through.

*Delia Cross Child*

I know there are so many people of our community and our people who have lost those ways and it hasn’t been by choice. It has been with a lack of choice to have our ceremonial items, our traditions, our ways of life removed. Or told you can’t do these things otherwise there is punishment . . . But I think about that but, as a social worker, we see the fallout, the identity loss. And just seeing these it amazes me, and it instills so much pride to think, we did exist a long time ago. We've lived for hundreds and hundreds of years, but so much has been taken away. But to be able to retrieve a bit of this back at this place and time, it is so much teaching for *all* of us and our young people. So it’s quite amazing to be able to see something so old and to see it physically, tangibly hold it, and it was just a wonderful experience.

*Charlene Bruised Head Mountain Horse*
and returning them. After some loaned items were not returned, because leaders felt strongly that the items should remain in the community, there was a period of difficult relationships between Blackfoot people and museum staff—but one that led to deeper discussions between these parties and also to some creative compromises, including further loans to facilitate ceremonial use and culturally appropriate care of sacred items. Glenbow signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation from the Kainai Nation in 1997 to ensure that relationships continued to develop and that this material would be appropriately cared for. As Gerald Conaty notes:

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? (Conaty 2015, 111)

This question, and the strong relationships between Blackfoot people and museum staff, led eventually to the drafting and adoption of Alberta’s First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (2000) and the Blackfoot First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Regulation (2004). Today, nearly all Blackfoot ceremonial material that was at the Glenbow and the Royal Alberta Museum (formerly the Provincial Museum of Alberta) has been returned, and materials are being returned from museums elsewhere in Canada and the United States and also from Europe. These items are back in use within ceremonies, bringing blessings and health to Blackfoot people.

As Frank Weasel Head has noted, once the bundles began to come home and people began to revive ceremonies with them, the community also took control of other aspects of their lives: for instance, training and hiring their own
people in the fields of education and health. The reconnections sparked by bringing sacred items home rippled across the communities. Blackfoot people began also to think of the wider range of heritage items in museums around the world, and of the knowledge embodied in those items. Not everything could be repatriated, and not everything needed to be: for some kinds of learning, increased access would be enough. Perhaps things could come home for a visit, so that people could learn from them. It was time to develop other kinds of relationships with other museums: some of them local, and some of them overseas.

And so the lesson that people in your country, that they need to know: that our people still believe, that we still have that connection. We still speak the language. We still call on each other, our ancestors, where these shirts come from. We still practice the songs, we still practice everything that they did back then today. It is still going here. We might have kind of suffered some loss, but it’s coming back strong.

NAA TOO TSSI (HOLY SMOKER) / HERMAN YELLOW OLD WOMAN

It’s almost like our ancestors are behind all this, you know, pushing for these things to come back and visit us to make sure that we teach our kids.

POOKSINAWAAKI (LITTLE CHIEF WOMAN) / JEAN DAVIS