

**THE NEXT HORIZON OF MUSEUM PRACTICE:
VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPARATIONS**

Museum as Way Station: Reframing Repositories as Part of Object Journeys

BY BROOKE M. MORGAN, PHD
CURATOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY, ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM



**Center for the Future
of Museums**

ABOUT THIS PAPER

An academic foresight paper exploring a future in which museums recognize they are but one stop on a cultural object's journey and returning an object to its community of origin continues its life process.

ABOUT THE NEXT HORIZON PROJECT


This paper is one of a series published by the American Alliance of Museums exploring the future of voluntary repatriation, restitution, and reparations in museums. For this collection, AAM's Center for the Future of Museums invited a diverse group of authors from the museum sector, academia, and descendant communities to share their visions of preferable futures in opinion pieces, academic research, fictional stories, or hybrids between these formats. For a full overview of the project, and a selected timeline of museums' evolving ethics regarding collections and community relationships, see the AAM report [*The First Horizon: Understanding the State of Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations Today*](#).

Rain falls steadily in the kaya, a sacred forest of the Mijikenda people of coastal Kenya, creating rivulets in the brick red earth. It hasn't rained in weeks. "The Ancestors are returning home," remarks one of our hosts. On a makeshift table in a small clearing lie several wooden memorial posts—vigango—embodying the spirit of venerated male relatives. They had been stolen decades earlier, then placed in storage or on display in American museums. An elder rises to speak and his words seep into my consciousness: "They have been cold." Here, in the forest, the Ancestors are freed from climate-controlled repositories and can continue their journey of natural deterioration. Perhaps now crops will flourish, children will grow strong, and communities will feel whole again.

MUSEUMS AND PRESERVATION

Museums are often considered the ultimate repository for collections of cultural materials, with objects only leaving if they no longer meet the mission, are potentially hazardous, or are legally required to be repatriated. (Note: Though I use the term "object" throughout as a shorthand for material culture, I recognize that materials may be considered ancestors, relatives, non-human beings, or other living entities. My use of this term does not include human remains.) Browse any number of museum mission statements and you are likely to encounter terms such as "preserve," "maintain," and "safeguard" with respect to collections. Coded within these terms is the notion of authoritative stewardship, if not outright ownership, of material culture. This is echoed in writings for the public, wherein the museum and its staff are portrayed as the only capable caretakers of such precious items (Frum 2022; Hunt 2019). Moreover, Western museums are rooted in a universalist philosophy wherein collections are considered shared cultural heritage that are held in trust for the public and belong to everyone. This positions the museum as the sole arbiter for decisions regarding disposition of cultural objects.

Museum ethos traditionally privileges the (European) authority of the institution and decenters the objects in question (Hicks 2020; Jones 2019). Ironically, applying a colonialist perspective to objects may diminish their significance to a few descriptive lines of identifying information. As a result, collections are something to be acted upon (viewed/researched/displayed) and are not considered to have agency. However, the creation and use of objects imbues them with agency, which arguably is not removed despite physical and temporal distance between the creator/user and the object. Objects do not necessarily experience a "deactivation" outside of cultural context, despite not being interacted with in the manner for which they were created. While proximity between object and person is essential for agency to fluoresce, the experience of the




object outside of its cultural context may be relayed to a person once reunification takes place, as illustrated in the opening vignette.

The idea that objects should be allowed to decompose or otherwise be altered is anathema to Western museum curation principles. Preservation, in effect, is meant to stall deterioration and arrest physical change in an object in perpetuity. Even when objects were created to eventually deteriorate, venerated museums have decried returning them to their communities of origin for fear of their condition and future care (Merrill et al. 1993). Though this stance is couched in terms of wanting to do what is best for the object, in reality it is not about the object itself, but what the object can provide to the institution (such as prestige and admission revenue) and the public (incentive to visit and make return visits). The subtext reveals concern about what repatriation of an object may mean for other objects in the collection.


