The Magic of Bureaucracy: Repatriation as Ceremony

Laura Peers

For all that it has become a standard part of the museum profession, the idea and practice of repatriation continues to have a special energy, a political and emotional charge, articulating tensions between passionately held belief systems (Indigenous and scientific), core values of the Western societies which created museums (possession and scientific enquiry), and deeply felt aspirations of claimant groups. Repatriation is, nonetheless, largely a bureaucratic process. It is conducted by email, by publication of decisions, by letter, through formal minuted committee meetings, and by carefully planned face-to-face visits; it follows institutional policy and cultural protocol. Such actions are performed carefully, formally: ritually. While the ceremonies we usually think of as part of repatriation events are Indigenous—prayer, song, and dance—the administrative actions involved in repatriation are also ceremonies in the anthropological sense, performances of corporate identity and relations of power.

Furthermore, while museum staff and claimant groups have different agendas in this process, the ceremonies each group performs are interdependent and co-produced across the repatriation process. These intersecting sets of powerful actions not only translate human remains and objects from museum specimens to forms of personhood and release them from the museum into the hands of claimant groups, but for each group have the same overarching functions: to articulate and maintain existing identities, core values and structures of power; to open the possibility of new aspects of identity, new values, and new forms of relationships; and to articulate ongoing tensions between majority society and claimant groups.

As Curator for the Americas collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, I have facilitated just two repatriation claims: far fewer than many colleagues in North American and Pacific museums, but each case was given extra force by virtue of its location at the University of Oxford, a symbolic centre of the former British Empire. One case involved a single femur, which had been broken during the individual's life and had set badly, collected by a missionary as a medical curiosity, from an Indigenous nation with whom I have long-standing professional and personal relationships. The other case involved a single mandible of an older child or young adolescent, the wisdom teeth not yet through, with the provenance that the individual had been killed in a well-documented massacre by the U.S. army, along with over a hundred of his people. In that case, the Museum did not have existing relations with the claimant nation. I do not name these nations, in order to focus on the overarching dynamics of repatriation cases generally, and I focus on repatriations involving human remains, as epitomizing many issues within repatriation. Both processes of return were emotionally and professionally fraught, having considerable potential for reputational damage to the museum and the university should they go wrong. They occurred in heightened states of affect, challenged normal museum protocols, involved ritualistic and overtly ceremonial behaviour from museum staff and Indigenous participants alike, and were draining in every possible way: they were "proper ceremonies," in both the anthropological and Indigenous understandings of the term.

My consideration of the ritual elements involved in repatriation processes was triggered by preparing for the return of the child's remain. One of my tasks was to assemble the dossier of paperwork to accompany him back to the United States. Transit in this case was complicated by the fact that the claimant Nation wanted to carry their ancestor home on board the plane, rather than in the hold, on an international flight. All international returns require considerable

paperwork addressing legal and security issues triggered by the transport of human remains on board an aircraft from one country to another. Individual letters and documents demonstrate the legal chain of ownership and the authority of those transporting the remains; assert that the remains are not a health risk to others in transit or in its country of destination (i.e. that the deceased did not die recently of an infectious disease) and that the shipment poses no airline security risk; provide an export license and pro forma invoice to move the remains out of the UK; and address importation and customs issues in the destination country, naming the correct customs codes. If the dossier does not do all these things, the shipment could be impounded by customs officials, quarantined, and potentially destroyed.

Given the importance of the safe return of the child's remain, the dossier that my colleagues and I put together for this case included sixteen separate documents, totalling over thirty pages. The American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, the University of Oxford Physician, the President of the claimant nation, a senior security officer at Heathrow airport, and a leading international art shipping firm all contributed to the dossier. I thought of it as a magical device, something like the Trobriand canoe prows discussed by Alfred Gell (1992), something that would dazzle airport security officers and customs officials and cause them to look away, or to wield their stamps approvingly, something that would carry the child safely home. This dossier was crafted of power: it was a powerful thing with a powerful purpose. It was a ritual object, and its function was more than just moving one human remain from a museum on one continent to a grave on another. Equally, it became clear during this return that the administrative process of repatriation, culminating in the contents of that dossier, comprises a collective ritual that performs the actual release of the material and its transit from museum to grave. The rituals accompanying repatriation include bureaucratic acts

performed by museum staff as well as spiritual acts by Indigenous claimants, and it is the magic of bureaucracy that ultimately effects the repatriation.

