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# White Redemption Rituals

## Repatriating Aboriginal Secret-Sacred Objects

### Introduction

During the past five years, the federal government has given \$3 million to Australian museums to repatriate Aboriginal cultural heritage. As part of this project, my colleagues and I at Melbourne Museum investigated over 1500 ceremonial objects housed in the Museum's storerooms. Our aim was to establish the provenance for each object, identify the owners and arrange for their return. Most of the objects — or *churingas* — originated in Central Australia and were associated with secret men's ceremonies. Ultimately, we were only able to determine the ownership of little more than 100 objects. In August 2004, I conveyed these *churingas* back to their owners in Central Australia.

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I had previously spent fifteen years in the Central Australian region, working with various Aboriginal communities. I was well aware of the complexities associated with the local political and social environment and conscious of the fact that the return of the objects would not be without its difficulties. Nonetheless, I was not prepared for the kind of reception I received. Indeed, it has led me to the conclusion that the nationally funded project of repatriation is in need of urgent review, if not a complete rethink.

### **Ambivalence**

In most of the communities we visited there was a general ambivalence on the part of the owners about accepting the objects, and even a sense of confusion about what to do with them once we had handed them over. These uncertainties were no doubt exacerbated by the state of the communities. Despite my familiarity with the region, I was struck by their physical dilapidation, and more so, by the declining health of the Aboriginal residents. Not long before we arrived in the area, one of the people to whom we were to return objects had been evacuated to Alice Springs to receive dialysis treatment. As we travelled from one community to the next, it appeared to me that the repatriation of objects was a low priority given the many other problems these communities faced. The idea that we were performing a curious kind of ritual — and indeed, a largely empty one — was reinforced during the first few days of the trip.

Most of the owners expressed concerns about the problem of storing their churingas in a secure place. Communal discipline had collapsed to such an extent in some areas that the security of such objects could not be guaranteed. In two locations, special buildings had been erected during the 1970s to house them. In both cases, the stores had been vandalized and a number of objects stolen. We were reliably informed that some of these churingas were subsequently sold to tourists or shady art dealers in Alice Springs. These stories were partly confirmed when one of the owners joked, 'I'm glad you bought these things back, now we can sell them'.

Apart from such dilemmas, the return of significant ritual objects can rekindle old hostilities in a community and produce unwanted realignments of local power. In one such community, we were well aware of a conflict that had been underway for some years. We also knew that the return of a particularly significant churinga would exacerbate these troubles and probably lead to physical violence.

The circumstances surrounding this issue are extremely complicated and many of the details confidential. However, I will provide a basic outline here.

In very brief terms, two men from the same community claimed exclusive ownership of the same object and both refused to compromise. At the heart of the argument was an old dispute concerning a land claim that had been conducted in the area a few years before our arrival. It turned out that the object we were attempting to repatriate was linked to this land claim process.

One of the claimants to the object believed that he had been unfairly treated during the land claim. Indeed, the judge in the claim found that he was not a primary spiritual owner. As a consequence, he not only lost prestige in the community but a share of the royalties that flowed from related mining activities. However, when he learnt that the museum possessed a churinga connected to the land claim, he came to the conclusion that if he could prove his ownership of the object, the land claim decision might be overturned in his favour. He also believed that possession of the object would help re-establish his prestige and power in the community. While our research indicated that he did have some rights over the object, it was clear that such rights would not affect the land claim decision. Nonetheless, he remained convinced that it would.

From the point of view of the other claimant, he believed that his rights of ownership to the object were irrefutable — a claim that our research tended to support. Moreover, he was judged to be a primary spiritual owner during the land claim process and was of course receiving mining royalties. He was adamant that if the object was handed to the other claimant, it would not only undermine his status as a primary spiritual owner, but make a mockery of traditional protocols. Indeed, he and his supporters were outraged that anyone could dispute such rights.

Ultimately, we decided not to return the object. This decision was taken after seeking advice from a number of expert parties, one of whom said that taking the object back would have been 'like lobbing a grenade into the community'. To date, this conflict has not been resolved.

