

## **Volume introduction: repatriation and ritual, repatriation as ritual**

Repatriation—one of the most powerful but under-theorized processes within “museum worlds”—is often portrayed as a space of contestation: Indigenous vs Western, sacred vs secular, science vs religion, colonial control vs cultural survival. The editors and authors of this issue of *Museum Worlds* have taken a different set of perspectives. We explore repatriation as ritual: a set of highlighted performances enacting cosmological beliefs for a special purpose, deeply embedded within symbolic systems, and connected to a plurality of traditional scripts as well as to social and political structures. Challenging the either/or dichotomies within which repatriation has been characterized, we describe the ways in which rituals are enacted across the entire repatriation process both by Indigenous claimants and by museum staff. Some of the rituals of repatriation are enacted within the space of Indigenous ceremonies; others happen within the museum spaces of collections storage and the boardroom, including professional processes of museum labor; others, such as handover ceremonies, are sharply defined, co-produced and culturally hybrid. Our understanding of ritual embraces the breadth of definitions of ritual practices, including habitual and unconscious actions and specially demarcated performances intended to communicate with the sacred and taking participants out of the everyday. Authors in this volume have taken on the challenge to use concepts of ritual as an analytical tool to understand the broad spectrum of activities involved in repatriation.

The larger contexts in which repatriation operates also highlight its ritual nature. As a process managed by state-funded cultural institutions within nation-states and with formerly colonized claimants, repatriation articulates the outlines of an emerging moral landscape, where negotiations about memory, responsibility, guilt, identity, sanctity, place and ownership are given a ritual form (cf. Gustafsson Reinius, Silvén and Svanberg 2012: 5). In this sense, the formal bureaucracy of repatriation is just as much a ritual as Indigenous

ceremonies conducted at various points during the repatriation process. For the nation-state, the ritual involves an assertion of moral purging from historical guilt through bureaucratic means. For Indigenous claimants, repatriation includes spiritual cleansing and prayer, fulfilling kinship obligations to ancestors, laying spirits to rest and acknowledging difficult histories as part of the process of mourning and healing: “All remains need to be given ceremony which will ease the pain of the Indigenous community and restore some self respect and pride as their ancestral spirits are united” (Atkinson 2010: 18, 19). The entire process of repatriation is a specially-demarcated, ritual space within which relations of power between claimant and institution—and their respective worlds—are articulated and potentially realigned.

While we use ritual as an analytical tool to enable a critical focus on the relations of power involved in repatriation, we also acknowledge and honor the perspectives of Indigenous groups that ancestral remains and objects require ritual, that ceremony is at the core of what is needed to show respect and to begin to reclaim and set right the outcomes of unequal historical relationships. We add to this a sense that it is important, in such emerging forms of ritual, for all participants to be self-reflexive, thoughtful, and willing to discuss the process, actions, and expectations involved if we are to enact change through the processes we discuss and describe here.

In these articles, ritual is explored in relation to actions within the museum as well as in relation to the actions of Indigenous claimants. The extreme care taken at all stages of repatriation by participants, and the emotional weight such actions have, tells us that there is more going on than meets the eye, and that what is happening within the ritual space of repatriation is very powerful. Ritual occurs in the administration of repatriation, including highly prescribed, very formal, sometimes excessively bureaucratic behavior of museum staff and committees when determining the outcome

of claims, the construction of elaborate frameworks for evaluating the legitimacy of claims, the extensive paperwork required to transfer title, and the special efforts required to pack and transport returned ancestors and cultural property. Bell's work on ritual (2009: 19) describes such behavior as arising from the ritual enactment of underlying, deep cultural "conceptual orientations," to the extent that it leads to "particularly thoughtless action—routinized, habitual, obsessive." The excessive bureaucracy of repatriation expresses deep underlying concepts in Western culture, just as claiming ancestors and ancestral items and the Indigenous ceremony across the process expresses Indigenous identity in its respect for ancestors. Possession (for museums) and kinship (for Indigenous claimants) emerge through this lens of analysis as key underlying expectations, along with different and overlapping senses of responsibility toward collections and ancestral remains by all participants. The desire of museum staff to demonstrate respect for Indigenous claimants and distance themselves from colonial actions also underlies compulsive actions across the repatriation process.

