Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit

Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte

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English title: Provenance research on ethnographic collections from the colonial era

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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Using the Reciprocal Research Network for both Indigenous and Western Cultural Provenance Standards

Trevor Isaac

»Provenance: the place of origin or earliest known history of something.« [1]

The concept of provenance has a different meaning in Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw culture than in Western culture. In my culture of the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw, provenance relates to cultural ownership and the specific, intangible ceremonial right to display or perform certain privileges. These rights exist before and as the justification for the creation of tangible object whereas, in the museum world provenance relates to the object's history of ownership. Tools such as the *Reciprocal Research Network* (RRN) website can assist both cultures in researching the provenance of objects, through the history of tangible pieces and the underlying intangible cultural rights of Northwest Coast collections.

To understand the difference between the two perspectives, first you need to understand the worldview of my people. The Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw, translating to Kwak'wala-Speaking-People, are from the northern tip of Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland of British Columbia. Sixty percent of Canada's Indigenous languages are found in British Columbia. I am from the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw, who used to be referred to as the Kwakiutl by early anthropologists. We have a rich and complex culture passed down through oral tradition. My language group alone once consisted of 28 tribes who spoke Kwak'wala. Today, there are about nineteen of these tribes represented during the potlatch ceremony. This number can fluctuate at times, because some tribes are said to have died out or »to be asleep«, some tribes were amalgamated into larger groups because they were small in numbers due to smallpox and other devastations or to make administration easier for colonial governments. The tribes consist of clans or ex-

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1   Oxford Living Dictionaries, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/provenance (accessed 21.12.2017).

tended family units called ʼna̱mima. All of these clans have their own origin
stories with different meanings which may tell of how their ancestors trans-
formed from animals into humans, how they survived the great flood, and leg-
ends of ancestors who acquired supernatural powers or defeated supernatural
animals or people.

The history of extended family groups, or ʼna̱mima, can be read and inter-
preted through the visual decoration on material possessions (what the collect-
ing world calls »artworks«), and through ceremonial songs and dances. Each
family is proud of their ancestry and displays such history as cultural preroga-
tives during the potlatch ceremony. The potlatch is a ceremony hosted by a
chief to mark important occasions in the lives of the Kwakwa̱ka̱ʼwakw such as
naming of children, transferring rights and prerogatives, raising a totem pole,
mourning the dead along with other important life events. Guests are then
compensated as witness for remembering everything that happened during the
event. This is our way of recording and re-recording family history.

Kwakwa̱ka̱ʼwakw provenance is grounded in the families' displays of rights.
You can see this woven throughout the potlatch through displays of crest fig-
ures, the performance of songs and dances, as well as family history reiterated
by the chief and his speaker. Almost all artefacts from the Northwest Coast in
museum collections display family provenance. Some examples commonly rec-
ognizable in museum collections may include but are not limited to face masks
and dance headdresses, totem poles, elaborate storage boxes, ceremonial hats
or jewellery, and in some cases whole houses and the house posts, as well as
many other ceremonial and everyday objects. The ownership of the specific
family rights to use these objects are confirmed publicly during each family's
potlatch. This is a way to record new life events as well as the ancient history of
the host's family. The potlatch is where connections are recognized relating to
a family's first ancestor, supernatural encounters, and the rightful ownership of
certain ceremonial prerogatives. [fig. 1] We believe

> »Dancing is not only a right and a privilege for us. It is an obligation.
> As the chiefs told Franz Boas when he first came to their ceremonies in
> Fort Rupert, ›It is a strict law that bids us dance. Performing our dances
> is not just a chance to show off. It is one of the ways that we carry out
> our responsibilities as Kwakwa̱ka̱ʼwakw‹.« (Powell et al. 1981)

This statement is still relevant today. Upholding family obligations to share and
remember our history is just as important today, 100 years after this speech in
Fort Rupert.