Repatriation is a series of performances, formal institutional and cultural rituals, which articulate and reinforce identities and relations of power, and which also challenge these. Museums, as hierarchical, structured institutions with very formalized routines, are excellent lenses with which to analyze these dynamics. In both "settler" countries and the UK, museums are mainstream cultural institutions supported by government and charged through legal acts, social expectations, and professional standards with the possession and display of the material culture of Western and non-Western societies for the benefit of society. Consultation with Indigenous communities of origin for collections has been part of addressing historical inequities of collecting practices and of museological practices that excluded Indigenous perspectives even as they placed Indigenous material heritage items within Eurocentric classifications (Phillips 1995, 2005); repatriation has been an even more powerful form of addressing such imbalances of power (Clifford 2004: 18).

There is an additional element to repatriation within British contexts, given that museums—especially in England—are located in former centres of Empire, and hold collections arising from imperial entanglements. Existing literature on repatriation and restitution within the UK acknowledges that many museum collections were acquired through Imperial expansion and that repatriation is understood as "the Empire taking back" (Simpson 2001; Fforde et.al. 2002; essays on UK repatriation in Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). Within this context, repatriation is framed as the release of possessions by majority society to its formerly colonized groups, thus challenging the historical relations between museums and Indigenous communities. This also challenges aspects of British identity formed during the colonial era. As Kathleen Wilson has

argued (2003: 3, 62), the modern British nation-state emerged through its contacts with non-British peoples around the world during the age of imperial expansion. British collections of ethnographic material also emerged through such contacts, and became material articulations of difference between British and non-British, used to construct intellectual and political rationales of political dominance (Anderson 1983, Coombes 1995). In this context, giving things back to formerly colonized peoples takes on the burden of British political and identity reconstruction in the post-imperial age. It is little wonder that the ceremonies of repatriation in British museums are infused with such power.

Ceremonies always have consequences, functions, for their participants. What are the functions of repatriation ceremonies, both bureaucratic and Indigenous? Given that repatriation ceremony is always co-produced between museums and Indigenous claimants, how does co-production affect the nature and functions of such ceremonies?

Ceremony, ritual, and repatriation: descriptions

While anthropologists often define ceremony as a larger set of activities comprised of smaller ritual actions (Bell 2009: 70), Indigenous people often use the term ceremony to mean all ritual actions and avoid anthropological terms such as ritual. I am going to blur these terms here, defining them as the formal actions involved in the repatriation process, whether performed by museum staff to comply with institutional culture or Indigenous claimants to express theirs.

As with other forms of ritual, these are special performances of everyday actions with a special purpose, deeply embedded within symbolic systems, and connected to tradition (Mitchell 1996: 490). The entire repatriation process, from the decision to make a claim to altering museum records after return, also comprises a ceremony, a collective set of ritual actions expressing deeper meaning and performing several contradictory functions. Cross-culturally, anthropologists

note that ritual and ceremony may support existing social structure and its authority, may challenge these, or may be part of the political process and negotiate the tensions between continuity and change (Mitchell 1996: 490; Kelly and Caplan 1990). Repatriation ceremonies involve all of these processes.

Any exploration of the functions of ceremony in repatriation needs to be grounded in an understanding of what those ceremonies are. Remarkably, they are seldom described in the literature on repatriation. I want to describe these aspects of repatriation as I have seen them from my perspective of a curator of North American ethnographic collections at a university museum in the United Kingdom, with the acknowledgement that there are considerable cultural variations across both Indigenous claimants and museums. This essentialized description is a tool with which to think about repatriation ceremonies, their co-production, and their functions.[1]

