Why Were the Shirts Not Repatriated?

They should be home, and I do think the spirits of those people are here. They’ve always been here, either in them, or in the descendants, in the stories, in the ceremonies, in the things that we do. . . . I think the biggest thought is, are you going to repatriate them?

MIIKSIK'A'M / CLARENCE WOLFG

Well, I think that those museums, whether they are in England or France or Germany or whatever should return all that stuff now. And that if the facilities that are at home are compatible and able to house those, they should come back. There’s not very many people in our Confederacy that would be able to afford a trip to the Pitt Rivers or to the Louvre, or to Germany, where . . . there are vast collections of our . . . us . . . in these different places. And they were either given as gifts or they were just taken. And I believe that their
place is home, whether they are a shirt, or a pair of leggings, or even a pair of moccasins. They need to be home; they need to be examined by our own people.

Darnell rides at the door

The loan of the five Blackfoot shirts to the Glenbow and Galt Museums came to an end in September 2010, and the shirts were returned to the Pitt Rivers Museum. During every handling session, people who came to visit the shirts asked why they could not stay permanently in Blackfoot territory. One of the strongest tensions in this project has been that although in many respects it was cutting-edge, pushing museums to offer access to important objects through handling within the originating community’s own territory, it also exemplifies the ongoing colonial control of Indigenous material heritage by the nation-state, through continued museum possession of these objects. The shirts are legally owned by the University of Oxford; they were loaned to the Glenbow and the Galt Museums; and at the end of the loan, they returned to the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Museum attitudes toward the ownership of Indigenous objects, particularly sacred objects, have changed greatly within North America in recent decades. Across the United States and Canada relationships between museums and tribal peoples have been strengthened through consultation and repatriation since the 1980s. The passage of NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) in the United States in 1990, and the recommendations of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples in Canada in 1992 (cma 1992) both recognized the right of stewardship and access that Aboriginal people have toward heritage items and ancestral human remains. NAGPRA is national legislation compelling federally funded museums in the United States to consult with tribal groups about their collections and to return certain items to them. The report of the Canadian Task Force is a professional code that recommends that museums should work with Aboriginal groups, but does not legally require repatriation. In Alberta, the First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (2000) and the Blackfoot First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Regulation (2004) are provincial repatriation legislation provisions that apply to the collections at the Royal Alberta Museum and the Glenbow Museum. Their purpose is to return sacred ceremonial objects that are
needed for the continuance of traditional ceremonies back into active use. They were developed in close consultation with ceremonial leaders from the three Blackfoot First Nations in the province.

Outside North America, public attitudes and expectations within the museum profession can be very different. Many Indigenous cultural items have existed in British museums longer than they did in their originating communities. The attitudes to the ownership of such objects expressed by the British public are often in stark contrast to those of members of the museum profession. Indeed, many British people are in favour of repatriation, as demonstrated by the response to exhibitions or public panel discussions on the topic; others, however, feel that the presence of such items in British collections reflects British histories as well as Indigenous ones. Within most museums in the UK, retaining possession over such items is a core value and goal, although museum professionals acknowledge the importance of cultural material to Indigenous communities and there is a diversity of opinion on the topic within the sector itself.

Although museums in the UK are not legally obligated to work with originating communities, legal requirements that oblige museums to work with Indigenous communities are rare anywhere. NAGPRA does not apply internationally, and the Canadian Museum Association’s Task Force recommendations can be referred to for guidance but are not officially valid outside of Canada itself. Britain is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2008), Article 12 of which states that signatory nations “shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous peoples concerned.” This does not legally compel Britain to act in this regard, however, as such declarations are statements about ideals rather than legal instruments.

Awareness of developments in museums in other countries, and increasing visits from Indigenous groups to work with heritage items, have set in motion changes within the UK museum profession fostering more collaborative and consultative relationships with originating communities. These new relationships have resulted in some repatriations of ceremonial materials, including to North American tribal communities. The University of Aberdeen, for example,
repatriated a ceremonial bundle to the Kainai Nation in 2003. The Museum Ethnographers Group, a professional body, produced guidelines on repatriation in 1991; guidance on the management (including repatriation) of human remains that applies to museums in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland was issued in 2006 (DCMS 2005), while guidelines for Scottish museums were issued in 2011 (Museums Galleries Scotland 2011). Most UK museums now have policies on repatriation and over the past two decades a rising number of museum professionals in Britain have participated in the repatriation of ancestral remains and artifacts to a range of peoples, including in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

At present, the University of Oxford, which owns the Blackfoot shirts, has a policy on the repatriation of human remains, and has sent ancestral remains home to communities in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. It does not have a policy on the repatriation of cultural artifacts, and has not repatriated objects. The Pitt Rivers Museum staff takes issues of community access to heritage items seriously, however, and staff there are developing relationships with and loans to originating communities. At the present moment, for collections cared for by the university, loans with handling access such as the Blackfoot Shirts Project are the best that can be done. We are very pleased at how successful the project was under these terms, at how many Blackfoot people engaged with the shirts and learned about how a European museum operates (in contrast to North American museums, with which they are more familiar), so as to facilitate such work and ensure that different benefits were possible. Nevertheless, we are very conscious that this was, to some Blackfoot people, only a loan and therefore not acceptable terms to base the project—and our relationships—upon.

Going beyond these important issues of power within relationships between museums and Indigenous communities, it should be said that even where there is considerable goodwill on the part of museums, providing access to heritage items is especially difficult when the collections exist on another continent from the community they came from. Museums all over the world have experimented with forms of access, some of which work better for some audiences than for others and for some purposes more than for others. Digital images, websites, Flickr streams, photo-elicitation projects, “expanded loans” such as the Blackfoot Shirts Project that enable some direct community engagement
with objects as well as standard exhibitions, and research trips to the UK by originating community members, have all been part of access strategies for UK museums. Museums need to consider, however, what kind of access is required, and for whom. Photographs posted online may not be nearly enough for artists, who need to see the details of how items were made. For ceremonial practitioners, photographs of some sacred items are a form of desecration, and deeply disrespectful. There is no one answer to the issue of “access.”

Part of the problem of creating access is quite simply the cost. Moving the shirts from Oxford to Calgary—including a custom-made crate, air freight, insurance, special trucks used for moving art, business-class air tickets for a museum staff member to act as courier, and customs fees, was nearly CDN$30,000, or about $6,000 per shirt. All of these costs are standard when museums move objects, to prevent damage and ensure their safety in transit. For loans, the borrower usually pays for all costs (we were fortunate that the costs of the loan for the shirts project were paid for by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK), and for repatriations, the costs are often mostly covered by the Indigenous nation involved. There is also the question of where and how returned items would be housed to preserve them for future generations: some, like the shirts, require special museum environments to prevent damage to fragile quillwork and ancient hide, whereas others need to be returned to ceremonial use and are kept in people’s homes. Some Blackfoot people felt that these shirts had fulfilled their purpose and should be given as ritual offerings—left outdoors—and allowed to decay; others felt they should be preserved within a tribally run facility with greater access to Blackfoot people.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of items from Blackfoot territory in UK and European museums. How do museums create access for community members to such items? What are the needs—of both the community and the museum—for access? What are the goals of access?

To me, it’s the knowledge that we were able to repatriate from having these shirts here. You can take them back for another hundred years. We have what we need here.

AKAISTISKAAKII (MANY SWEAT LODGE WOMAN) / RAMONA BIG HEAD