

# Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit

## Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte

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**Das Buch** versammelt die Beiträge zur gleichnamigen Tagung am 7./8. April 2017 – veranstaltet von der AG Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (DGSKA) und dem Museum Fünf Kontinente, München. Herausgeberinnen und Autor\_innen behandeln darin u.a. die Frage nach einer sinnvollen Systematisierung und Institutionalisierung von postkolonialer Provenienzforschung, nach internationaler Vernetzung, insbesondere zu den Herkunftsländern und -gesellschaften, und stellen aktuelle Forschungs- und Ausstellungsprojekte zum Thema vor.

**The book** collects the contributions to the conference of the same name that took place on 7th/8th April 2017, and was organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. Editors and authors discuss issues such as meaningful systematization and institutionalization of postcolonial provenance research, international networking and collaboration, in particular with regards to source countries and communities, and present current research and exhibition projects on the subject.

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# People and Things – Things and People

Ivan Gaskell

I do not work in a museum, though I have done so in the past. My principal disciplinary frames of reference are history and philosophy. I hope to contribute by saying a little about my own experience and understanding of circumstances regarding Native things in North America, where my father was born and where I have lived for over 25 years.

In terms of polities, North America consists of three large, complex, settler colonial countries of recent formation – Canada, the United States, and Mexico – the origins of which date back no earlier than the sixteenth century. Recent settlers and their descendants predominate, though there are communities of Native peoples in all three countries who can trace their lineages from times long before settlers and involuntary immigrants from elsewhere arrived. Settlers have treated Native peoples in various more or less dreadful ways, from appropriating aspects of their traditions to genocide. They have done so largely without apology until very recently.

Buried as Section 8113 of the *Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2010*, signed by the then president of the United States, Barack Obama, in December, 2009, is the first »apology to Native Peoples of the United States« for »years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes,« and »for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States.« However, the text specifically states that this admission is not intended to support any legal claims against the government.<sup>1</sup>

Two years earlier, the then prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, formally apologized for the abuse of Native peoples, specifically the abduction of tens of

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1 S.J.Res.14 – A joint resolution to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/14/text> (accessed 3.7.2017).

thousands of children for acculturation in Indian residential schools. Justice Murray Sinclair (whose Ojibwe name is Mizanay Gheezhik), chair of the *Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (TRC), subsequently appointed to the Senate of Canada, called this policy an act of cultural genocide. The TRC issued its final report in December, 2015. Many in Canada believe that more action should follow.

Native people born in the USA were not granted US citizenship until 1924. Even then, some states refused to permit them to vote. Much communally owned land was lost to Native nations following the *General Allotment or Dawes Act* of 1887, which began the process of allocating Indian lands to individuals, a process not halted until the *Indian Reorganization Act* of 1934. The effective suppression of Native religious practices did not end until the passage of the *American Indian Religious Freedom Act* in 1978. By then, various Native communities were calling for the return of things that had been acquired by anthropologists and other collectors, mostly from the nineteenth century onwards. These demands were about cultural survival. After considerable discussion, Congress passed legislation to create the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989, and the following year enacted the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA). This legislation mandated the repatriation of certain classes of things from institutions – mostly museums – in receipt of federal funds to originating federally recognized Native American nations that might establish a legitimate claim to them. Things covered include human remains, grave goods, sacred items used in the practice of Native religion, and communally owned items of cultural patrimony.<sup>2</sup>

Compliance placed a considerable burden on museums with Native American holdings. There was a strict timetable for the compilation and distribution of information about those holdings. The staffs of some institutions were far from happy that their museums would be emptied, as they feared, of Native items. Compliance was also a financial burden, though federal grants covered some costs. The collections of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology are second only to those of the Smithsonian Institution in size, extent and geographical diversity. In the fiscal years 2000 and 2001 the Peabody Museum budgeted approximately \$1m per annum and a staff of twenty to NAGPRA compliance. This kind of work requires serious funding and commitment.