The incoming claim is sent to the Director, either by the claimant community or by the member of staff who receives it first. Claims elicit a *frisson* in the museum, constituting a classic social breach (V. Turner 1974: 38) familiar to anthropological students of ritual: they are talked about, and taken extremely seriously, because they violate core assumptions that museums should retain and care for collections. The receipt of a claim initiates a series of actions that articulate structures of power, the concept of the museum as steward, and the relative values of scientific data, cultural meanings, and ethical capital involved. The Director asks for an assessment of the claim from senior staff with the specialist knowledge—usually the relevant curator—to evaluate it in terms of the museum's policy on repatriation. At Oxford, the policy considers the nature, age and likely cultural affiliation of the remains claimed and the circumstances of their acquisition by the museum; the identity of the claimant community and the nature of its relationship to the remains, and the; the value of the remains to science; and the cultural and spiritual significance of

the remains (Oxford University 2006). Other colleagues within or outside the university may be asked to contribute to the brief, such as scientists who have studied the remains. At this stage, knowledge is gathered from within the boundaries of academic and scientific networks; Indigenous community members are considered as claimants, not as potential experts. The brief includes information about complicating factors that make the claim difficult to align with the museum's policy, for instance should the claim arise from a group not socially or genealogically affiliated with the remains. As the brief is compiled, the remains are brought into the central building from outlying storage areas and provided with appropriate boxes and shelf space. Storage of remains is often improved at this point, with museum staff seeking to show best care of the material both to the claimant group and to themselves.

The senior staff team within the museum then discusses the case in a closed meeting, and minutes the discussion. Following this, the case is discussed at a meeting of the museum's board. The curator responsible for coordinating the brief will come in to the meeting to discuss key issues of the claim with the board and show how the claim meets, or does not meet, the University's policy on the return of human remains. The board may recommend seeking additional external advice on the case, accept the claim, or refuse it. The board's decision is formally and very carefully minuted, and their decision is then taken upwards to the University committee responsible for museums and divisional pro-Vice-Chancellor, and then taken by the pro-Vice-Chancellor to the University Council and the Vice-Chancellor. In cases where a decision is made to return remains, the University then advertises (within the University community) a declaration of intention to repatriate, to enable individuals to comment. This process takes between six months and several years, and a great deal of staff time at the senior and governance level.

Once the decision to return is made, the Vice Chancellor informs the claimant community, and a member of staff (usually the relevant curator) is tasked with liaising with claimants regarding the date of the handover, the community's wishes on storage of the remains before handover, assisting with travel arrangements for a delegation and making arrangements for secure shipment. This stage involves Skype meetings, calls and emails between community members and museum staff. Museum staff discuss whether to remove accession numbers (which were historically painted on bone), and follow guidance from community members in handling remains, for example speaking to the deceased when they enter the storeroom in which the deceased is resting.

Members of the claimant community then visit the museum for the formal handover. Before the handover itself, claimants visit with the deceased, during which the personhood of and kinship with the deceased is acknowledged. This is often the first community contact with the remains since they entered the museum decades or centuries earlier. This event occurs in a backstage area of the museum, a research room or boardroom, specially cleaned and staged by museum staff for the purpose of creating a respectful environment, to which the remain is moved from its storage location for the purpose of the encounter. Much thought by staff goes into the presentation of the remain as it moves symbolically from scientific histories of thought and museological regimes of care into Indigenous ones: it may be cleaned, a new conservation-grade cushion may be made for it, tags may be removed, and it is often draped with archival tissue or fabric, to express respect to the deceased and to community visitors. And, contrary to the usual practice of invigilating researchers working with collections as a means of ensuring careful stewardship of collections, staff may decide it is not appropriate to be in the room with community members for this visit.

There are many culturally-specific variables here, but in general: when claimants enter the room and face the remains being returned, there is a heavy pause, an emotional thickening in the space, and then acknowledgement of the spiritual presence and power of an ancestor. The grievous histories that brought the ancestral remain to the museum are also present in the room, and everyone is very conscious of them. The remains are socialized, leaving their status as objectified and numbered museum collections and becoming persons. Community members may smudge, using smoke from tobacco and sacred herbs to spiritually cleanse the room and to bridge this world and the spirit world, making the mundane space they occupy with the remains a sacred one. These actions also protect the living from the power of the deceased and of the spirit world, and are accompanied by prayers to spiritual beings. Claimants may make offerings of food to the deceased, introduce themselves to the deceased, and apologize that it has taken them so long to come and take the ancestor home. They may sing to the ancestor, songs appropriate to the status of the ancestor, such as chiefly songs, but also, with the remains of children, lullabies, old songs in old dialects the deceased might once have heard. The remains may be cradled against the bodies of relatives, held, stroked, touched, in loving gestures of kinship and care. Finally, the ancestor is wrapped in a special covering, often made especially for the occasion, gifts of love and respect: a blanket decorated with clan crest markings, the nation's flag, a Pendleton blanket, or a handmade baby quilt, wrapping the remain in signs of kinship and group identity.