[fig.1] Elder Axu, Agnes Alfred, holding repatriated Raven and Ermine headdress that had belonged to K´wamxudi (her grandfather or uncle), U'mista Cultural Centre, 1980. UPN-00384. Photo: Vickie Jensen

Songs and dances derive from origin stories. The highly-prized masks and other ceremonial artefacts represent family history in object form. The ownership of the right to display the mask is actually more important than the mask itself. This is because the history associated with the mask reflects the lineage of the family. Some of these rights can be acquired from the wife to the husband through marriage, or even in some historical cases through warfare. If a mask is given away or stolen from the community, then another mask can be made to take its place. This is not to say the mask itself is unimportant. These ceremonial artefacts are sacred objects and cared for with respect, and in some cases, treasured pieces such as houses, totems, coppers, and feast dishes had names. Carvers and weavers alike have always been respected for their fine works. The ceremonial display of such prestigious pieces tells guests about important family history and how the mask and dance were acquired.

   Many Northwest Coast artefacts have been wrongfully removed from native communities and sacred sites by Canadian government officials, and by collectors for private and museum collections around the world. Often these removals were either illegal, or at the very least, fundamentally unethical. [fig. 2]

[fig.2] Regalia surrendered under duress in Alert Bay Parish Hall, 1922. Royal
British Columbia Museum, Inv. AA 176. Photo: William Halliday

A critical historic note is that Canada made it illegal to practice the potlatch
ceremony from 1885 until 1951 under section 149 of the *Indian Act*. Ironically,
the largest-scale potlatches in history occurred during the potlatch ban, mostly
due to newfound wealth and easy access to trade goods from Europeans. The
same time period saw anthropologists and collectors studying and collecting
from Native communities under the guise of »salvage anthropology« which as-
sumed that Native culture was in the process of dying out due to population
decimation and assimilationist policies. Many native people refer to the decades
of the potlatch ban as »the dark years«. Native peoples were charged by law and
some even went to prison for upholding our ancient traditions.

In December 1921, a large potlatch was held by chief Dan Cranmer in the
remote community of Village Island. Subsequently, forty-five Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw
people were charged under the Criminal Code for participating in this ceremo-
ny. They were charged with making speeches, dancing, and giving and receiv-
ing gifts. Canada made an illegal offer that in exchange for relinquishing their
ceremonial objects, the defendants would not be sent to prison. In February

[fig.3] Margaret Frank wearing chilkat blanket (left) standing next to sister Marion Wilson in button blanket (right). Private Collection. Photo: Margaret Frank

1922, a trial was held. This was greatly influenced by the Indian Agent, William Halliday, a man known for his personal and professional mission to extinguish the potlatch. Of all the tribes who participated in the ceremony hosted by Cranmer, only three tribes agreed to a suspended sentence bargain that included the surrender of their ceremonial objects to lessen their sentences. A significant amount of the objects surrendered under duress include dance masks, headdresses, rattles, whistles, along with other sacred garments and coppers. The people who did not agree to the illegal bargain, meaning they did not surrender goods, were then sentenced to prison for two months and repeat offenders were sentenced to six months. Twenty men and women served prison sentences, twenty-two suspended sentences and three were remanded on appeal. The masks surrendered were then dispersed around the world to private and museum collections.

When the potlatch ban was dropped (rather than repealed) by the Canadian government in 1951, Kwakwa̲ka'wakw nations increased their efforts to locate all of these sacred objects with hopes of them being returned. After decades of

advocating for the return of the confiscated potlatch collection, the Kwakwaka̱-'wakw succeeded in bringing the majority of the Potlatch collection home. Building a museum was mandatory in order for the objects to be returned. Two museums were built, Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre in the village of Cape Mudge on Quadra Island, in 1979, and the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay. U'mista opened on November 1, 1980 and is classified as a Category A museum in Canada. It is recognized around the world for being a leader in repatriation. The return of these artefacts was possible thanks to hard work done by researchers who studied archival photos, and the oral history of the Kwakwaka̱'wakw people. In this case, both aspects of provenance, from native traditions and from museum records, came into play while identifying the rightful owners and their associated artefacts. This was a major achievement because as many of us know museum records from this time are quite sparse with little to no descriptive information about the artefacts collected in this era.

When talking about the museum concept of »provenance«, we refer to the history of ownership of a particular object and how it was acquired by a museum or private collection. This is especially important to collections from the Northwest Coast due to the manner in which many artefacts were removed from First Nations Peoples, and then dispersed around the world.