In 1998 the Peabody Museum repatriated seventeen items of sacred dance regalia to the Natinixwe, called in English the Hoopa Valley Tribe of northern California. They had been acquired between 1904 and 1911. Following correspondence

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2 25 U.S. Code Chapter 32 – Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/25/chapter-32> (accessed 3. 7.2017).



with the elder responsible for dance regalia, I went to the remote reservation to visit with community leaders, and to view the repatriated items. I was shown all but one of them, the most sacred. The most telling indication of the success of the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened on the Mall in Washington DC in September, 2004, was that such an item – an albino deer skin used in a world renewal ritual – was included in an exhibit on Natinixwe cosmology. The National Museum of the American Indian is a Native institution, and can garner Native trust. Other museums have to work very hard to earn that trust, whether by repatriating items, by sustaining the relationships that the process of consultation and repatriation fosters, and by looking after items that remain in their collections in a sensitive manner. Although far from perfect, things are a great deal better than they were before the passage of NAGPRA, and many in museums who were initially skeptical now acknowledge the benefits brought by the legislation.<sup>3</sup>

Europe, obviously, is not subject to NAGPRA, and some European museums deny requests for repatriation for a variety of reasons, including that their collections are the property of the state. Some, though, have embraced repatriation. One example is the Marischal Museum of the University of Aberdeen, where the senior curator, Neil Curtis, has taken a lead in repatriating items to Native communities. For example, in 2003 the University of Aberdeen repatriated a sacred headdress associated with the Horn Society of the Kaínaí Nation of the Niitsítapi Confederacy in Alberta, Canada (called in English the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy). Some museum staffs in North America and in Europe have come to see that not only is repatriation, when requested, usually morally correct, but can also lead to new relationships with Native communities, dispelling at least some of the distrust and dislike that had existed for generations. Although some Native communities have experienced internal conflicts over possible repatriations, the opportunity to recover ancestors, sacred items and items of cultural patrimony has usually been to their advantage, as, arguably, has been the enhanced respect for their knowledge systems among the majority populations that sustained contact with settler institutions and greater visibility through bodies such as the National Museum of the American Indian have brought about.

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3 A great deal has been written on NAGPRA and its effects. I recommend a recent book by the senior curator of anthropology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Chip Colwell, 2017, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture*. Chicago. For a strong and wise statement by a Native scholar, the executive director of the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, Zuni, New Mexico, Jim Enote, see his *Museum Collaboration Manifesto* (2015 International Conference of Indigenous Archives, Libraries, and Museums, Washington, DC), A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, <http://ashiwi-museum.org/collaborations/museum-collaboration-manifesto/> (accessed 11.7. 2017).

Following from this observation about the importance of individual and communal human relationships, I want to end with a claim that might risk turning received ideas about museums on their heads. Many people consider museums to be principally about the things they contain, care for, and – above all – exhibit. This is mistaken. Museums are not, in the first instance, about *things* – their collections – so much as about *people*, and relations among them. Those people include not only the groups of scholars and other professionals who constitute museum staffs, but those people beyond their walls who have a stake in the knowledge those staffs claim to produce and the things from which they derive those claims. Those people beyond the museum walls have knowledge of their own, some of which they may be willing to share with museum staff if circumstances encourage an equal exchange of ideas. Those circumstances include a shared acknowledgement that, as a matter of cultural probity, certain kinds of knowledge should and must remain confined to certain groups.

If it was not clear before NAGPRA that museums are about people before they are about things, the consequences of this legislation have made it unmistakable. People, though, are not confined to living individuals, but include ancestors, and those beings that inhabit numinous realms. Things participate actively in those relationships, and it is insofar that they do so that they matter. Indeed, although this understanding is difficult for many Westerners to accept, in spite of the recent attribution by some theorists of agency to things, *things* can be *people*. I am not equating the idea that things can be invested with personhood, with claims about agency by scholars including Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I am advising that we take the wide variety of Native claims regarding the character of things seriously. Therefore, in considering provenance – the topic of this symposium – let us put *people* – in an extended sense – first, in terms of relationships that include active *things*. Let us consign *objects*, in the sense of material items of Western post-enlightenment study, to the trash barrel of superseded concepts.

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4 Two key texts are Gell, Alfred, 1998 *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford and New York, and Latour, Bruno, 2005, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford and New York.