

Culture as Property: Returning Knowledge to Native Communities

Erich Kasten

Erich Kasten received his PhD in anthropology (Ethnologie) from the Free University in Berlin in 1984. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Canadian Pacific Northwest and, since 1993, in Kamchatka. In addition to teaching at the Free University, he has realized numerous museum exhibitions and is involved in multimedia productions. He was the first coordinator of the Siberia Projektgruppe. Since 2003 he has been the team leader of a UNESCO project on indigenous knowledge in the Russian North.

The diverse backgrounds of the researchers in the Property Relations Focus Group generated lively discussions on pathways to reform in post-Soviet Siberia. They helped me crystallize my own concepts and approaches, which I have continued to apply in my most recent projects, funded by the German Research Council and by UNESCO. I chose to pay special attention to the symbolic discourses surrounding property concepts, because this enabled me to build on my earlier research with First Nations in the Pacific Northwest of North America. According to worldviews still in place in hunting and fishing societies today, well-being depends largely on maintaining proper relations with the supernatural. To understand property relations in these societies, it is necessary to understand the specific knowledge which underpins such relations with the supernatural and how it is manipulated in discourse. The prime location of my research in the Russian North since 1993 has been Kamchatka, where debates over cultural property have been particularly lively. For this reason, after convening the conference 'Postsocialisms in the Russian North' at MPISA in 2000, I proposed a similar large conference titled 'Culture as Property', which I convened in 2002, together with Deema Kaneff.

The culture-as-property debate is fuelled largely by the fact that cultural traditions are increasingly subject to commodification and political instrumentalization. This jeopardizes productive exchanges between indigenous and exogenous knowledge carriers, exchanges that are crucial for cultural dynamics. Creativity and innovation are blocked when stereotypes are reproduced, which is what happens when distinct 'cultural' or 'ethnic' styles are foisted on native traditions in order to make performances or works of art 'authentic' in the eyes of consumers (2004a, 2004c). It is important to acknowledge the diverse origins of such traditions. Almost all intellectual work builds upon the knowledge and ideas of others. This fact makes it difficult to specify the originality of any particular creation, which may be considered the property of an individual, of a collectivity, or of the entirety of humankind, depending

upon one's perspective. People writing legislation on cultural property must search for flexible solutions which take account of such fuzzy boundaries and recognize that cultural creativity is a continuous process which subverts rigid reification.

Similarly, when native political leaders and their advocates (often anthropologists) assert an ethnic identity and claim territorial boundaries for it, people whose existing social and economic networks are based on interethnic exchanges with their neighbours find the concepts alien. In Kamchatka, new socio-economic organizations such as the *obshchina* (clan community) failed because they usually involved the mapping of territories, whereas local people preferred to live with more flexible arrangements for sharing the land and its resources with others. Therefore, the proclamation of ethnic identities and ethnic territorial units such as 'Itelmeniya' and 'Koryakiya' can lead to tensions among residents in such areas, where different native groups lived together even before the massive arrival of incomers (2005d).

Looking more closely, one finds, of course, that native societies are not homogeneous: views about cultural property concepts vary according to interest and, often, generation. The anthropologist must take care in deciding which 'map' to follow. Those of powerful factions or native activists may well be opportunistic, and in such cases it is incumbent on the researcher to balance these maps against those of other local people.

From cultural property it is but a short step to investigating concepts of intellectual property in general. One particularly sensitive issue concerns what is understood as the 'anthropologist's property' – the collected data from one's own fieldwork. Researchers still often treat such data in questionable ways, without proper acknowledgement of the intellectual property rights of informants and research assistants. Contests over the cultural heritage of indigenous people require new ways of returning that knowledge or sharing it with the communities in which the data originated. I have tested several options for doing so in recent initiatives, with encouraging results. For example, anthropologists commonly collect unpublished manuscripts or notes by native experts and use them in their dissertations and other academic works. In order to do justice to the intellectual property of such native authors, I established the series *Posobie po yazyku i kult'ure korennykh narodov Kamchatki* with the Kamshat publishing house; three volumes by native authors (K. Khaloimova 2000, A. Urkachan 2002, and M. Yaganov 2005) have already appeared (see <http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/kamshat.html>).

