

## Beyond Repatriation – Collaborations between Museums and Alaska Native Communities

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The title of this paper may sound somewhat too grandiose – “*beyond* repatriation” – but it reflects the hopes expressed by participants of the two projects I am going to discuss. These projects involve anthropologists, Alaska Native communities and museum staff, and are aimed at making collaboration between these groups possible, a level of collaboration that goes beyond the debate about repatriation and the fears and suspicions evoked by this term.<sup>1</sup> Instead of debating the necessity or dangers of the physical return of objects into Native ownership, these and other collaborations between indigenous communities and museums are creating new forms of joint custody over cultural property by emphasizing the less tangible characteristics of objects: their function as repositories of knowledge and their ability to become a focus of debate between and within communities.<sup>2</sup> It must be in part the excitement of striving to move “beyond” current impasses toward something new that gives the organizers of such projects the energy they need to draw together broad networks of people and resources.

At the center of the projects I am going to discuss are two ethnographic collections made in Alaska in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first is the Fisher Collection in the National Museum of Natural History, made in the 1880s and 1890s among the Alutiiq of Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound on the coast of South-Central Alaska by William Fisher, tidal observer and trader (Crowell 1992). The second is the Jacobsen Collection, made in 1882/83 among the Yup'ik and Iñupiaq of Alaska's Bering Sea coast by a Norwegian sailor and jack-of-all-trades working for the Berlin Ethnological Museum, Johan Adrian Jacobsen (Cole 1985, 55–73, Thode-Arora 1989, Haberland 1989, Fienup-Riordan 1996, 217–28). It is ironic that these collections, both made in the age of “salvage ethnology” in order to document the ancient ways of cultures that were expected to vanish in the near future, have become the focus of very lively exchanges between museums and Native communities.

### **Repatriation at issue**

Before introducing the two Alaskan projects, let me say a few words about the repatriation debate. “Repatriation,” as Christian Feest has pointed out, is a term that used to be applied to the return of persons to their country of

residence or citizenship. Only recently – apparently some time in the mid-1970s – has it come to designate the restitution of objects from museum collections to people who produced the objects or who claim to be related to the producers by descent or cultural affiliation (Feest 1995). In the U.S., legislation such as the National Museum of the American Indian Act (1989) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, 1990) has created a legal basis for tribes to request the return of religious and funerary objects, human remains, and objects characterized as “cultural patrimony” (see Bray and Killion 1994; Mihesuah 2000; Bray 2001). This, in turn, has created an atmosphere of fear and distrust in parts of the museum and anthropological professions. Some professionals fear that valuable objects may be lost to further study, that the general public (as well as the profession) may be deprived of knowledge, and that researchers may be curtailed in carrying out their professional mandates and advancing in their careers (Meighan 1992).

The return of objects also raises the question of what will happen to them once they are in Native custody. Will the community build a museum according to the Euro-American model, as in the case of the return of confiscated potlatch goods to the Kwakiutl of Alert Bay and Cape Mudge in British Columbia? Will the objects be exposed to the natural weathering process, as is the case with the Twin Gods, which the Pueblo of Zuni has been retrieving from various museums and private collections since 1978, or will they be used in ceremonies (Jacknis 2000; Ferguson, Anyon, and Ladd 2000; cf. Jonaitis 1999)? The actual deaccessioning of objects from a museum’s storage facility is a relatively simple act compared to arrangements for what comes after, and decisions are complicated by the contradictory demands of the law and public opinion. On the one hand, NAGPRA obligates tribes to prove a meaningful connection to the makers of the objects and the uses they intended, raising the expectation that objects be either used or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, humanist arguments that Natives reclaiming objects made by their ancestors are depriving humankind of part of a common heritage are best countered by making them available for viewing and research in a tribal museum, even though this may not have been what the makers of the objects had in mind.

Another problem associated with NAGPRA is the severe strain on tribal and museum finances caused by the legal and bureaucratic processes associated with its implementation. The process of notification alone – museums are required to compile inventories of their Native American collections and make them available to tribes with potential “cultural affiliation,” and tribal offices must go through these lists and decide how to react – exceeds the normal capacities of both museums and tribes.