At the U'mista Cultural Centre, we have been working on a long-term project to ensure our object records reflect museum standards as well as Kwakwa̱-ka̱'wakw values. We continue to raise the standard of our management of U'mista's world-class collection by creating and enhancing permanent collections records for the Potlatch Collection. The first time we completed enhancing records for fifty objects in 2012, we added personal, family, and '*na̱mi-ma* histories to the catalogue records for these items, including information such as ownership, names, and ceremonial use. This was such a success in terms of enhancing collections records, creating collections management professional development opportunities, and building partnerships with community members, that we knew that we wanted to repeat this project in future years until we had created this rich documentation for the entire Potlatch Collection. Continuing this work for all our collections, reflects both best-practice museum standards and traditional values. For the Kwakwaka̱'wakw, the physical object is much less significant than what that object represents in terms of stories, family connections, and places. As we continue to enhance our database to reflect community priorities, we bring in associated content such as Kwak'wala language, maps, photographs, and audio clips to reflect these traditional values and the essential connections to intangible cultural heritage and family prerogatives. We are changing our collections records database to move

to a new platform that supports the entry of text in Kwak'wala which is critical to properly recording family names, chiefly privileges, and vocabulary pertinent to our collections. Sharing our research with descendants has been rewarding for both U'mista and local families. For example, our research on Chief Johnny Drabble has been put into direct use in a recent potlatch in Alert Bay.

One initiative bridging museum collections records to the object's community of origin is done through the *Reciprocal Research Network* (RRN). This platform is a great tool when researching objects from the Northwest Coast. The U'mista Cultural Centre was one of five museums who collaborated in the co-development of the RRN, which was spearheaded by the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA). In my opinion, one of the critical successes of the RRN is that it puts Indigenous knowledge on par with academic knowledge and museum standards, which has rarely been done in the institutional context. The incorporation of community knowledge enriches the context for understanding museum collections whose databases often reflect the shallow understandings of collectors. This collaboration augments the knowledge base for the collection records for both the holding institutions and for descendants of the original owner and people from the object's community of origin. Currently, the RRN website interface allows you to search through twenty-seven museum collections through the collaborative online database.

One successful aspect of the RRN is that it provides access to multiple museum collections for natives and non-natives alike to locate specific artefacts across many institutions. For me, using the RRN means that I am now quite familiar with other museum collections that I have not had a chance to visit in person. Lineage is an important aspect in Kwakwaka'wakw culture. I am a descendant of the Hunt family from Fort Rupert. My family has been keen to research our family's chilkat blankets and where they are in the world today. These blankets, or dance robes, were woven by our grandmother named Anisalaga, or Mary Ebbets Hunt. In one family photo [fig. 3], Margaret Frank is wearing a chilkat blanket and her sister Marion Wilson is next to her wearing a button blanket. Family members are familiar with this photo because of our chilkat blanket research, but this raised the question, »Where is this amazing button blanket today?« These types of questions are really common for First Nations Peoples.

One day, I found out through social media that the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) had joined the RRN. I was eager to search through their collection that was newly added, and found many exciting and interesting pieces I had never seen before, including the »long lost« button blanket we had been searching

[fig.4] Button Blanket. The same blanket is worn by Marion Wilson in the archival photo, fig. 3. Museum of Vancouver Collection, Inv. AA 692.

for! To confirm that it was in fact the same blanket, I studied the old photo to compare the object. After careful study of design composition, I confirmed it was the blanket and sent the information to the family members who are descendants of Margaret Frank and sister Marion, both seen in the photo. Family history mystery solved thanks to the RRN. [fig. 4]

This button blanket is one of the artefacts I recognized from various archival photos, simply because the MOV joined the RRN database. Since locating the button blanket, the Everson descendants have now replicated their aunt's button blanket and are using it in ceremonies. From my perspective, this is one of the best possible uses of the RRN: connecting the artefacts and prerogatives with the rightful family and the community of origin. Even if the actual object is still in the hands of the museum collection, the artefact has come back to life through a replica and lives on through ceremony. [fig. 5] This is a good example of searching for a ceremonial object from a photo, with great success. The family has been in contact with the MOV who has added information to their records of the blanket's family association. The permanent collection records are available from the museum itself but these notes are currently not visible on

[fig.5] Lee and Keisha Everson holding newly replicated button blanket. Private Collection. Photo: Lee Everson

the RRN website. This may be because after the »finding« of the blanket, the family then contacted the museum directly and communicated outside of the RRN platform.