During the entire journey, there was only one occasion in which an owner welcomed, whole-heartedly, the return of his churingas. However, for the most part, it seemed to me that we were perhaps imposing rather than facilitating the process of repatriation. To

some extent, this imposition was driven by the need to complete a logistically difficult project. We had to visit six communities separated by more than 2 000 kilometres of mainly dirt road. On several occasions, when we were running behind schedule, I was obliged to force the issue by saying to people that if they were unable to take the objects, we would have to take them back to the Museum. This was probably impolite, but until the objects were formally returned and a special release form signed by the owners, Melbourne Museum had legal responsibilities for the care of the objects. Moreover, the Museum had always followed a policy of offering people the choice of either leaving their objects in the Museum or taking them back into their communities. Indeed, many had opted to leave them in the Museum, or in a similar institution.

At the end of the trip, we visited a community in which I had worked for three years during the late 1970s. Like most of the other places, it had fallen into complete disrepair. Here, children as young as seven roamed around with tins of petrol strapped under their noses without incurring the slightest admonishment from their parents. I wondered whether these young petrol sniffers — most of them boys — would survive to adulthood and thus be shown the objects we had returned, and whether they would really care.

I have perhaps dwelt too much here on the bleak conditions in these communities and not enough on the process of repatriation. But this is deliberate. One cannot gain any real insight into the process of repatriation — particularly its reception at the community end — without placing it in a wider social context. In some situations, this seemed to be the only way of explaining the responses we received from the owners of objects.

### **Disjunction**

I will now turn to a closer examination of the repatriation process and attempt to understand the apparent disjunction between its official representation and application in the field.

As is commonly understood, Aboriginal cultural materials in museum collections were taken — to quote a communiqué issued by the Australian Council for Cultural Ministers — ‘without the consent of family members or the traditional owners’. However, in the case of secret-sacred objects, it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether the objects were actually stolen or not. For the most part, the available documentation is scanty or simply non-existent. As

we have seen, my colleagues and I could establish the provenance of only 100 or so churingas from a total of 1500 in Melbourne Museum's collection.

However, we do have documentary material of a general nature — such as diaries, letters and official reports — that give us some idea of what actually occurred. This material indicates that in some situations, the objects were indeed taken without the permission of their owners, while in other cases — probably the majority — they were offered as gifts or traded by Aboriginal people for European goods such as axes, knives, flour and tobacco. What we do know for certain is that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, a strong demand for churingas had begun to emerge on the part of private collectors and museums. This was particularly the case after the publication in 1899 of Spencer and Gillen's classic *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.<sup>1</sup> Their account of Arrernte ceremonial life — including detailed descriptions of churingas — had a profound influence in intellectual circles throughout the world and, of course, fuelled the demand for churingas.

We also know that by the late 1920s, this demand had grown into an extensive trade in Central Australia. Much of this activity centred around the Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg, where the collection and selling of churingas had become commonplace. Many local Aboriginal people actively participated in this trade, and indeed, began to manufacture churingas to meet the demand. One of the missionaries at Hermannsburg at this time, H. A. Heinrich, seems to have assumed the role of official buyer and seller of churingas. In a letter to one of his main customers, Heinrich wrote:

I have had the good fortune of having the contents of three storehouses of churingas brought to me. 'Real genuine old stuff!' The natives having gone as far a field as Mt Hay for them. However, owing to the keen demand, the mission has raised the price to 7/6 each for the best and 4/6 for the others. Should your friend from the Museum like any more, ask him to put his order in early as the demand is bigger than supply.<sup>2</sup>

1. B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, New York, Dover Publications, 1968.

2. Museum Victoria, *Heinrich to Croll 1929*, Croll Manuscripts, Museum Victoria, p. 3.

During my work on repatriation, I have also recorded a number of cases, including recent ones, in which Aboriginal people have chosen to give or sell their churingas to private collectors. In fact, when working in an Aboriginal community in the late 1970s, I myself was offered several churingas that I refused to buy, much to the disquiet of the vendor. So it seems to me, from the available evidence, that the vast majority of churingas now in museums were probably given, or more likely, sold by their owners.