In exploring the nature of repatriation ritual, we ask what functions such rituals serve, what power is flowing through them, who that power serves, and what it does. Anthropological theory tells us that ritual can cause change, can create new states of being, or reinforce the status quo (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:135). The affective, spiritual, or administrative force of actions involved in repatriation would not have such energy if they did not achieve something, if something crucial were not at stake. As Mitchell notes (2002: 493), rituals are "significant sites of political contest between different social groups." Repatriation involves rituals of resistance as much as the reassertion of existing relations of power, with the potential to make all participants "conscious of the oppression and ... to envision new communities and possibilities" (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:135). The possession, claim and transfer of heritage items and human remains achieves translations in their location and care,

and recategorizes them from specimen to ancestor. These processes also create reputation, identity, and—potentially—reparation for historic injustice, space for the development of new relationships of equality between Indigenous and colonizer, and powerful experiences which serve as catalysts for new ways of understanding and behavior (on the political agency of ritual in relation to dead bodies and reburial, see also Verdery 2010). One significant possibility of transformation highlighted in several papers in this issue is the co-production of ceremony by museum staff and claimants at the handover moment in the repatriation process.

*Ritual agencies of repatriation: renewal, translation and emergence*

Theoretical contexts for this volume include aspects of literature on ritual—including analyses based on Indigenous ceremony and those examining the more unmarked, but equally significant and charged, habitual processes of Western society such as professional museum behavior. The fact that we take interest in ritual as repetitive and at times located in habitual, unreflexive behavior does not imply an imagination of ritual as something fixed. The emergent nature of repatriation rituals illustrates James Clifford's (2013) point that Indigenous groups' strong return to cultural identities and political agency involves both the recovery of traditions and creative work in process, and the power of ritual to both articulate and to alter existing patterns of politics and sociality.

Existing literature has considered museums as both ritual and secularizing spaces. Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (2005:8) examined the processes by which museums, as specially demarcated sites encouraging contemplative behavior, “publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it.” Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto's *Science, Magic and Religion: The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic* (2004:3) also considers “how museums...may be

invested with ritual meaning by both museum staff and visitors” and dramatized by different actors. Another strand of literature discusses the contested secularization of sacred items in museum spaces, where it is assumed there should be “no touching, no spitting, no praying” (Mathur and Singh 2015; cf. Wingfield 2010). The essays in this volume contribute to the literature on museum as ritual space by exploring the museum as both setting for and agent of ritual action, paying special attention to hybrid and intercultural productions of ritual involving different categories of staff, claimants, other agents, and public audiences. And while we would agree with Aaron Glass (2015: 19-20) that, “all anthropological knowledge is co-constructed to a significant degree, in as much as it emerges from social encounter and interaction that is based on relations of consultation and complicity between scholars and research associated,” one of the uses of the focus on ritual in these analyses is that such co-production becomes highly visible.

These essays also draw on literature examining the “dramatic change in the relationships between museums and their source communities, the communities from which museum collections originate” (Peers and Brown 2003: 1; Golding and Modest 2013). Museums have become key sites in which nation-states offer “symbolic restitution” to formerly colonized peoples (Phillips 2003: 158). Picking up on this, scholars today stress the need for studies on the social and material agency of collections and museums as entangled, active networks of objects and people (Byrne 2011, Gustafsson Reinius, Svanberg and Silvén 2012). Ritual can also be understood as a kind of socio-material agency, in which aesthetics, form and symbolism work with various actors to achieve not only social durability but change and transcendence.

The working definition of ritual used in the volume is broad, encompassing aspects of performance; the articulation of social and political structures, and challenges to these; and the enactment of broader systems of belief. We find especially useful the idea of ritual as a

special performance of ordinary actions for a special purpose, deeply embedded within symbolic systems (Mitchell 2002: 490). As with other kinds of ritual, repatriation articulates social and political power, reinforces it in some ways, and challenges it in others (Bell 2009: 170). Terence Turner's definition (1977:61-62) of ritual seems especially germane to consideration of repatriation: "formulaic patterns of symbolic action for ordering or controlling relatively disorderly or uncontrollable situations by controlling the hierarchical relationship between the levels of the structure within which the relations in question are defined."