Such social, affective, and embodied behavior is a radical departure from established norms of behavior in the museum, which is characterized as physically and emotionally calm and inflected by an attitude of rational, scientific enquiry. Despite this tension, museum staff facilitate and participate in these events. Staff disable smoke detectors to enable smudging, advise on whether ritual items such as eagle feathers or earth can be transported across international

boundaries for these interactions, book and set up museum rooms or find outdoor spaces for Indigenous ceremonies. Song and dance are key modes of cross-generational and cross-cultural interaction for many Indigenous groups, and museum staff find spaces in which these can occur and are often invited to dance with claimants. Staff hold hands with claimants and colleagues during prayer, witness moments of resocialization and mourning, and often cry with claimants. Staff also assist delegates to adapt ceremonies for the constraints of the museum space: I have provided picnic rugs for rituals on soggy English ground, purchased a portable barbecue for an outdoor smudging, persuaded my neighbors to dig a hole in their lawn for a bonfire in order to feed ancestors, and recruited my head of department to guard the gate into a garden behind the School of Anthropology premises in central Oxford to ensure privacy for a ritual involving the release of a soul.

As I have explored with Haida curator and repatriation committee member Nika Collison (2013; see also Gurian 2004), co-participation in ceremony with museum staff and the collaborative renegotiation of museum rules to facilitate ceremony (e.g. smudging; invigilation of researchers with objects; dancing with historic objects) challenge the historic dichotomy between museum and Indigenous group. The embodied, affective nature of repatriation ceremonies creates a sense of unfamiliarity for museum staff, a space of possibility for new relationships. While performing identity—and constructing social identity for the deceased, after a long period of identity as objects—they also involve museum staff as witnesses and participants, creating a sense of communitas.

The formal handover ceremony is co-choreographed by claimants and museum staff. A staff member facilitates delegates' ceremonial requirements within institutional constraints, and schedules the event around the diary of a senior museum official who performs the handover on

behalf of the institution. Staff liaise with delegates regarding media and whether the delegation wishes to have other staff, public, or diplomatic witnesses present at the handover.

The handover ritual includes Indigenous prayer, oration, and often song invoking ancestors and powerful beings to bless the space and effect social relations with the remains claimed, and formal speeches which distance the current institution from colonial collecting practices and affirm community stewardship of the remains. Delegates may describe the history of the collection of the remains being handed over, and the effects that such collecting had on their community: these are already known to most participants, but are spoken again in this context as public declarations, a formal witnessing of difficult histories. Both museum and claimant participants also express the hope that the repatriation will create more equal relationships between them, and that they will work together in the future. The transfer of legal ownership of the remains is performed through the presence of a senior official representing the institutional ownership and who speaks a formal (magical, ritual) statement releasing the remains into the care and keeping of the claimants—a phrase which, like Austin's (1962) analysis of the statement about marriage, creates something new through the utterance. The handover concludes with the exchange of diplomatic gifts between the museum and delegates, and often with the sharing of food and drink, involving community members and museum staff and governors, as a moment of communitas.

Afterwards, the remains are packaged for transport according to airline security regulations. This may involve art shipping agents, who have special expertise on transport and relationships with airport security staff. The dossier of paperwork addressing security, legal, health and customs issues now comes into play. Museum staff coordinating this stage are very conscious that improper paperwork may lead to the shipment being impounded: this is an anxious

phase because customs and security officials who have not been part of relationship-building now have considerable power, and very different agendas, toward the shipment.

Once at the border of the home country, the dossier is presented at customs and after examination by officials the remains are permitted to enter. And then, the ancestor is escorted home, and buried with relatives within a landscape sacred to that Nation. The museum records for the remains returned are updated—at the Pitt Rivers Museum they are not erased, but added to—to indicate that the material is no longer part of the museum collection. Finally, the museum and the community issue a press release, and community newspapers and museum annual reports feature information about repatriations: the museum to advertise itself as an ethical institution working with Indigenous communities, and the community to demonstrate to its members that it takes care of its own.