Decentralizing museums as prime actors and shifting focus to the objects themselves requires acknowledging an object's potential future outside of museum context. Instead of repositories, what if museums could serve as way stations, where voluntary repatriations are part of an object's life cycle?

OBJECT BIOGRAPHIES AND JOURNEYS TO THE FUTURE



Object biographies (Kopytoff 1986) center the lived history of an object by interpreting the context in which it was made and used, as well as how it was collected and came to the museum. Essential to object biography is understanding the entanglement of people, institutions, and objects, and how meaning may be derived differently depending on context. An object that is part of daily life in a community will have different significance to its users than when being observed behind glass by someone outside the community. The object's experience and influence on other actors is contingent on its situation, but removal from a community does not diminish its power or render it inert. An example from my own repatriation work demonstrates this concept.

In 2018, the Illinois State Museum (ISM) entered into conversation with staff of the Return of Cultural Heritage Project (RoCH), an initiative of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to engage with collecting institutions worldwide and return material culture to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Johnston et al. 2021). At the time, the ISM held more than one hundred items from Australia, which had been accessioned into the anthropology collection in 1942 and 1957 with little accompanying documentation. Working with AIATSIS and knowledge keepers in Australian Aboriginal communities, it quickly




became clear the ISM held secret/sacred objects used in restricted ceremonies (see Pickering 2015). Regardless of the manner in which they were acquired, Arrente elders stated the objects should never have left their country.

Specific protocols were requested for the ISM to continue documentation of secret/sacred objects. These were not merely out of respect for the male elders or because ISM staff (notably, all women) were not initiated into the ceremonies for which the objects were used. Rather, it was to protect ISM staff because the objects retained their power. It did not matter if we believed the objects had agency; anyone could be affected by their power. This suggests that their power may have impacted us prior to our finding out that certain individuals should not handle these objects. Anyone who had been near the objects was invited to a smoke ceremony as part of the formal handover of ISM materials to Aboriginal Australian representatives, which cleansed any lingering power of the objects.

Many of the objects returned to Bardi Jawi custodians were not secret/sacred, and they may have been acquired aboveboard by a linguistic anthropologist working with the community. Nonetheless, these secular items were highly valued for their craftsmanship and potential to be put back into circulation. Information coded within the construction of these objects can be interpreted by elders and knowledge keepers in order to revitalize traditional practices that have long been threatened as a result of colonial enterprise. In this case, museum preservation of cultural heritage benefitted the community of origin by acting as a way station or temporary keeping place until repatriation was requested. The elders acknowledged that the ISM had played a critical role in the objects' lives by taking care of them for nearly eighty years when they may have otherwise been lost or damaged. Because the objects are in good condition, they can now be used to teach younger generations. The future of Bardi Jawi culture is strengthened because of the return of these objects.

Knowledge of objects improves through repatriation and learning directly from descendants of the makers (Curtis 2006). For example, the ISM returned two marine shell necklaces to Bardi Jawi custodians that were listed in the museum database as “Money, Shell Exchange Media,” an entirely incorrect categorization. This type of necklace was made by women in the community for boys' initiation rituals, though the practice has slowed since the 1980s. The necklaces from the ISM collection will be used as examples for young women to start making necklaces in the way their ancestors did in the early twentieth century.

When does an object's biography end? How is the end of an object's journey determined? For many objects curated in museums, the biography ends with curation, perhaps with a postscript for conservation, exhibition, or educational outreach. Objects



are considered retired from service precisely because they are in a museum. But, as seen in the example from a repatriation to Australian Aboriginal groups, “retired” does not equate to inactive. For objects meant to live, and sometimes decay, in the world outside the museum, curation interrupts their journey (Nash 2021). This interruption can drastically impact the communities relying on the interaction between people and object, resulting in alternative futures never anticipated by the object’s creator.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Dialogues on repatriation have often invoked the complicated histories between museums and the communities from which objects are acquired. By emphasizing the divide between Western museums as colonial entities and source communities as the “other,” these arguments unintentionally draw a stark dichotomy that puts these actors at odds. They consider the story of an object mainly with respect to how it has been moved between entities and shared with the public. They therefore identify objects that have been stolen or otherwise parted from their community without consent as among the best candidates for repatriation based on the legal or moral ambiguity surrounding their acquisition. If we shift focus to the objects themselves, however, we must conclude that theft and colonial violence are not prerequisites for voluntary repatriations, but only one possible basis for this outcome.

