

A Chance Encounter Helps Return Sacred Artifacts to an Indigenous Group

The United Nations helped the Yaqui Nation, an Indigenous group in Mexico and the United States, reclaim a deer's head and other items from a Swedish museum.



Some of the cultural artifacts being returned from a Swedish museum to the Yaqui Nation. One item, a deer's head, is considered sacred by the group and inappropriate to photograph.

By Isabella Grullón Paz

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Nearly 20 years ago, Andrea Carmen, a member of the Yaqui Nation, an Indigenous group in Mexico and the United States, was at an event commemorating International Day of Indigenous Peoples at a museum in Stockholm. Afterward, she was invited to view the museum's collection of items from the Americas.

What she spotted brought her up short: a Maaso Kova, a ceremonial deer's head sacred to the Yaqui Nation.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," Ms. Carmen said of her discovery at the Museum of Ethnography. It was, she added, "like seeing a child in a cage."

For the Yaqui Nation, whose members live across Sonora State in northern Mexico and in parts of southern Arizona, the Maaso Kova is a sacred item used in ceremonial dances to connect the physical world to the spiritual world of their ancestors.

After Ms. Carmen returned to Arizona, she asked a Yaqui tribal chief to petition the museum to return the deer head and any other Yaqui items it possessed. It took the

museum 11 years to issue an official response and eight more for the artifacts to be returned.

This month, representatives and officials from the museum, the Swedish and Mexican governments and the United Nations met in Sweden to formally authorize the transfer of the deer head, along with 23 other items, back to the Yaqui Nation.

The artifacts, stored in two metal containers, have been shipped to Mexico City, where the Mexican government will turn them over to the Yaqui Nation.

“We’re so happy to be receiving our Maaso Kova, which to us is a living being that was locked up for a long time,” Juan Gregorio Jaime León, a Yaqui member in Mexico, said in an interview. (Photographing the sacred deer’s head or displaying an image of the artifact is considered inappropriate by the Yaqui Nation.)

The return of the Maaso Kova is the first successful repatriation of cultural artifacts to an Indigenous group overseen by the United Nations under its Declaration of Indigenous Rights, according to Kristen Carpenter, a former U.N. official who was involved in the negotiations.

Without U.N. pressure on Sweden, the Yaqui almost certainly would not have been able to reclaim their artifacts, said Ms. Carmen, the executive director for the International Indian Treaty Council, a nongovernmental organization focused on Indigenous sovereignty.

In recent years, as conversations about racism and the legacy of colonialism have increased across the world, discussions about the repatriation of cultural items that were stolen, taken under duress or removed without the consent of their owners have intensified at museums and other cultural centers.

A major challenge in repatriation is the question of provenance — how a museum came to possess an artifact.

But the U.N. Declaration of Indigenous Rights, which was ratified in 2007 and that Sweden agreed to follow, states that Indigenous people have “the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects,” and gave the Yaqui the chance to defend their claim, regardless of how the objects were obtained.

“The fact that Indigenous people have their sacred items and human remains in universities and museums and private auction houses all over the world speaks to a mind-set that is still very much based on the doctrine of discovery,” Ms. Carmen said. “We’re changing that worldview.”

Another barrier to repatriation of Indigenous items is that countries often do not recognize Indigenous groups as legitimate governments, Ms. Carmen said.

Swedish law requires any repatriation negotiation for state-owned items to be conducted between nations. The Yaqui Nation was able to negotiate with Sweden through the United Nations, and then secured Mexico’s agreement to represent the group during the final agreement.

The Museum of Ethnography is one of four cultural centers that make up the National Museums of World Culture, which is run by the Swedish government. For years, the museum maintained that it had no reason to return the Yaqui items since they had been given as gifts, according to Adriana Muñoz, the curator of the museum's Americas collections.

But after the United Nations intervened in 2014 and made its own repatriation inquiry, the museum produced a report to determine how the deer's head and the other items had made their way to the institution, Ms. Muñoz said.

Some items came from two Danish anthropologists who had been doing research in Tlaxcala, Mexico, east of Mexico City, in the 1930s, and were given the artifacts by a Yaqui military officer at the end of a long-running war over land rights between Mexico and the Yaqui people, according to Ms. Muñoz.

The anthropologists had helped the Yaqui after the war and became friendly with the military officer, General José Andrés Amarillas Valenzuela, she said.

The rest of the items, including the deer's head, were bought by a group of Swedish explorers who worked with the museum and were invited by the anthropologists to Tlaxcala to see the Yaqui perform a ceremonial deer dance, Ms. Muñoz said.

After finishing its review, the museum told the Yaqui Nation in a letter that it would not return the items since their provenance was "permitted."

But the Yaqui Nation had a different version of history. They said that General Amarilla was actually fighting for the Mexican army and helped oversee Yaquis in Tlaxcala who had been taken as war prisoners and sent to work in mines. Although he was a Yaqui, he is considered a "traitor," Ms. Carmen said.

"This case illustrates that there's a really vast gulf in understanding among parties who participate in this kind of claim," Ms. Carpenter, the former U.N. official, said.

Though the two parties disagreed about the origin of the items, Ms. Carmen said they both coalesced around the main reason they should be returned: their religious value.

Ms. Muñoz, with the assistance of activists and anthropologists working for the National Institute of Anthropology in Hermosillo, Mexico, conducted her own research and recommended the items' return, explaining that the review had "opened my eyes to the significance of these objects."

Since the return of the Yaqui artifacts, tribes from Canada, Panama and the Caribbean have sought Ms. Carmen's help in their own repatriation efforts, including for some objects also held by the National Museums of World Culture.

Ms. Carmen hopes that the process to reclaim the Yaqui items can be applied to other Indigenous repatriation campaigns.

She and Ms. Carpenter are pushing UNESCO, the United Nations' cultural agency, to create a database of Indigenous artifacts in museums and universities to make it easier for groups to locate items.

They also want the agency to establish a certification that would require Indigenous consent for an item's transportation to prevent auction houses from acquiring and selling objects that could be repatriated, and to designate a U.N. body as an official facilitator of future repatriations.

"We're calling for a new relationship," Ms. Carmen said, "by which we can set the injustices and harms of the past behind us and heal the wounds to start engaging in cultural exchanges that are based on a real appreciation of Indigenous peoples' rights."