



SPECIAL SECTION: RITUAL REPATRIATION

Introduction

Repatriation and Ritual, Repatriation as Ritual

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This special section of *Museum Worlds* explores the entire process of repatriation as a set of rituals enacted by claimants and museum staff: a set of highlighted performances enacting multiple sets of cosmological beliefs, symbolic systems, and political structures. Some of the rituals of repatriation occur within the space of Indigenous ceremonies; others happen within the museum spaces of collections storage and the boardroom; others, such as handover ceremonies, are coproduced and culturally hybrid. From the often obsessive bureaucracy associated with repatriation claims to the affective moment of handover, repatriation articulates a moral landscape where memory, responsibility, guilt, identity, sanctity, place, and ownership are given a ritual form. Theory about ritual is used here to situate the articles in this section, which together form a cross-cultural examination of ritual meaning and form across repatriation processes.

■ **KEYWORDS:** coproduction, repatriation, ritual, ritual function, ritual theory

Repatriation—one of the most powerful but undertheorized processes within “museum worlds”—is often portrayed as a space of contestation: Indigenous versus Western, sacred versus secular, science versus religion, colonial control versus cultural survival. The editors and authors of this special section 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 how 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, coproduced 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 section 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 et al. 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 believing 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 and to the actions of Indigenous claimants. The extreme care taken at all stages of repatriation by participants, as well as 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. Catherine Bell’s (2009: 19) work on ritual 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, whom that power serves, and what it does. Anthropological

theory tells us that ritual can cause change, 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 Jon Mitchell ([1996] 2002: 493) notes, 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 . . . 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 that 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 2005). One significant possibility of transformation highlighted in several articles in this section is the coproduction 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 section 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 (2005: 8) *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* examines 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 (2004: 3) *Science, Magic and Religion: The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic* 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 articles in this section 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 associates,” one of the uses of the focus on ritual in these analyses is that such coproduction becomes highly visible.

These articles 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; see also 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 et al. 2011; Gustafsson Reinius et al. 2012). Ritual can also be understood as a kind of sociomaterial agency, in which aesthetics, form, and symbolism work with various actors to achieve not only social durability but also change and transcendence.

The working definition of ritual used in the section is broad, encompassing aspects of performance; the articulation of social and political structures, as well as 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 (1977: 61–62) definition 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] 1995), and Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of ritual as social drama and the way in which ritual fuses social order and sacred space. Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart’s (2007: 137) comment 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 articles in this section explore aspects of what V. Turner ([1969] 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 leveling 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: Michael Bull and Jon 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 Laura 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. Stanley 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 the realm of globalization, and to 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, 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 section’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 the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States. Each case study explores various forms of ritual connected to repatriation and the ways in which these articulate identity, relations of power, and politics. Following the articles, 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.

Peers’s 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 coproduced 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 article examines the history of repatriation claims, as well as the changing nature of ceremonies attached to these over time. 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 Kwakwaka’wakw in 1921. Using archival documents from the relevant museums that 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 articles in this section, the Kwakwaka'wakw case archives indicate that most of this ritual arena was constructed solely within the museums involved. While Kwakwaka'wakw claimants lobbied museum and government staff across the history of this case, the archival records document a ritual locus within the museums involved as new processes were created. When items went home, the ritual locus shifted: claimants 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 United States, 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 that bring both Tlingit and museum staff together in "a temporary alliance that erases their differences" and create "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 US legal systems and brings these together in complex new forms of ritual.

Also locating their contribution in the present and in the United States, Helen Robbins (a member of Chicago's 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, as well as the frustrations caused by NAGPRA's "highly ritualized, bureaucratic processes" that "often serve to reinscribe the very power structures they are, in theory, designed to remedy." Their article 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 processes 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 that articulates Hopi social structures as it simultaneously reinforces and articulates dominant society power relations over Hopi people.

Lotten Gustafsson Reinius's 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 autoethnographic 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 article 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 and 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 postsecular and globally connected society.

Conclusion

Kelly and Kaplan's seminal article states, "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" (1990: 141). As a collective arena for the contestation and renegotiation of power, repatriation rituals actively address historical and ongoing injustices and create a new potential for hope. The editors and contributors of this volume intend to participate in this emerging process.

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