Ritual and its meanings and functions

These actions across the repatriation process are described here to show their conformity to formal rules and sets of expectations. The excessive administrative complexity, the way structures of power are highlighted, the depth of emotional involvement in these processes, the deep desire to lay the dead and their powerful histories to rest, the highlighting of issues of ownership and control of property, the desire to ensure due professional and legal diligence in museum stewardship, and the performance of communitas in handover ceremonies, all highlight powerful meanings underneath these actions. Repatriation events are ceremonies marking the intersections of majority society institutions and formerly colonized groups, around the change of legal and moral ownership of property acquired during the colonial period through unequal relations of power, and intended to satisfy political and social needs in museum and claimant communities.

Considering the functions of ceremony helps us see these deeper elements of repatriation. As Catherine Bell (2009: 19) states, ritual expresses deep beliefs, or “conceptual orientations” in society. Repatriation rituals make visible the core value of possession in Western culture, which is linked to the acquisition and maintenance of social and political status and power; they also perform aspects of colonial relations of power. At the same time, repatriation rituals challenge the identity of museums as institutions charged by mainstream society with keeping things deemed of value to the nation-state, and serve as symbolic arenas for challenges to colonial relations. This explains the extremely ritualistic behavior across repatriation events: “Ritual and ceremonial behaviors develop in response to situations in which some transition, ambiguity, conflict, or uncontrollable element threatens a given structure of relations either explicitly or, simply by remaining beyond control, implicitly” (T. Turner 1977: 60). From an Indigenous perspective, the lack of control over the bodies of the dead as part of the imposition of colonialism constituted profound threats to the structure of relations between the living and the dead and amongst the living. Colonialism also altered Indigenous sovereignty: as Classen and Howes (2006: 209) remind us, “Collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin.” For Indigenous people, repatriation is a set of rituals intended to challenge the historic structures of power through which collections entered and continue to be held within the museum. Repatriation rituals also function to develop and articulate new layers of identity and values for museums, based on inclusivity and social justice. These do not necessarily replace older values of scientific enquiry or possession but are layered on top, sometimes uneasily and incompletely. For indigenous claimants, repatriation rituals assert their increasing power vis a vis mainstream society and ongoing articulations of cultural identity (Clifford 2004). There are resounding dissonances between identities, values, and expectations

articulated in the rituals of repatriation which speak to the continuing tensions between societies. These contradictions are in keeping with the anthropological literature on ritual, which suggests that ritual may be used to challenge or resist power and authority; that it articulates and becomes a "site of political contest between social groups"; and that it may create moments of communitas and social unity by uniting conflicting groups in ritual action, but that ultimately it is central to the creation and maintenance of structures of power (Mitchell 1996; Kelly and Kaplan 1990).

The first, and primary, function of ceremony in repatriation is to act as a specially demarcated space and event within which existing identities, values, and structures are expressed and affirmed (Goffman 1959: 35-6; see also Schechner 2003: 14). This is true both for Indigenous claimants and for museums. For claimants, the engagement with the past through the overarching ceremony of repatriation affirms distinctive historical experiences and key aspects of identity in the present related to those experiences. Historical experiences that led to the collection of the remains being claimed are re-told across the repatriation process, within the community, to museum staff, and in press releases. Repatriation rituals are powerful because they are epitomizing events: "narratives that condense, encapsulate, and dramatize longer-term historical processes" (Fogelson 1989: 143). Such ceremonies symbolically articulate these processes, acknowledging the histories of removal of ancestral remains and material heritage from Indigenous communities as a manifestation of colonial power over Indigenous peoples, and critiquing such processes by imposing Indigenous ways of understanding them.

For Indigenous claimant groups, repatriation ceremonies involving prayer, smudging, song, dance, and social and kinship-based interaction with ancestors constitute embodied performances of distinctive identity, cosmology and values to themselves, to museum staff, and

to other witnesses representing mainstream society. To perform identity in such settings is an emphatic declaration of continued distinctiveness and survival (Clifford 2004: 8).[2]

Repatriation also performs identity for museum staff and institutions through rituals involving the commissioning of reports, formal discussion in committees, and the use of structures of governance and authority to adjudicate and decide on repatriation claims. These actions articulate core values of stewardship and possession, demonstrating the museum's care of collections and caution in disposal of collections. The elaborate processes for adjudicating claims, the displays of power within the formal arenas of committees, legalities, and elaborate bureaucracy, perform the distinct identity of museums. There is an additional layer to this identity in the United Kingdom, where repatriation is understood as a threat to museums not simply because of the loss of collections or the limitations to scientific research such loss would impose, but because it threatens the accumulation of objects acquired in processes central to the construction of British identity across the early modern period.