Recognizing that certain items need specific care based on information obtained from source or descendant communities is fundamental to museum curation work. It is why museums have created best practices regarding handling protocols and verbiage such as “duty of care” has been enshrined in United States repatriation law (43 CFR Part 10). Applying culturally sensitive care to collections is a way of acknowledging that curation is about living people as much as it is about objects (Adams 2020). When enacted, such protocols not only align with the requests of the descendant community, but also meet the needs of the objects. If the object’s purpose cannot be fulfilled in a museum, curators should recognize that care protocols may include repatriation.

Communities of origin can connect to objects in museums and attest that they are not necessarily dormant or static, but rather living beings with a spirit or life force. If we accept that objects have agency, and object agency remains even when the item is removed from cultural context, it follows that objects may have purpose that requires them to continue life outside the museum. In reframing the museum repository as a temporary keeping place that welcomes collaboration with traditional knowledge keepers, we may become better caretakers of cultural items and voluntary repatriations will be standard practice—one that fulfills obligations to people and to objects.

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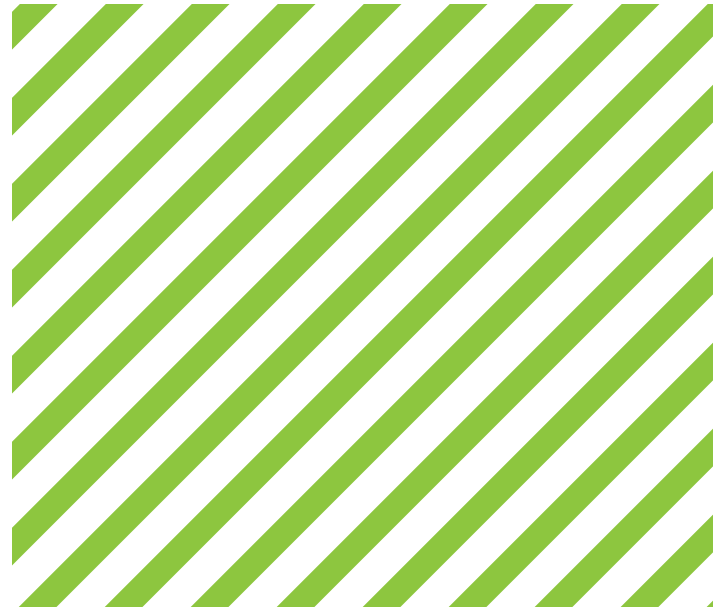
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke M. Morgan, PhD, is an archaeologist, curator, and NAGPRA practitioner at the Illinois State Museum. Her anthropological research focuses on pre- and post-contact Indigenous histories of the Great Plains and Midwestern United States. Since joining the Illinois State Museum in 2018, she has led significant domestic and international repatriation projects, including the [return of cultural materials to Aboriginal Australian communities](#) under the auspices of the Australian government's Return of Cultural Heritage Project, the [transfer of *vigango* \(wooden memorial posts\)](#) to the National Museums of Kenya for repatriation to Mijikenda communities, and the impending repatriation of Native American ancestors and their funerary belongings from a mound complex in Illinois that will be the largest repatriation in the Midwest under NAGPRA to date. Brooke envisions a museum that hinges on collaborative partnerships with descendant communities to create spaces of healing and knowledge exchange.





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