We draw on key works and themes from the very large body of literature about ritual to think about the repatriation process, including ritual's repetitive and "formulaic patterns of symbolic action," the role of ritual in upholding social and political order by reinforcing collective beliefs (Durkheim 1912), and Victor Turner's concept of ritual as social drama and the way that ritual fuses social order and sacred space (1974). Strathern and Stewart's comment (2007: 137) that "[Victor] Turner's social dramas—sequences of action in which conflict is expressed and, if possible, resolved—can be seen as kinds of ritual performances, with all their capacities to effect change through processual mediations of social relationships," seems directly applicable, especially to handover ceremonies at the core of repatriation.

Several of the papers in this volume explore aspects of what V. Turner (1977) identified as a temporary but deeply felt sense of union, or *communitas*, among participants, experienced in the central stage of ritual, which creates a temporary levelling of social conditions. *Communitas* is a key part of the embodied and affective nature of ritual across the repatriation process. Recent work has continued to emphasize the role of the body in ritual and of ritual as sensory and affective experience: Bull and Mitchell (2016), for instance, state that ritual "enables ideas, beliefs, values and representation to be shared among participants

through embodied engagement.” Paul Connerton (1989) suggested the role of commemorative rituals to secure central values in unconscious and habitual ritual. Such theories have fueled critical discussion of ritual’s role as political manipulation and seductive tool in the hands of power and order. As Peers notes in this volume, however, the embodied and affective nature of repatriation ritual may also do the opposite, providing pathways for making new ways of doing and thinking more possible within the museum culture and space. Tambiah’s (1979: 137) adaptation of the Chamula concept of ritual as “heated discourse” serving as an “intensified medium” to establish contact with the sacred, inspires consideration of the multisensory, emotionally heightened, and spiritual nature of repatriation, the most heated discourse in museums in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

One of the intriguing implications of considering repatriation as ritual is that the processes of repatriation belong both to very local spaces and to the realm of globalization, and networks of people, with very different cultural and ceremonial scripts. This broadening of ritual suggests that we might be less concerned with whether ritual behavior should be understood as secular or sacred, if it serves change or stability, or belongs to the modern or traditional realm, and more concerned with how such emerging ceremonies allow a “restoration of behavior” (Schechner 1981) in the sense of a ritual and spiritual usage of things: how the rituals of repatriation function (or not) to set right many things that have been badly wrong. As Frank Korom (1999: 21) states, ritual loci are “sites of contestation where global concerns are debated and negotiated for political, economic, and ideological reasons.” That repatriation rituals include both culturally specific and hybrid, interculturally negotiated forms of action to achieve such potential resolutions constitutes a significant development.

*Ritual and repatriation: six case studies*

The volume's three guest editors have all participated in repatriation as museum staff members. Contributors include Indigenous peoples and claimants, museum staff (some Indigenous), anthropologists, folklorists and historians who have participated in and reflect on repatriation in different ways. Repatriation is considered across different geopolitical contexts and historical periods, from a nineteenth century Sámi case in Norway to issues involved in recent Hopi repatriation under NAGPRA in the USA. Each case study explores various forms of ritual connected to repatriation and the ways these articulate identity, relations of power, and politics. Following the papers, we include brief comments by discussants, some of whom cross the categories of museum professionals, Indigenous community members, repatriation claimants, and repatriation officers. They discuss the transformative power of repatriation on museums, communities, and our individual selves and provide models for appropriate cultural practice and how to demonstrate respect. Their contributions call us to ceremony, to restorative justice, to engage in repatriation, and to witness how it has changed them.

Laura Peers' article uses cases of repatriation of human remains from the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford to consider the processes of repatriation (seldom actually documented in detail, despite the importance this topic has had), their co-produced nature, and the underlying meanings of bureaucracy and action across the process. She then considers whether the rituals of repatriation change the status quo, concluding that the affective, embodied nature of ritual, and moments of *communitas* involved, create new models and pathways for changed thought and behavior for museum staff and reassert cultural identity and sovereignty over ancestral materials for Indigenous claimants, even as they assert ongoing, unequal relations of power between claimant communities and museums as agents of the nation-state.

Focusing on the remains of two Sámi men executed for their part in the Kautokeino rebellion of 1852 in Norway, Stein Mathisen's paper examines the history of repatriation claims, and the changing nature of ceremonies attached to these over times. Mathisen also

examines the ways in which the burials, claims, and reburials have functioned as an ongoing ritual arena for the assertion of power by the state over Sámi people, and the insistence by Sámi people of forms of justice and expressions of sovereignty. Centering his analysis on “how various actors put the dead and their remains to work in narrative emplotments” and how these in turn show the complexity of repatriation and its inability to resolve or even entirely embrace all perspectives involved in such cases over time, Mathisen details the ritual performances through which various agendas pass, in changing configurations, across time.