Repatriation rituals also articulate power remaining in museums, and mainstream society, when faced with perceived threats by formerly colonized peoples. They are used, as ritual often is, to control challenges to power and to maintain the status quo (T. Turner 1977: 61-62):

> Ritual may be defined as formulaic patterns of symbolic action for ordering or controlling relatively disorderly or uncontrollable situations … because they directly model, in their own structures, the hierarchical mechanisms of control that forms an intrinsic part of the structure of the situations in question.

Thus, museums dictate the terms of engagement for and the processes of repatriation, from setting policies describing what they regard as legitimate claims to deciding whether claimants

may smudge in the museum space. As Lynch and Alberti have described (2010; see also Lynch 2011), museums now seeking relations of greater equality with minority groups may instead continue colonial structures of power, by inviting minority groups to contribute to predetermined museum processes in very limited ways. The formal performances of committees and bureaucracy, the negotiations between museum staff and claimants about the nature and logistics of Indigenous ceremonies, and the elaborate precautions regarding airport security and customs all highlight the power of the museum and mainstream society to control objects and human remains even as these are in the process of leaving their domain.

At the same time, repatriation rituals are arenas for developing new aspects of identity and new values for museums. This function of repatriation ritual creates forms of communitas and shared experience encompassing museum staff and Indigenous claimants, which create new relationships of greater equality. As Victor Turner noted long ago (1991(1969): 128), "communitas … transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency." Prayer, dance, song and emotion, the embodied and affective cores of Indigenous ceremony within the repatriation process, are highly effective in this process (Collison and Peers 2013). Holding hands in prayer; song, dance, drumming; wearing clan regalia; dancing museum objects to honor ancestors and learn from them; and sharing food among participants and with ancestral spirits, involve museum staff, whose hands are also held, who stand around the fire, who facilitate and witness performances, who may be invited to dance or to participate in smudging. Many of these shared moments are infused with strong emotions, grief and anger and love. Staff witness, and to a certain extent participate in, these emotions. Being with people who are weeping on objects, who

are grieving and apologizing to the deceased, who are emotionally overwhelmed at the moment of handover or visibly anxious at the responsibility of transporting their ancestor home across hostile enemy lines of customs and airport security, is profoundly disruptive to “normal” ways of working in the museum and to the ways in which museum professionals think about museum collections. Bringing emotion (and thus sociality) into the museum as a scientific institution acknowledges Indigenous forms of ownership over museum collections. The shared emotional tension of such moments can also profoundly transform the dynamic of relationships: we humanize each other through such moments and through having experienced them together, even though we are experiencing different things (Collison and Peers 2013).

In many cases, given the historic disjuncture between museums and indigenous peoples, such rituals creating communitas may be the first ever coming-together in that relationship, and a starting point for creating new relationships based on mutual respect. Importantly, the museum director and sometimes board members are involved in moments of communitas at the handover ceremony along with curatorial, conservation, and front of house staff, so that shifts in perspective arising from these moments develop across the entire institutional structure. This process encompasses what Eaton and Gaskell (2009: 235-6) have termed decentering, an institutional and societal shift toward an “ideal of acknowledging fundamental equality among human forms of social organization.”

The concept of decentering brings us to an important function of repatriation ceremony that contradicts its other function of articulating colonial structures of power that museums retain over collections: the opportunity to affirm commitment to an emerging identity for museums which emphasizes social justice, equality, inclusion and plurality (Phillips 2005: 89). In this

vision, the museum becomes a technology for social justice and the sharing of power—and thus of collections (Sandell and Nightingale 2012). Repatriation, as a highly charged and visible symbol, becomes a means by which society distances itself from colonial histories and relations of power.

Such performances of new identity and values for museums do not entirely erase old ones. The third function of ritual in repatriation is the articulation of continuing tensions between majority society and minority, formerly colonized peoples. Despite the hopeful statements about equality that accompany handover ceremonies, historic relations of power are not resolved through repatriation. At a mundane level, the budgetary imperative and management culture of museums tends to work against the construction of new museum identities based on social justice and the construction of long-term ethical relations with Indigenous peoples. Within the heightened context of repatriation ritual, at the very moment that remains are released by the museum and unequal relations of power are articulated as problematic, the museum's—and mainstream society's—power is reasserted. While it is true, as James Clifford (2004: 18) states, that "Repatriation … establishes indigenous control over cultural artifacts and thus the possibility of engaging with scientific research on something like equal terms," it is also true that when one is standing at Customs waiting to find out whether an ancestral remain is going to be quarantined, that equality is nowhere in sight. At other times in the process, the ongoing struggle for power produces uncertainty in participants, or cycles rapidly between different sets of authority.