This outcome is a positive example of using the RRN to return cultural information and imagery of artefacts to the family and the community of origin, but this is not always the best form of repatriation. Some museums feel it is enough to digitally »repatriate« information and photos of our sacred artefacts without returning the objects. This information-sharing is encouraged, and helpful, but does not offer all the benefits of physical repatriation.

Axu, or Agnes Alfred [fig. 1], is a great-great-grandmother of mine who played an important role in having our treasures returned to U'mista. Axu held a headdress belonging to her great-uncle or grandfather (in our culture a great-uncle is respectfully considered a grandfather). While holding the headdress, the story of the legend relating to her family came flooding back into memory. Holding and studying the piece revealed its purpose to Axu, a descendant of the once forgotten history. Through this story of Axu I wanted to showcase the importance of having the mask in the community of origin. Although the infor-

mation shared by museums who hold these cultural treasures is greatly appreciated, there is no denying that having the object in the community of origin has much deeper meaning, and the spirit of the artefact has a memory which can reveal itself in the rightful hands. Using the internet to research artefacts around the world is a useful tool when you cannot travel, but no comparison is made to viewing and holding an object in person.

One negative aspect of the RRN is that many native family and community researchers from my neighbouring villages are simply unaware the website exists and is available for free. I use the site quite frequently and try to share and inform as many people as possible. Another issue is that some researchers and elders, who are aware of the website, can be unfamiliar with using a database platform, or the internet itself. This issue will prove to be less common as the years go by, but as we lose those elders, we are also losing significant cultural knowledge. One improvement, and maybe the only other option other then a class on using the site, is to arrange for intergenerational site visits to conduct online research and/or incorporate important cultural knowledge to the RRN community records online.

Another example of a disconnection between the RRN and First Nations communities comes from my family research. Searching through the collections on the RRN site, I came across a button blanket belonging to our grandfather. The online accession records had little to no information except the year the object was purchased, and that the object was Kwakwaka'wakw. I noticed my uncle Lawrence Isaac utilized one of the tools, and under the »Share Knowledge« button he stated: »This blanket belonged to Thomas Nowell [and] his chief's name was Owadalagis ›Owadi‹. He was the head chief of the first clan of the Kwixa tribe in Fort Rupert, B.C.« Isaac continues, »Thomas Nowell is my great-grandfather through his only [surviving] daughter Dorothy Isaac (nee Nowell).« This information contribution is visible to the general public on the RRN, but I am unsure what information is accepted or rejected by museum collection managers to then be brought into their permanent object accession records. One concern is whether using the RRN to gather information might be problematic, if misleading or inaccurate information is provided by the RRN contributors. That said, in my opinion, all of the information I have come across on the RRN has been respectful and knowledgeable.

There are many other features that make the RRN interactive. You can leave a comment to generate discussion for the general public, you can share information or pose a question to a specific museum object, or you can invite other RRN members to join in a specific discussion. You can also upload archival photos to an object field, ideally an image of the artefact in use during ceremo-

ny or a family related to the object, etc. Another feature allows you to make notes under each of the images in the »project« function. I have also seen museums use the »project« feature when generating object lists from multiple museums for upcoming exhibitions, which is hugely positive. All of these different aspects create a richer representation of the object's cultural context and breath life into the original functionality, history and meaning.

The incorporation of the additional information contributed to a specific object record seems to be a positive and encouraging aspect of the RRN, but are the museums taking the new information into their permanent records? It is great to start discussion on the RRN platform, but is this where the community collaboration ends, or does the information added to the object's history lead to stronger connections between native communities? This question needs to be answered by the participating museums and also, how each individual museum wishes to incorporate the new data. As it stands currently, I am unsure if the community contributions are incorporated into museum accession records.

Through collaborative databases, we can enrich the object history within both Indigenous and museum-based conceptions of provenance. The histories of how Northwest Coast families obtained ownership to ceremonial rights and privileges are equally important to the records of museum acquisition. Fortunately, many anthropologists and researchers have heavily documented the history along the Northwest Coast, thus providing an important facet of knowledge. However, not all history can be learned without the living cultural knowledge from the artefact's community of origin. By working together we can bring both, current cultural knowledge and historical collections, together to create rich, full context for Kwakwaka'wakw cultural treasures.

Bibliography

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