To enable native and other local experts to take a more active part in academic debates, since 2000 I have organized (with the support of the Franckesche Stiftungen in Halle) a number of workshops in Kamchatka. The edited volumes of proceedings (2002e, 2004e) are published in Russian and are aimed primarily at native communities. They en-

courage local scholars and educators to continue developing bicultural education programmes, and we have contributed electronic learning tools on CD and DVD (2000, 2001a, 2005e, forthcoming). In this way, recorded texts and indigenous knowledge are being returned to local communities. Such e-learning tools include full transcripts in the native languages. They help in preserving and enhancing endangered languages and dialects, together with the particular knowledge connected to them. At the same time, optional Russian and English subtitles encourage cultural exchanges, not only with other local ethnic groups but also with people in other parts of the Russian North and in Canada and Alaska. These documentaries place special emphasis on indigenous knowledge with regard to nature use, the main focus of my work since 2003 under the UNESCO-LINKS programme.

Another project – hosted at the Museum für Völkerkunde in München and supported by the German Research Council from 2001 to 2004 – involved collaboration with native artists to study the cultural dynamics of their creations. While organizing exhibits in Germany (*Unterwegs: Nomaden früher und heute*, Westfälisches Museum für Naturkunde Münster, 2003, and *Offen für das Fremde*, Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin, 2005), I was able to test in real applications property concepts discussed at MPISA. Cultural heritage, removed from local communities in the form of objects, is ‘repatriated’ in new ways when the knowledge connected to it is presented in catalogues (2005a) and DVD documentaries (2003b, 2005b). These materials contribute to the survival of endangered art and craft traditions and supplement the educational programmes already described.

The internet, too, presents many opportunities for returning scientific knowledge based on data collected from local informants. New information technologies and the wider dissemination of knowledge, however, often have problematic effects on native societies. The unauthorized use of indigenous ‘secret’ knowledge can lead to well-justified anger among people affected by this ‘theft’. Nevertheless, potential benefits for native societies also arise through certain uses of modern technologies, which can allow them to participate in the global knowledge society (2004d).

An example is the website <http://www.siberian-studies.org>, which I created together with Michael Dürr. It is dedicated to case studies in Siberia and the Russian North by social and cultural anthropologists. By providing electronic access to digitized publications, the site both enhances dialogue within the scientific community and ensures that the outcome of ethnographic research is shared with local communities. In addition to essays by international scholars, particular attention is given to publications by local and native authors. Differing viewpoints from authors with a variety of backgrounds help stimulate more productive discussion and understanding among scholars, local and native experts, and other practitioners and consumers of culture in the Russian North.

Native organizations have welcomed this initiative, which counters the danger of an increasing divide between those at the centre and those on the periphery of the 'information society'. Because of high transportation costs, among other reasons, print media are increasingly scarce in communities such as those of Kamchatka, and local libraries seldom have the financial means to augment their holdings. But even if computers in private households are still rarities, and even if some villages still struggle to maintain reliable power supplies, almost every community has access to the internet, through either the library, the school, or the office of a native organization.

In sum, my investigations of property issues have emphasized how further theoretical insights can be achieved when concepts are explored and tested by means of practical applications. It is important to reflect critically on researchers' interactions with native communities, to devise appropriate ways of dealing with the intellectual property of informants and local experts, and to return to them the outcomes of the anthropologist's research, which is always a collaborative process.



Retired Even and Koryak reindeer herders share knowledge with anthropologist Erich Kasten, near Palana, 2003. (Photo: Aleksandra Urkachan)

Erich Kasten

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