### Returning to Alaska

While NAGPRA was still being debated in legislative chambers, Kodiak Island, the site of one of my examples, was already at the center of a particularly confrontational repatriation case, leading to the biggest return of objects undertaken by the Smithsonian to date: the 1991 return to the Alutiiq community of Larsen Bay on Kodiak Island of 756 sets of human remains and 95 lots of funerary objects, all of them excavated by Aleš Hrdlicka in the 1930s. The case took a long time to resolve, created much bad blood and disappointment on both sides, and ended with the reburial of the remains in cardboard boxes. Smithsonian anthropologists felt that they had been deprived of a valuable, much-studied collection. People from Larsen Bay thought they had lost an unnecessary amount of time and energy on what should have been a simple act of correcting a wrong done by Hrdlicka, who, although he claimed to have excavated mainly very old burials, was remembered locally as having robbed the graves of victims of a recent flu epidemic (Bray and Killion 1994).

Partly to make amends for the bad name that the Smithsonian got in the wake of all this, but also building on a tradition of community archaeology on Kodiak Island (Steffian 2001, 129–34), Aron Crowell of the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center and Amy Steffian of the Alutiiq Museum, together with an advisory panel of Alutiiq elders and Alaskan scholars, created an exhibition called *Looking Both Ways – Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*. Many of the core objects come from the Fisher Collection, and are returning to Alaska for the first time since being collected more than a century ago (Crowell, Steffian and Pullar 2001). The significance of even such a temporary return stems from a problem Alaska Natives share with other Northern peoples. Museum collections documenting the arts and skills of their ancestors are located in such far-away cities as Washington, D.C., St. Petersburg, Berlin or Copenhagen, making it hard for museums to live up to the claim that by giving the “general public” access to collections they are also serving the community of origin. The Jacobsen collection, which became the focus of the other project – a research trip to Berlin undertaken by anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan and a group of Yup’ik elders – was not only halfway around the globe from Alaska, but had only recently reappeared. It was presumed lost during World War II, but had actually been taken to Leningrad by the Red Army. From there, it was returned first to Leipzig in 1978, and then, between 1990 and 1992, to West Berlin (Fienup-Riordan 1998; Höpfner 1992; Kasten 1990).

I was involved with both projects in a marginal capacity, as a researcher and translator of archival materials. Most of what I know of the actual

collaboration between Native experts and anthropologically trained curators comes from published accounts or, in the case of *Looking Both Ways*, videotaped planning sessions. Here are brief overviews of the conceptions of both projects:

*Looking Both Ways* is a traveling exhibit put together by the Anchorage office of the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center and the Alutiiq Museum. The latter opened in Kodiak, Alaska in 1995 with funds from the Exxon-Valdez oil spill settlement, and is governed by a board of representatives from the regional Native corporations. The exhibition opened in Kodiak in June 2001, has been shown in the small museum of Homer on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, will be at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art during the winter of 2002/2003, and will tour Alaska and the contiguous US until 2004.<sup>4</sup> The aims of the exhibit were twofold: to bring objects collected by Fisher and others back to be seen in Alaska and to generate a discussion about the meaning of Alutiiq identity both within and outside the Alutiiq community. The Alutiiq (also known as Koniag and Chugach), whose territories on the Kodiak Archipelago and Prince William Sound were centers of the Russian fur trade and the American salmon canning industry, are among the least known Native groups in Alaska and often have to ask themselves whether they are "real" Natives, or rather a mix of Russians and Scandinavians with some Native ancestry (Pullar 1991).

Through an elders planning conference (with delegates from every Alutiiq village), a youth-elder workshop and ongoing consultation with knowledgeable community members, the exhibit organizers hoped to generate a discussion within the community about how Alutiiq history should be presented and what was important about it. The exhibit catalog is also the first attempt at a general ethnographic account of the Alutiiq.<sup>5</sup> The copy of a parka from the collection, as well as a CD-ROM with pictures of the objects, will remain in the community as educational tools. The aim was to provide Alutiiq representatives with access to objects and the power to make decisions on how to present them, in partnership with the official curators – white, academically trained anthropologists – who provided contact with the lending institutions (Crowell 2001, 11–2).