Emma Knight also explores an early, landmark repatriation arising from the confiscation of potlatch regalia from the Kwakwaka'wakw community at Alert Bay in 1921. Using archival documents from the relevant museums which received the collection, she pieces together the highly formalized ways in which staff members and indigenous claimants navigated this largely uncharted territory of repatriation. Knight's analysis indicates the ways in which the bureaucracy of repatriation articulates deep values and regimes of power, demonstrating how the “letters, memorandums, collections inventories, and legal consultations found in the archive reflect the ritual actions museum staff undertook which served to reinforce their institutional identity when it was being threatened by repatriation,” and which now provide “a collective memory of these conversations, moments of conflict, and moments of resolve.”

Unlike the processes documented in other papers in this volume, the Alert Bay case archives indicate that most of this ritual arena was constructed solely within the museums involved; only very late in the process, when decisions to return were made, did Kwakwaka'wakw claimants enter this arena. When they did, they created a new ritual for the return of ancestral treasures: an adaptation of the potlatch that reasserts Kwakwaka'wakw ownership and reiterates the history of potlatch prohibition, confiscation, and cultural continuity.

Moving into the present and across the border into the U.S., but remaining on the Northwest Coast, Aldona Jonaitis examines how repatriation of Tlingit ancestral items, including replicas and loans for ceremonial use perceived by Tlingit people as forms of repatriation, has created new forms of ritual which bring both Tlingit and museum staff together in “a temporary alliance that erases their differences,” and creates “empowering expressions of cultural self-determination, a process we might call repatriation sovereignty.” Jonaitis uses detailed examples to show how repatriation processes articulate competing sets of values in Tlingit and U.S. legal systems and brings these together in complex new forms of ritual.

Also locating their contribution in the present and in the U.S., Helen Robbins (a member of the Chicago Field Museum staff) and Leigh Kuwanwisiwma (a Hopi tribal member and director of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office), write about the hope raised by NAGPRA that sacred items will become available to renew elements of Hopi ritual practice, and the frustrations caused by NAGPRA’s “highly ritualized, bureaucratic processes” which “often serve to re-inscribe the very power structures they are, in theory, designed to remedy.” Their paper explores the “uncomfortable intersection of secular authority, in this case federal law, and religious belief and practice,” which requires Hopi spiritual leaders to breach sacred protocols to identify ritual items in detail in order to satisfy NAGPRA administrative process and thus determine whether items can be repatriated and how. They detail the highly complex ritual dance—which slips between secular and spiritual realms—of negotiation, identification of items, and movement of different forms of authority across the process, a process which articulates Hopi social structures at the same time as it reinforces and articulates dominant society power relations over Hopi people.

Lotten Gustafsson Reinius’ article reflects on rites, enacted in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm by staff and Indigenous claimants, in connection to the return of

stolen human remains to Australian Aboriginal groups. Employing an auto-ethnographic method, she explores the affective and experiential aspects of participation in a co-created and intercultural process of ritual communication. The repatriation process included a series of ceremonies, enacted in different places and ritual systems by various actors. Structuring her paper around the events of the day of the handover of the remains in Sweden, with its formation of sequences, restrictions, and metaphoric behavior, she uncovers a complex ritual structure characterized by turn-taking and creative hybridity. This included a division of ritual authority and labor, as conservators and claimants took turns to perform their traditional expertise in the handling of tabooed and charged material. The protective crate for transport, in this context, served as a materialized metaphor for the paradoxical need to safeguard transformation as well as stability. The joint labor of reconciliation was concertized in ritual and performative co-creation of an existential language that may be shared, at least temporarily. At the heart of the process was improvisation as well as carefully planned symbolic behavior. Gustafsson Reinius suggests that rituals such as these are emergent and significant cultural forms in post-secular and globally connected society.

### *Conclusion*

Kelly and Kaplan's seminal essay states that "Rituals ... are a principal site of new history being made, and [the] study of the plural formal potentialities of rituals could be basic to efforts to imagine possibilities for real political change' (Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 141). As a collective arena for the contestation and re-negotiation of power, repatriation rituals actively address historical and ongoing injustices and create a new potential for hope. It is the intention of the editors and contributors to this volume to participate in this emerging process.

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