Such instability of power was expressed in seemingly minor ways during the return of the child's remain. The art shipping company contracted for transport advised that although the remain would belong legally to the claimant after the handover ceremony, it was necessary from

a security perspective to sequester the remain in the museum overnight before shipping so that it would remain "secure." On the morning of transport, the shipping company representative came to pick up the remain and the claimant delegates to take them to Heathrow. At the museum, the shipping agent began to move toward the suitcase in which the ancestor was packed, and then stopped, physically stepped aside, apologized to the claimant delegate who was nominated as legal courier, and asked the delegate to pick up and move the suitcase in which the remain was packed, acknowledging kinship and moral rights over professional ones to handle the shipment. The agent then drove the delegates and the remain to the airport and assisted them through security, including x-ray of the case containing the remain and the inspection of documents. The dossier, with all its powerful letterheads and signatures, performed its protective magic (or, in the claimant nation's world view, the spirits of the ancestors exercised their considerable power to ensure a safe journey), and the agent escorted the group onto the airplane for the journey home. Very complex assertions of ownership and control were enacted at each of those moments.

Conclusion

If rituals are a "significant site of political contest between different social groups… [which can] lead to change, as much as they evoke tradition and continuity" (Mitchell 1996: 493), if they can be "a principal site of new history being made" (Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 141), does this hold true for repatriation rituals?

In some ways, repatriation ceremonies have very little effect. While they may create moments of communitas when museum staff may weep or pray with delegates, museums continue to own objects, to set the rules by which repatriation claims are accepted or rejected, and

to determine the nature of the entire set of ceremonies. Colonial structures of power as embodied in the museum appear to be untouched by repatriation ceremony.

On the other hand, as Kelly and Kaplan state (1990: 135), “If a system of domination controls the representation of what is possible and what is natural, then a ritual of resistance breaks the hegemony over the subjective consciousness of the ritual participants. It makes them conscious of the oppression and allows them to envision new communities and possibilities.” Repatriation ceremony is ultimately efficacious because it does precisely that: it provides personal experiences which allow people to envisage new possibilities. Repatriation creates important precedents which act as the equivalent of neural pathways, creating options for thought and action that did not exist before, and training staff at all levels up to the directorship and board that such actions are possible. Embodied, emotional, and often startling, the ceremonies of repatriation cause people to think about the museum in new ways. Over time, a sense of familiarity with the process develops at all levels of museum staff. Quotidian practices of governance, record-keeping, conservation, display, and documentation remain unchanged but with a new overlay of awareness that museums are accountable to claimant communities.

Furthermore, as colleagues whom I consulted in writing this paper noted, repatriation takes many forms, and does not exist in a vacuum. Many museums across the UK have developed ties to the communities whose material heritage they care for and have created innovative ways of making collections accessible to those communities. Photo-elicitation projects, consultation about care and interpretation, expanded loans involving handling components supervised by museum staff in or near communities, bringing delegations to the UK to see collections—all of these form a rapidly-evolving culture of expectation within UK ethnographic museums (Krmpotich and Peers 2013: 24-34). Repatriation is part of this set of

activities, not distinct from it. If repatriation is a ceremony comprised of distinct rituals, then it is also a ritual within the larger ceremony of recentering ethnographic museum curation

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Notes

[1] At UK museums this process works very differently than it would in the USA, where NAGPRA has created parallel administrative processes.

[2] On the ways repatriation rituals strengthen distinct Indigenous identity outside the museum, see Krmpotich 2010 on the effects of repatriation amongst the Haida Nation. Krmpotich concludes that Haida repatriation rituals—including the making of blankets and boxes with clan crests to carry ancestors on their journeys home, the formal welcoming home of ancestors and the burial process, feasts to feed ancestors' spirits with traditional foods, the use of Haida regalia adorned with clan crests at such events—strengthen kinship, identity and community.