The immediate goal of the work Yup'ik elders did with the Jacobsen collection in Berlin was not to create an exhibition,<sup>6</sup> but a book with photographs of the objects and transcriptions of the discussions and stories they elicited among the elders. This is a good example of what organizer and author Ann Fienup-Riordan calls "visual repatriation," a "two-way process of Yup'ik people owning their past and museum curators better understanding the contents of their attics" (Fienup-Riordan 1996, 23). The objects themselves are not physically returned, but, along with their pic-

tures, something more elusive and potentially more threatened: the memories and associations they trigger in the minds of elders who remember using such objects, or hearing about them, as children. The four elders and two interpreters/recorders (Catherine Moore, Wassilie Berlin, Paul John, Annie Blue, Marie Meade and Andy Paukan), who traveled to Berlin with Fienup-Riordan in the fall of 1997, analyzed the entire Yup'ik part of the collection (approximately 2,000 objects) in the course of three weeks. They recorded technical explanations, stories, songs, rules of correct use and reflections on the meaning of these objects for the future. Museum curators had to make exceptions to some of their professional guidelines and allow the guests to handle, weigh, play and dance with the objects. The result, however, was not only an undamaged collection, but one whose value had been enhanced by the knowledge recorded (Fienup-Riordan 1998 and forthcoming).

In both projects the initiative came from the anthropologists, who then proceeded to find Native collaborators. Both focused on working with members of older generations, the famous “elders” who in some cases have personal memories of using objects like those in the collections or hearing about them from their own elders. Representation of a variety of local groups was an issue for both projects. For *Looking Both Ways*, each village in the region was asked to nominate an elder for the planning conference. Ann Fienup-Riordan, who selected the participants in consultation with her Yup'ik translator and collaborator Marie Meade, traveled with elders from four different parts of the Yup'ik region (two men and two women), who also represented the three major Christian denominations in the area: Catholic, Moravian and Russian Orthodox (Crowell 2001, 11; Fienup-Riordan forthcoming).

### **Ownership and semiotic sovereignty**

So do these projects warrant the claim of going “beyond” the repatriation debate? Critics could argue that they represent attempts to circumvent it. Instead of a permanent return of objects into Native ownership, there will only be a temporary display or photographs in a book. Parts of the Fisher collection will possibly come to Anchorage on permanent loan after the traveling exhibit is over (Aron Crowell, personal communication, May 2002), but they will still be housed in facilities controlled by the Smithsonian Institution. Natives can look, and sometimes touch, but in the end property relations remain unchanged.

On the other hand, both projects conceptualize ownership in different terms than just holding an object in physical custody. Ownership of the

objects becomes less important than (to recall Fienup-Riordan's words) "ownership of a past" or of knowledge. Part of this knowledge is connected materially to the objects – they are testimony to the skills and artistic sensibilities of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Alutiiq and Yup'ik, and can instill pride in present generations and command the respect of their white neighbors. But at one of the planning conferences for *Looking Both Ways*, retired Alutiiq teacher Martha Demientieff pointed out how little is gained by simply returning objects from museums:

If I see a basket that I think was used in the past for berry picking, that's not enough for me to know. What I do, which heals my spirit and makes my body healthy, is to go out and pick berries in a basket, knowing that for maybe ten thousand years my ancestors have been doing this. ... And I hope that that kind of thing will come out as we look at these artifacts. (Quoted in Crowell 2001, 11)

Both projects place emphasis on generating or recovering knowledge through far-ranging discussions for which the objects are stimuli. Objects trigger elders' memories of gestures, words and sounds associated with a world in which such objects were used. They become the reason for elders to gather and decide on how to present them, on what is important in the community's history, what should be shown to outsiders and what should not. For instance, one of the subjects of debate at the Alutiiq Planning Conference was whether or not to show objects associated with shamanistic practices, and how to evaluate shamans' actions in the texts accompanying the displays (Crowell 2001, 11–2). Another question was how much weight to give to the Alutiiq language, which is spoken only by a tiny fraction of the community today. Owning a past requires what Suzanne Crawford (2000, 233) calls "semiotic sovereignty": the right to present accounts of one's past and to have them taken seriously by others. But such accounts do not simply exist within a community; they evolve out of opportunities to reflect on the past, out of encounters between knowledgeable people and through engagement with material reminders.

If, then, the issue is not so much where an object is stored but who can see it and hear its story, there are many possible solutions to conflicts between Native communities and museums. Where the interest of the Native community resides mainly in gaining access to the knowledge preserved in a museum, photographs of objects and transcripts of accompanying documentation can be an effective way of bringing that knowledge back. So can the study of collections by individuals interested in reviving certain technical skills, people who can learn how an object was made and teach that technique in their home community (cf. Kasten, *this volume*).