Should we be shocked that Aboriginal people chose to sell their secret-sacred objects? Not really. Under Aboriginal customary law, churingas were not only seen as the embodiment of a person's ancestral forebears, they were also considered to be the owner's private property. As T. G. H. Strehlow pointed out in *Aranda Traditions*, a man had the right to do whatever he liked with his personal churinga, including the right to sell it.<sup>3</sup> In my experience, such rights are not only respected, but fiercely asserted. There is also the issue of what happens to a churinga once the owner dies. In the case of the Arrernte, the churinga of the deceased was commonly passed on to the son. However, when there was no son, or any other appropriate persons to inherit the object, it would, in effect, come to the end of the family line and 'go dead'. In this situation, the churinga would also become, so to speak, surplus. In these circumstances, one might understand the temptation on the part of others to sell such objects.

So where does this leave the repatriation process? On the one hand, the Aboriginal owners of the objects appear to be stricken with such appalling living conditions that the return of religious artefacts seems to come as an awkward intrusion into their lives, or threaten to disrupt already complicated community relations. On the other hand, it would appear that one of the main arguments for repatriation, that Aboriginal cultural property was removed 'without the consent of ... traditional owners', does not stand up to much scrutiny, at least in relation to secret-sacred objects from Central Australia.

Nonetheless, these difficulties would not appear to matter to any great extent. It would seem that repatriation is more about white redemption and the alleviation of guilt, than about whether this or that object was stolen or sold. It is more important that the process of repatriation be seen to be carried out, than to be concerned about

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3. T. G. H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1968.

such details. Certainly, this seems to be the view of the Australian Council of Cultural Ministers (a body made up of all state and federal arts ministers), whose only real interest is in adding up the number of objects returned by museums. In a sense, these objects can be seen as theatrical props in a wider redemptive ritual, and their repatriation, a symbolic act of national reconciliation. Before concluding I would like to offer some speculative thoughts about the broader effects of repatriation.

First, it seems to me that most of the secret-sacred objects currently being repatriated will probably end up in private, non-Aboriginal collections. This tentative conclusion is not only based on my own experience but on the current state of the market. Indeed, while most museums in Australia are busily repatriating their Indigenous collections, the market for Indigenous artefacts is booming — is there a connection here? Perhaps. Certainly, good quality churingas can now be bought without too much difficulty from private traders both in Australia and overseas, and occasionally they even appear on eBay. Although most reputable dealers will refrain from selling secret-sacred objects, this does not apply to other Indigenous artefacts (which are also subject to repatriation in several Australian museums). One only needs to examine the catalogues of the major auction houses to see the variety of material currently available.

Unfortunately, it seems that public collections of Indigenous materials are being gradually privatized — aided, unwittingly, by the process of repatriation. Indeed, although museums are under pressure to rid themselves of their Indigenous collections, no such pressure is being applied to the private sector — in fact, as long as you pay for your Indigenous artefacts, you can do what you like with them. As in almost every other sphere of our current social, economic and political environment, it appears that market forces are being given free reign and now determine the acquisition and distribution of Aboriginal cultural heritage. This is somewhat ironic given the fact that it is the Left that has traditionally supported repatriation.

Second, with the national push to repatriate Indigenous collections, the idea of actually going out and collecting new Indigenous materials seems laughable. Although Aboriginal art continues to fill museums, few if any institutions would mount expeditions to collect Aboriginal artefacts, as occurred in the past. Apart from the fact that such objects would now be subject to

repatriation, the whole notion of amassing Indigenous collections in public institutions is no longer a viable proposition, either politically or professionally. Gone are the days when anthropologists built their reputations on a collection of artefacts — as did Spencer, Strehlow, Berndt, Thomson and others. Down the track, even these old collections will probably be depleted and scattered throughout the private sector. In my opinion, this is a great loss — not only for the institutions involved but for the Aboriginal people who in many cases have depended on such institutions for the preservation of their heritage.

Third, although it might appear that I am against repatriation, this is not exactly the case. Rather, I believe that arrangements should be established in which museums and traditional Aboriginal owners can share in the preservation of existing collections. This might mean establishing 'keeping-places' in locations such as Central Australia that are jointly controlled and managed by traditional owners and appropriate museums. Not only would Aboriginal people have complete access to such material, researchers could also work with the owners in building up a repository of detailed information about the objects. Moreover, new materials could be added. While such an approach would be expensive and probably difficult to organize, I believe that it is the only way in which the great cultural heritage of Indigenous Australians will be preserved beyond the current century.