Susan Malutin and Grace Harrod from Kodiak Island did that by sewing a duplicate of a ground squirrel parka that had been purchased by William Fisher in Ugashik on the Alaska Peninsula in 1883. This not only created an object for permanent display on Kodiak Island, it also recovered some of the knowledge Alutiiq seamstresses held a century ago (Crowell, Stefian and Pullar 2001, 47). In the revival of North West Coast Native art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup>-century collections available for study to contemporary artists also played an inspiring role (Shadbolt 1986, 29–32).

The situation is different where the concern is mainly gaining control over the representation of one's past and restricting unauthorized persons from gaining secret knowledge. Even while the objects remain in a museum, Native communities can gain a voice in decisions over what kind of research can be conducted with certain collections or whether they can be put on public display. Such an arrangement, for which the term "joint custody" would truly be fitting, has been chosen by the Zuni Pueblo with respect to human remains and certain religious objects (Ferguson, Anyon and Ladd 2000, 257–9). It spares the Native community from making the decision how and where to receive the objects, and who will be responsible for determining what to do with them. It also saves them the costs and possible spiritual risks associated with any form of disposal or curation. The museum, on the other hand, retains some opportunities for study or display, and, through regular consultation with Native religious authorities, curators can gain a new understanding of the objects or about the issues of concern to the contemporary Native community. In the case of the Norton Allen Collection of prehistoric Hohokam artifacts, a museum and a Native American tribe officially received joint ownership when the collector donated it to the Arizona State Museum and the Tohono O'odham Nation (Teague, Joaquin and Lomawaima 1997).

Where, as in the work with the Fisher and Jacobsen collections, Native experts and museum professionals discuss and analyze objects, the recordings of these conversations themselves become artifacts. They represent a new kind of cultural property, one that appears to be easier to share and can, it is hoped, belong both to the Native community and to the organizing anthropologists, who have participated in creating it. In the case of these two collections, even the objects themselves are currently considered shareable by the descendants of their makers. None of the originals are claimed as physically necessary for the ritual or political survival of a community. The situation is different in many repatriation cases in North America, especially those involving human remains, which, when their return is desired, are claimed for their intrinsic properties and cannot be

replaced by pictures or reproductions. Museums themselves have traditionally placed great emphasis on original objects, and have indeed been instrumental in creating what is called the “aura of the original.” However, budget cuts and the long-term costs of storing collections force even museum professionals dedicated to research in material culture to consider a partial shift toward storing information rather than objects (Washburn 1998).

In discussing cultural property, it thus seems necessary to distinguish varying intensities of this aura of the original, or, to put it simpler, varying degrees of “thingyness” of the objects concerned. The strength of an aura may wax and wane over time, though, and neither objects nor information about them are intrinsically shareable. Opinions on this issue may vary from individual to individual as well as over time. While many of the Native American objects presently considered subject to repatriation or inappropriate for display ended up in a museum as a result of theft, coercion, or unauthorized sale, many more were voluntarily sold or given away by people who considered themselves their rightful owners. Among the latter are such anthropologist-generated artifacts as wax cylinders with songs from the Northwest Coast, sung by their owners explicitly for the purpose of being recorded. Today they are being reclaimed by heirs who no longer consider such knowledge appropriate for sharing. The Zuni have demanded the repatriation of cardboard replica kachina masks made by WPA workers and boy scouts while allowing original masks to remain in museums. It seems that the alienation and use of information is deemed more menacing by Zuni religious authorities than the alienation of objects (Ferguson, Anyon and Ladd 2000, 253–4, Ladd 2001, 112–3, Nason 1997, 249). How long the Alaskan consensus on the importance of sharing knowledge (rather than claiming objects) will last may depend to a large degree on the quality of relations between museums and interested community members.

Given that the issues to be resolved concern public recognition of claims to semiotic sovereignty far more than mere ownership, talking about “cultural property” at all may be an unfortunate choice of term. Is a past really something that can be “owned”? Lawyer-anthropologist Rosemary Coombe connects the discourse on culture as property to a kind of essentialist multiculturalism, where every person is considered to *have* one clearly demarcated culture, and where questions of recognition and authority are transformed into questions of legally enforced exclusive property claims (Coombe 1997, 80–3). Quite a bit of salvage ethnology’s obsession with creating inventories of the world’s cultures seems to survive in an approach that treats culture as a collection of objectified traits which can then be identified as the property of a certain group of people.

Be that as it may, representing itself as *having* a culture seems to be, in today's world, one of the most effective ways for a community to back up its claims to political and economic existence (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 65). Displaying distinctive artifacts is, in turn, an effective way to represent one's culture. This is one reason why museum collections are so important for contemporary cultural politics, and why the museum model as such does not seem to have much to fear from the inclusion of tribal voices into custody decisions. Tribes and Native corporations are eagerly opening their own museums all over the United States and Canada (Sens 1994). The *Tribal Museum Directory*, published by the Center for Museum Studies at the Smithsonian Institution in 1998, lists 150 tribally operated museums in North America. Many of the Smithsonian's projects also involve training Native interns, thus helping to create a new generation of Native museum professionals. Objects collected in big institutions may have to become more mobile, temporarily or permanently moving out to more peripheral places of storage, but the principle of conserving and collecting cultural heritage seems to have spread successfully into indigenous communities (Clifford 1997, 212).

### God's plan

This essay has presented two instances of Alaska Native elders "reowning" museum collections by working with them. Are these elders proving salvage ethnography wrong by still being there to care about their ancestors' creations, instead of having vanished into the twilight of history? Or are they demonstrating the final victory of the salvage paradigm by basing their cultural revival on the collections assembled in its name? In 1882, Johan Adrian Jacobsen took a wooden marker from a grave near the Yukon, thinking that it would far better realize its purpose "to be seen" in the Berlin Museum than in the Alaskan wilderness (Jacobsen 1884, 211–2). The words of Yup'ik elder Paul John, recently returned from Berlin, to a gathering of museum professionals in Anchorage in 1998 seem to confirm this reasoning, crediting Jacobsen with saving objects that would otherwise have been destroyed. But Paul John gives Jacobsen's actions a meaning quite different than the Norwegian sailor would have intended, by introducing other actors – a wisely planning God and destructive priests. He also introduces a different sense of history, in which Yup'ik makers and users of objects are not replaced by German viewers, but reassert their claims after overcoming a temporary crisis:

I truly believe that we were not supposed to lose our culture which God granted us long, long ago when there were no white people

in our area. And as I observe it, since God knew that our priests were going to brush away our culture, God evidently had our ancestral objects collected so that they would be revealed to us through a place totally unexpected, through Germany, a place underneath our home. That is how I look at the situation today. If we had kept the objects while our priests were brushing our culture away, we would have lost them and allowed the land to cover them by now. But since God had planned that they be revealed to us through an unexpected place, they are now being revealed down in Germany. [...] The objects in museums, our ancestral objects, are not insignificant. If we live using them as our strength, we will get closer to the ways of our ancestors. And when we are gone, our grandchildren will be able to continue to live according to the knowledge they have gained. (Quoted in Fienup-Riordan 2000, 272)

## Notes

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- 2 For Arctic North America, see Hall, Oakes and Webster 1994, Kingston 1999.
- 3 Beside human remains and funerary objects, NAGPRA recognizes two categories of objects subject to repatriation: “sacred objects,” defined as “specific ceremonial objects which are needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of traditional Native American religions by their present day adherents,” and “cultural patrimony,” meaning “an object having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group or culture.” Both definitions call for the demonstration of continuity of practices from the time the object was made, and, somewhat paradoxically, for evidence that the return of the object is crucial for maintaining that continuity; see Haas 2001.
- 4 The exhibit website can be viewed at: [www.mnh.si.edu/lookingbothways](http://www.mnh.si.edu/lookingbothways).
- 5 Two detailed ethnographic accounts by Russian-era travelers focus exclusively on the inhabitants of Kodiak Island (the Koniag) (Lisiansky 1814, Holmberg 1856). The classic ethnographic monograph of Birket-Smith (1953) describes only the Chugach of Prince William Sound.
- 6 Some masks from the collection had previously been included in Fienup-Riordan’s exhibit *Agayuliyararput: Our Way of Making Prayer* (Fienup-Riordan 1996, Fienup-Riordan and Meade 1996), and objects from the Jacobsen collection received a special place in the new permanent exhibit on Native American culture in the Berlin museum, which opened in 1999 (Bolz and Sanner 1999, 216–21).

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